



Working Paper Series  
WP-11-05

November 2011

Couple Disagreement in Reporting  
on Courtship Stages:  
Implications for Measurement and Marital Outcomes

Sarah Halpern-Meekin  
*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

Laura Tach  
*University of Pennsylvania*

This research was supported by the National Center for Family & Marriage Research, which is funded by a cooperative agreement, grant number 5 UOI AE000001-05, between the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Bowling Green State University. Any opinions and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the author(s) and should not be construed as representing the opinions or policy of any agency of the federal government.

**Couple Disagreement in Reporting on Courtship Stages:  
Implications for Measurement and Marital Outcomes**

Sarah Halpern-Meekin<sup>1</sup> and Laura Tach<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

<sup>2</sup> University of Pennsylvania

RUNNING HEAD: Couple Disagreement on Courtship Stages

KEYWORDS: marriage, cohabitation, dating, spending the night, marital quality

The authors would like to acknowledge the National Center for Family & Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University for supporting this data collection and to thank the participants at the Center's pilot data conference for their helpful feedback.

## **Couple Disagreement in Reporting on Courtship Stages: Implications for Measurement and Marital Outcomes**

### Abstract

Previous research supports the idea that those who “slide” into more serious union stages, rather than “deciding” to do so, are at greater risk of poor marital outcomes. Using new, nationally representative married-couple-level data from the Knowledge Networks online research panel (n = 1,504), we test whether couple disagreement over premarital courtship stages is associated with marital outcomes. We argue that disagreement in retrospective relationship reports is a potential indicator of a couple having "slid" into a more serious relationship because it may occur when a couple lacks clear symbols or turning points in the relationship. We find that couple disagreement is common, particularly among former premarital cohabitators and for the less institutionalized courtship stages of dating and spending the night. Couple disagreement is associated with poorer marital outcomes, especially relationship satisfaction, partner supportiveness, and relationship happiness. Relationship measurement issues and the meaning of couple disagreement are discussed.

## **Introduction**

Previous research has shown that those who “slide” into more serious union stages, rather than “deciding” to do so, were at greater risk of poor marital outcomes because such a courtship is tied to lower relationship commitment (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Stanley, Rhoades, Amato, Markman, & Johnson, 2010; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). We argue that a couple’s disagreement in their retrospective reporting of the progression of their relationship is a potential indicator of that couple having slid into a more serious relationship, rather than having decided to do so; this is because disagreement may be more likely to occur when a couple lacks clear symbols or turning points in the relationship, such as particular conversations about what was happening in the relationship and what it meant. We examine the progression of premarital courtships to test whether couple disagreement over whether and how various relationship stages took place is associated with marital outcomes.

Previous research in this area has restricted its focus to pre-cohabitation engagement as a marker for deciding” (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Stanley et al., 2010; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Further, such studies have focused on whether or not the couple was engaged before cohabiting, without examining a potential third alternative – one member of the couple believed they had agreed to get married while the other partner did not. The present study builds on this previous research by (1) investigating the frequency of couple disagreement in retrospective reporting of relationship stages, (2) considering whether such intra-couple disagreement is a meaningful relationship characteristic, and (3) examining additional premarital relationship stages beyond pre-engagement cohabitation as potential areas of meaningful couple disagreement.

We use data collected from the Knowledge Networks online research panel -- a new, nationally representative survey that includes responses from both members of currently married couples -- to answer two research questions:

1. How commonly do couples disagree in their retrospective reporting of premarital and marital relationship stages? We examine more relationship stages than previous research has and show the degree to which previous studies that rely only on reports from one member of a couple may be inaccurate.
2. Is intra-couple disagreement on premarital courtship stages associated with marital quality and stability outcomes? A couple not being on the same page about how their relationship proceeded may be an indicator for sliding, as it may show that they lacked the clear markers that would designate an explicit decision process. We test whether disagreement is therefore a risk factor for poorer marital outcomes.

## **Background**

### *“Sliding” versus “Deciding” and Relationship Outcomes*

Couples who cohabited without being engaged report lower dedication and marital satisfaction as well as a greater likelihood of divorce than those who entered marriage directly or who only cohabited after engagement (Brown & Booth, 1996; Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Teachman, 2003, 2008). Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) argued that part of the risk of pre-engagement cohabitation lay in the fact that couples may have been sliding into an increasingly serious relationship without consciously making the decision to do so. Cohabiting couples may end up following a path into marriage that is not based primarily on the quality of their relationship, but rather on the inertia that develops when they are already sharing a home and possessions, and marriage is understood to be the next step in a relationship.

Getting engaged or explicitly deciding on future marriage plans prior to cohabitation is therefore a marker that deciding rather than sliding led a couple down the aisle.

We argue that couple disagreement over the reporting of relationship stages is another potential marker for sliding. Couples' disagreement about the progression of their relationship or when a relationship stage started may signal the lack of an explicit decision-making process or less commitment (Manning & Smock, 2005; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006, 2009). Building on previous research that uses the lack of pre-cohabitation engagement as an indicator of sliding, we hypothesize that couple disagreement about the occurrence and start date of various relationship stages is associated with more negative marital outcomes.

#### *Couple Disagreement about Relationship Stages*

Previous research has examined the quality of current versus retrospective reports of relationship status and start dates and the level of agreement between partners in their reporting (Hayford & Morgan, 2008; Lillard & Waite, 1989; Peters, 1988; Thompson & Collella, 1992; Teitler & Reichman, 2001). Researchers examining the quality of reports of marriage start dates generally find high levels of agreement between partners and for the same partner across multiple survey waves. For example, Lillard and Waite (1989) found that 83% of husbands and wives reported the same marriage year in the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), and Peters (1988) found that only 4% of women in the 1968 National Longitudinal Survey (NLS) reported marriage dates that differed by more than a year across survey waves. Disagreement over the occurrence and date of marital disruption was more common. Disagreement also increased as the length of time between the event and the survey increased, and couples with simpler relationship histories (such as having only one marriage versus multiple marriages) were also more likely to agree (Lillard & Waite, 1989; Peters, 1988).

There is considerably more disagreement over time and between partners in the quality of reporting on cohabitation. For example, Teitler and Reichman (2001) found that 11% of the parents of young children differed in their reports of whether they were currently cohabiting, and Thompson and Collella (1992) found that 12% of currently married couples gave inconsistent reports of whether they cohabited before marrying. Only half of currently cohabiting couples in the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) reported the same month and year of starting cohabitation, and partners in just 70% of couples reported a start date within three months of each other (Manning & Smock, 2005). Individual reports of cohabitation experiences also change over time (Hayford & Morgan, 2008; Teitler et al., 2006).

Researchers have argued that greater disagreement in reporting on cohabiting unions, compared to marital ones, reflects the fact that cohabitation is less institutionalized than marriage (Manning & Smock, 2005; Nock, 1995). Drawing on qualitative data from 115 couples with recent cohabitation experience, Manning and Smock (2005) found that the boundaries between cohabitation and dating were blurry and the process of moving in together unfolded over weeks or even months. In addition, cohabitation did not require a formalized agreement or ceremony, raising the possibility that it was a less conscious decision. Manning and Smock characterize this as a slide into cohabitation. Other research has supported the “blurry” nature of cohabitation, finding that couples may cycle into and out of coresidence (Binstock & Thornton, 2003) or reside together only part time, sometimes called “part-time cohabitations” (Knab, 2005) or “stayover relationships” (Jamison & Ganong, 2010). Reports also revealed a considerable amount of disagreement between cohabiting partners over expectations for future marriage (Waller & McLanahan, 2005).

We extend this research by measuring couple (dis)agreement over the occurrence and dates of relationship stages prior to cohabitation and marriage. We know of no prior research that

uses nationally representative data to assess couples' agreement about relationship stages other than marriage and cohabitation. Following the institutionalization theory outlined above, we hypothesize that couple disagreement will be even higher for earlier, less institutionalized relationship stages, such as dating or stayover relationships, than it is for cohabitation or marriage. We further extend this research by examining whether couple disagreement in the reporting of relationship stages is associated with marital quality outcomes.

In order to better isolate the relationship between couple disagreement and marital outcomes, we control for an array of personal and household characteristics. Personal characteristics include age, race, educational attainment, and employment status, and household characteristics include household income, the presence of children under eighteen in the household, and marital duration. Age serves as a proxy for cohort-based cultural experiences, like changing family behavior norms (Casper & Cohen, 2000). Race is also associated with differences in marital quality and stability, with particularly notable differences between African Americans and Whites (Bulanda & Brown, 2007). Because economic stress and spousal education are tied to marital quality and stability (Teachman & Polonko, 1990; White & Rogers, 2000), we account for educational attainment, household income, and employment status. We also control for the presence of children in the household as parenthood is related to marital satisfaction and divorce risk (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003; Waite & Lillard, 1991). Marital duration is associated with declining marital quality (Van Laningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001) and measures how long ago respondents experienced their premarital relationship stages.

#### *Contributions of the present study*

We build on previous research by examining the consistency of couple reports of relationship stages that occur prior to cohabitation and marriage. The stages we consider include



dating, spending the night, cohabitation, and marriage. Of these, “spending the night” is the least standard measure in studies of premarital courtship and is likely the least institutionalized as well; however, research on a sample of young adults indicates that spending the night on a regular basis before moving in together is the typical pathway into cohabitation (Pollard & Harris, 2007) thus worthy of consideration as a relationship stage. Using novel data from a nationally representative sample of married couples, we use reports from both members of a couple of the occurrence and start date of each relationship stage to understand how each partner saw the relationship unfold and how frequently partners disagree in their retrospective reporting of relationship stages. The present study, therefore, contributes to our understanding of how inaccurate our estimates of relationship stages and durations are when we rely only on measures from one member of a couple.

While previous studies have focused only on pre-engagement cohabitation as a marker of the sliding that is associated with greater marital risk, we argue that couple disagreement on premarital relationship stages is also a potential indicator of sliding. We test whether couple disagreement is associated with marital quality and stability outcomes. This tells us whether couple disagreement in reporting of premarital courtship stages is more than a measurement problem and can be leveraged as a predictor of marital outcomes.

We draw several hypotheses from previous literature about the extent and consequences of couple disagreement in relationship stages. First, we hypothesize that couple disagreement is more common among less institutionalized relationship stages, such as dating and stayover relationships, while disagreement is less frequent for more institutionalized relationship stages, such as marriage. Second, based on our argument that couple disagreement is a marker for sliding into a relationship stage without an explicit decision or commitment, we hypothesize that couple disagreement is associated with lower marital quality. Finally, we hypothesize that couple

disagreement is most strongly associated with marital outcomes for the more institutionalized relationship stages, such as marriage, because it is an indicator of couples being less committed and less certain about their relationship.

## **Data and Method**

### *Data*

The data used in this study come from a nationally representative panel study of the United States population, ages 18 to 64, who are in married heterosexual relationships. The data were collected between July and October 2010 as part of the larger, ongoing Knowledge Networks online research study, which began in 1999. Panel members were randomly recruited using random-digit dial (RDD) and address-based sampling methods, and then received emails notifying them to complete an online questionnaire. Households were provided with access to the Internet and hardware if needed. Individuals who participate in the Knowledge Panel complete an initial demographic survey that is used to determine eligibility for specific studies (Callegaro & DiSogra, 2008).

For this particular study, fielded through collaboration between the National Center for Marriage & Family Research at Bowling Green State University and Knowledge Networks, Knowledge Networks assigned the survey to 1,500 married men in the panel, of who 1,060 completed the survey. The wives of men who completed the survey were assigned the survey as well, and 752 of them completed the survey. The full sample therefore includes data from each partner in 752 couples, resulting in 1,504 survey responses.<sup>1</sup> Data are weighted to adjust for sample design and survey non-response. We further divide the sample into two groups: married couples who cohabited before marriage (N=380) and married couples who did not cohabit before marriage (N=369).

---

<sup>1</sup> The panel also surveyed currently cohabiting couples who are not included in the present analysis.

## *Measures*

*Relationship Stages.* We designed survey questions to measure the timing and duration of several relationship stages, including dating, spending the night, cohabitation, and marriage. Due to space limitations in the survey, we did not collect complete relationship histories, but rather focused primarily on the path of the current relationship. First, we asked all respondents for the date (month/year) they started dating their current partners. We also asked respondents whether they had ever separated or gotten back together while dating.

We then asked respondents a series of questions to gauge the timing and duration of the transition into cohabitation. We asked respondents, “How long before you were officially living together did you and your partner start spending the night at one another’s homes?” Respondents could report a number of weeks or months, or they could respond that they never spent the night at one another’s homes before officially living together. If they provided a non-zero response to this question, they were asked about how many times in a typical week they spent the night at one another’s homes, ranging from one to seven. We also asked respondents whether they and their partner had decided to get married before they officially started living together. Previous research indicates that respondents can recall the process of starting to spend nights together, before officially cohabiting (Manning & Smock, 2005; Pollard & Harris, 2007; Sassler, 2004). To our knowledge, the present study is the first to produce nationally representative estimates of the frequency and duration of this relationship stage.

We then asked respondents to report the date (month/year) they officially started living together, our measure of cohabitation. Those who reported that they had lived together before marriage were then asked whether they ever separated and got back together while cohabiting. We use the phrase “officially” living together” and do not describe “officially” to allow respondents to self-define the start of their cohabiting relationship. Providing a definition

assumes a common understanding of the start of cohabitation that qualitative research indicates is not the same across all cohabitators (Manning & Smock, 2005). Previous studies, both qualitative and quantitative, have found that respondents are able to report the beginning dates of their dating relationship and cohabitation and the length of time between the start of the relationship and cohabitation (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006, 2009; Sassler, 2004). Finally, we asked respondents to report on the date (month/year) that they got married. We also asked them whether they ever separated and got back together while married.

*Marital Quality.* The survey also includes several measures of current relationship quality. A measure of relationship satisfaction asks couples, “Taking all things together, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” A measure of listening satisfaction asks, “How satisfied are you with how well your spouse listens to you?” For both measures, respondents answered on a five-point scale ranging from very dissatisfied (1) to very satisfied (5). We constructed a measure of partner supportiveness, which takes the mean of the following items: “My spouse shows love and affection toward me”; “My spouse encourages me to do things that are important to me”; “My spouse will not cheat on me”; “My spouse listens when I need someone to talk to”; and the reverse code of “My spouse and I avoid discussing unpleasant or difficult topics.” Responses were on a five-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The reliability of this scale was  $\alpha = 0.76$ . A measure of relationship happiness asked respondents “How would you rate your relationship with your current spouse?” with responses ranging from completely unhappy (1) to completely happy (10). Finally, respondents were asked, “What are the chances you and your spouse will break up in the future?” with responses ranging from no chance (1) to almost certain chance (5). We standardized each marital quality measure ( $M=0$ ,  $SD=1$ ) so that results may be compared across measures.

*Background Characteristics.* We also include measures of respondents' demographic and economic characteristics as control variables. We measure respondent's age (< 30, 30-44, 45-59, or 60+); educational attainment (less than high school, high school graduate, some college, or college graduate); race (non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, non-Hispanic other, or Hispanic); whether there are children under the age of 18 in the household; household income (< \$20,000, \$20-39,999, \$40-59,999, \$60-99,999, or \$100,000+); and employment status (unemployed, employed, or retired/disabled). Finally, we measure respondents' marital duration in years based on the length of time between their reported date of marriage and the date of the interview.

### *Method*

The following analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we provide descriptive data on each partner's report of the duration of the following relationship stages: dating to first spending the night together, first spending the night together to officially living together, and officially living together to marrying. Couples who cohabited before marriage experience all three stages, while couples who entered marriage without cohabiting only experience the first two. We also provide descriptive evidence from each partner on whether they broke up and got back together during each of these relationship stages. We then provide descriptive evidence on what percentage of couples disagree in their retrospective reporting of their relationship stages, and run logistic regressions to predict the likelihood of disagreement based on couples' background characteristics.

Next, we examine the associations between intra-couple disagreement and marital quality outcomes. We regress each marital quality outcome on indicators of couple disagreement over each relationship stage, controlling for the background characteristics described above. This tests whether disagreement is a risk factor for poorer marital outcomes.

## **Results**

Table 1 provides the descriptive characteristics of the sample for our relationship quality outcomes and background characteristics, separately for husbands and wives. Premarital cohabitators report slightly lower quality relationships and a slightly higher chance of breaking up than couples who did not cohabit before marriage. Similarly, husbands report significantly more positive relationships on average than do wives.

[Table 1 about here]

On average, premarital cohabitators are younger, have lower education and household income, and are more likely to be unemployed than non-cohabitators. They have also been married for fewer years than non-cohabitators. There are few gender differences in reports of background characteristics, except that wives have lower educational attainment and are less likely to be employed than their husbands.

Table 2 presents detailed descriptive statistics for husbands' and wives' reports of their premarital relationship stages. On average, premarital cohabitators spent less time dating than non-cohabiting married couples, about 11 months compared to about 24 months, indicating that cohabitators transitioned faster from dating to spending the night together than non-cohabitators. Premarital cohabitators were also more likely than non-cohabitators to spend the night together before officially living together. Over 70% of premarital cohabitators spent the night, compared to less than 30% of non-cohabiting married couples. Of those who spent the night together, both premarital cohabitators and non-cohabitators spent the night together for an average of two to three months before officially living together, but cohabitators spent more nights per week together than non-cohabitators – about two nights per week, compared to less than one night per week on average for non-cohabitators. For non-cohabitators, this relationship stage is followed by marriage. For cohabitators, this relationship stage is followed by cohabitation, which lasted an average of 22 to 24 months before marriage.

[Table 2 about here]

Couples were also asked whether they had separated and gotten back together during each relationship stage. Premarital cohabitators were more likely to report that they had separated and gotten back together while dating than non-cohabitators (18-19% vs. 11-14%). Between 6-7% of premarital cohabitators reported that they had separated while cohabiting. Fewer couples in both groups reported that they had separated and gotten back together while they were married (5% for premarital cohabitators vs. 4% for non-cohabitators). We also compared husbands' and wives' mean reports of premarital relationship stage durations and found that they did not differ significantly.

#### *Intra-Couple Disagreement over Timing and Duration of Relationship Stages*

The mean relationship stages presented in Table 2 mask a great deal of heterogeneity in couples' reports, however, so Table 3 directly examines the amount of couple disagreement over each relationship stage. During the dating stage, we find that 43% of premarital cohabitators and 37% of non-cohabitators report starting dates for their relationships that differ by more than one month. Over two-thirds of cohabitators (68%) and over one-half of non-cohabitators (54%) differ by more than one month in the amount of time they report dating before starting to spend the night together. Additionally, 10% of cohabitators and 8% of non-cohabitators differ in their reports of whether they broke up and got back together while dating.

[Table 3 about here]

Premarital cohabitators in particular report greater disagreement over the stage of their relationship involving spending the night. Over 60% of cohabitators differed by more than one month in their reports of how long they spent the night together before officially living together, compared to 28% of non-cohabitators. Similarly, 36% of premarital cohabitators differed by more than one day in their reports of how many nights on average they spent with each other in a

typical week, compared to just 4% of non-cohabitators. The lower levels of disagreement for non-cohabitators relative to cohabitators reflects, in part, the fact that more non-cohabitators report never spending the night before officially living together thus have zeros for these responses.

Premarital cohabitators continue to display high levels of disagreement during the cohabitation stage of their relationship. Almost half differ by more than one month on the date they started officially living together, and 57% differ by more than one month in how long they cohabited before getting married. Interestingly, 22% of premarital cohabitators also disagreed over whether they had decided to get married before living together.

Couple disagreement was considerably lower concerning marriage for both premarital cohabitators and non-cohabitators. Just 14% of premarital cohabitators and 10% of non-cohabitators differed by more than one month in their reports of their marriage dates. Similarly, few couples disagreed over whether they had separated or gotten back together while married – just 3% of cohabitators and non-cohabitators.

Taken together, the results in Table 3 indicate a high level of couple disagreement over the timing and duration of premarital relationship stages. Disagreement was higher among premarital cohabitators than it was among non-cohabitators, and it was highest for the relationship stages that are least institutionalized, such as spending the night together, and lowest for marriage, the most institutionalized relationship stage. From these results, it is clear that many couples are not on the same page about the progression of their relationships, at least based on their retrospective reports.

We next predict the likelihood of couple disagreement based on couples' demographic and economic background characteristics. Because results for premarital cohabitators and non-cohabitators were similar (results not shown, available upon request), we pool the results for these two groups in the same model and include a dummy variable indicator for premarital cohabitators.



Table 4a reports the odds ratios of logistic regressions of couple disagreement on couple background characteristics.<sup>2</sup> The results in Table 4a show that, even net of controls for age, education, race, income, employment, and marital duration, premarital cohabitators remain significantly more likely to disagree than non-cohabitators for virtually every relationship stage.

[Table 4a about here]

Older couples were more likely to disagree than younger couples for most relationship stages, perhaps reflecting the fact that the accuracy of recall declines as more time passes. There were few consistent differences by income, race, employment, or education, suggesting that more disadvantaged married couples are no more likely to disagree than more advantaged couples.

Table 4b presents similar results for the cohabitation stage for the premarital cohabitor sample alone. We find a similar pattern of results here, with older couples being more likely to disagree on most measures, and few other consistent predictors among background characteristics. The pseudo- $R^2$  values for the models in Tables 4a and 4b are relatively low, however, indicating that background characteristics alone do not do a very good job of predicting which couples will disagree. By far the strongest correlate of disagreement is premarital cohabitation.

[Table 4b about here]

### *Associations between Couple Disagreement and Marital Quality*

Next, we ask whether disagreement over relationship stages is associated with marital outcomes. Table 5 presents the results of regressions of relationship quality measures on whether a couple disagreed over each relationship stage, controlling for background characteristics. Each

---

<sup>2</sup> We use husbands' reports of background characteristics in the models, but results using wives' reports or the average of husbands' and wives' reports were substantively and statistically similar.

couple disagreement measure was regressed in a separate model, so each coefficient in Table 5 reports the results of a separate regression. We show results separately for husbands' and wives' reports of marital quality. Because results were substantively similar for premarital cohabitators and non-cohabitators, we pooled them into a single sample and included a dummy variable for premarital cohabitation. All relationship outcome measures are standardized so that the magnitude of the coefficients may be interpreted as standard deviations and compared across models.

[Table 5 about here]

During the dating stage of a relationship, disagreement over when a couple started dating was significantly associated with reports of lower-quality marriages for all quality measures except the self-reported likelihood of breaking up. These associations were generally stronger for husbands' reports of marital quality than they were for wives' reports. Disagreements over the duration of the dating relationship or whether a couple separated while dating were less consistently associated with relationship quality outcomes. These associations were strongest for the measures of partner supportiveness, relationship satisfaction, and relationship happiness.

Disagreement over how long couples spent the night together was consistently associated with significantly worse reports of marital quality for both husbands and wives. However, disagreement over how many nights per week on average couples spent the night was not associated with most marital quality measures.

Among premarital cohabitators, disagreement over the cohabitation relationship stage was inconsistently associated with lower marital quality. Disagreement over the date cohabitation began was associated with husband's reports of lower relationship satisfaction and happiness, but no other measures. Both husbands and wives who disagreed over whether they had separated and gotten back together while cohabiting report lower quality marriages on most measures. In

contrast, disagreement over the duration of cohabitation was not associated with marital outcomes. Notably, disagreement over whether the couple had agreed to marry before living together was not significantly associated with marital quality outcomes.

At the marital stage, disagreement over the date couples married was not associated with marital quality. However, disagreement over whether the couple had separated and gotten back together while married was strongly and consistently associated with lower quality marriages. In fact, this was the single strongest predictor for poor marital quality among all our measures of couple disagreement.

Taken together, the results in Table 5 suggest that couples' disagreement over the progression of their relationships is significantly associated with lower quality marriages. This is particularly true when couples disagree over the progression of the least institutionalized relationship stages, dating, and spending the night together. Disagreement over the dates of cohabitation and marriage are less consequential for marital quality; what seems to matter during these relationship stages is whether the couple disagrees about past breakups.

### **Conclusion**

Couple disagreement in recounting premarital courtship stages is quite common, particularly among premarital cohabitators and for the less institutionalized courtship stages of dating and spending the night. The higher rates of couple disagreement among premarital cohabitators are not accounted for by standard demographic controls. Couple disagreement, in turn, is associated with poorer marital outcomes, especially relationship satisfaction, partner supportiveness, and relationship happiness.

We argue that couple disagreement is an indicator that the partners “slid” into a more serious relationship, as disagreement may be more likely when a couple lacks explicit markers or key turning points in the relationship (like having “the talk” about the relationship’s future).

Along these lines, our findings support the contention in previous research that sliding is associated with more negative marital outcomes (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Stanley et al., 2010; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Notably, our results indicate that sliding during the less institutionalized stages of a relationship – dating and spending the night together – is common and consequential for marital outcomes. Further, it appears to be more common among those following the less traditional pathway into marriage through cohabitation.

Our findings have implications for researchers interested in the measurement of relationship stages. First, premarital cohabitators are more likely than non-cohabitators to disagree in recounting their courtship stages. Therefore, studies that rely on measures from only one partner must be particularly cautious when comparing results for premarital cohabitators and those who entered marriage directly, as the divergent accounts among the cohabitators mean we may draw less reliable conclusions about them.

Second, couple disagreement about whether they had agreed to get married before beginning cohabitation is not uncommon – occurring among nearly one-quarter of the couples. Those examining the presence or absence of engagement prior to cohabitation and relying only on the reports of one partner for their measures need to be cautious as these may contain a good deal of messiness. Relatedly, couple disagreement on whether they had agreed to get married before cohabiting was not significantly associated with marital outcomes, although the couple agreeing that they had not decided to get married before cohabiting was associated with lower marital quality (results not shown). This illustrates that couple disagreement about pre-engagement cohabitation, which we measure in the current paper, is distinct from couple agreement that cohabitation occurred prior to engagement.

The present study contributes to our understanding of the courtship process by using a unique dataset that includes couple-level data drawn from a nationally representative panel. However, the married couples in the sample have been married for a long time – 15 years on average for premarital cohabitators and 23 years for those who entered marriage directly. This means we have a sample that is slanted toward longer-lasting marriages; for example, of marriages occurring between 1980 and 1984, one-third of couples were divorced by their 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary (Kreider, 2005). Therefore, the composition of our sample likely minimizes differences between premarital cohabitators and those who entered marriage directly, as premarital cohabitators are at a higher risk of divorce; future studies should examine the courtship processes explored in the present study in the context of “younger” marriages in order to capture the characteristics of those that will later end in divorce. Future research should also focus more specifically on whether there are consistent patterns of “his” and “hers” retrospective courtship stage reporting and whether such gender differences are tied to variation in marital outcomes.

By taking advantage of the relatively rare opportunity to examine couple level data on multiple relationship stages prior to, and including, cohabitation, we uncovered that couple disagreement in retrospective accounts of premarital courtship is both common and meaningful. There are important measurement issues here, particularly given the systematic variation in couple disagreement rates between premarital cohabitators and non-cohabitators. However, this is not just a measurement issue; rather, couple disagreement appears to be a substantively meaningful marker as it is associated with poorer marital outcomes. That couple disagreement over the less institutionalized stages of the courtship process is common and associated with marital outcomes indicates that these may be the stages in the premarital relationship that couples more easily “slide” through, with negative implications for their marital experiences. Future

research should aim to better understand these processes, particularly the spending the night stage, which has received little research attention to date.

## References

- Binstock, Georgina, & Thornton, Arland. 2003. Separations, reconciliations, and living apart in cohabiting and marital unions. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65, 432-443.
- Brown, Susan L., & Booth, Alan. 1996. Cohabitation versus marriage: A comparison of relationship quality. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 58, 668-678.
- Bulanda, Jennifer R., & Brown, Susan L. 2007. Race-ethnic differences in marital quality and divorce. *Social Science Research*, 36, 945-967.
- Callegaro, Mario, & DiSogra, Charles. 2008. Computing response metrics for online panels. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 72, 1008-1032.
- Casper, Lynne M., & Cohen, Philip N. 2000. How does POSSLQ measure up? Historical estimates of cohabitation. *Demography*, 37, 237-245.
- Hayford, Sarah R., & Morgan, S. Philip. 2008. The quality of retrospective data on cohabitation. *Demography*, 45, 129-141.
- Jamison, Tyler B., & Ganong, Lawrence. 2010. "We're not living together": Stayover relationships among college-educated emerging adults. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 28, 536-557.
- Kline, Galena H., Stanley, Scott M., Markman, Howard J., Olmos-Gallo, P. Antonio, St. Peters, Michelle, Whitton, Sarah W., & Prado, Lydia M. 2004. Timing is everything: Pre-engagement cohabitation and increased risk for poor marital outcomes. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 18, 311-318.
- Knab, Jean T. 2005. Cohabitation: Sharpening a fuzzy concept. Working Paper #04-05-FF. Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University.
- Kreider, Rose M. 2005. Number, timing, and duration of marriages and divorces: 2001. Current Population Reports, P70-97. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC.
- Lillard, Lee A., & Waite, Linda J. 1989. Panel versus retrospective data on marital histories: Lessons from the PSID. Pp. 243-253 in *Individuals and families in transition: Understanding change through longitudinal data*. Social Science Research Council.
- Manning, Wendy D., & Smock, Pamela J. 2005. Measuring and modeling cohabitation: New perspectives from qualitative data. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 989-1002.

- Nock, Steven L. 1995. A comparison of marriages and cohabiting relationships. *Journal of Family Issues*, 16, 53-76.
- Peters, E. 1988. Retrospective versus panel data in analyzing lifecycle events. *The Journal of Human Resources*, 23, 488-513.
- Pollard, Michael S., & Harris, Kathleen M. 2007. Measuring cohabitation in Add Health. Pp. 35-52 in *Handbook of Measurement Issues in Family Research*, Sandra L. Hofferth and Lynne M. Casper (Eds.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Rhoades, Galena K., Stanley, Scott M., & Markman, Howard J. 2006. Pre-engagement cohabitation and gender asymmetry in marital commitment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20, 553-560.
- Rhoades, Galena K., Stanley, Scott M., & Markman, Howard J. 2009. The pre-engagement cohabitation effect: A replication and extension of previous findings. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 23, 107-111.
- Sassler, Sharon. 2004. The process of entering into cohabiting unions. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66, 491-505.
- Stanley, Scott M., Rhoades, Galena K., Amato, Paul R., Markman, Howard J., & Johnson, Christine A. 2010. The timing of cohabitation and engagement: Impact on first and second marriages. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 906-918.
- Stanley, Scott M., Rhoades, Galena K., & Markman, Howard J. 2006 Sliding versus deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect. *Family Relations*, 55, 499-509.
- Teachman, Jay. 2003. Premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, and the risk of subsequent marital dissolution among women. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 65, 444-455.
- Teachman, Jay. 2008. Complex life course patterns and the risk of divorce in second marriages. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70, 294-305.
- Teachman, Jay D., & Polonko, Karen A. 1990. Cohabitation and marital stability in the United States. *Social Forces*, 69, 207-220.
- Teitler, Julien O., & Reichman, Nancy E. 2001. Cohabitation: An elusive concept. Social Indicators Survey Center Working Paper #01-4.
- Teitler, Julien O., Reichman, Nancy E., & Koball, Heather. 2006. Contemporaneous versus retrospective reports of cohabitation in the Fragile Families Survey. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68, 469-477.



Thomson, Elizabeth, & Colella, Ugo. 1992. Cohabitation and marital stability: Quality or commitment? *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54, 259-67.

Twenge, Jean M., Campbell, W. Keith, & Foster, Craig A. 2003. Parenthood and marital satisfaction: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65, 574-583.

Van Laningham, Jody, Johnson, David R., & Amato, Paul R. 2001. Marital happiness, marital duration, and the U-shaped curve: Evidence from a five-wave panel study. *Social Forces*, 79, 1313-1341.

Waite, Linda J., & Lillard, Lee A. 1991. Children and marital disruption. *American Journal of Sociology*, 96, 930-953.

Waller, Maureen R., & McLanahan, Sara S. 2005. "His" and "her" marriage expectations: Determinants and consequences. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 53-67.

White, L. K., & Rogers, S. J. 2000. Economic circumstances and family outcomes: A review of the 1990s. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 1035-1051.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Premarital Cohabitors and Non-Cohabiting Married Couples

	Premarital Cohabitors			Non-Cohabiting Marrieds		
	Husband	Wife		Husband	Wife	
<u>Relationship Quality</u>						
Relationship Satisfaction	-0.016	-0.149	**	0.116 <sup>a</sup>	-0.006 <sup>a</sup>	*
Listening Satisfaction	0.044	-0.248	***	0.200 <sup>a</sup>	-0.094 <sup>a</sup>	***
Partner Supportiveness	0.006	-0.159	**	0.109	-0.044 <sup>a</sup>	**
Relationship Happiness	0.005	-0.170	**	0.096	-0.013 <sup>a</sup>	
Chance of Breaking Up	0.096	0.104		-0.075 <sup>a</sup>	-0.144 <sup>a</sup>	
<u>Background Characteristics</u>						
Age						
< 30	10.59	14.54	*	9.22	12.45	
30-44	46.09	38.62		32.57 <sup>a</sup>	33.33 <sup>a</sup>	
45-59	37.39	38.10		42.24	41.33 <sup>a</sup>	
60+	5.92	8.74		15.96 <sup>a</sup>	12.88 <sup>a</sup>	*
Education						
Less than High School	18.51	13.08	+	5.07 <sup>a</sup>	7.21	
High School Graduate	30.01	28.49	+	27.95	27.62	+
Some College	23.12	30.69	*	26.82	25.69	+
College Graduate	28.27	27.74		40.14 <sup>a</sup>	39.47 <sup>a</sup>	
Race						
Non-Hispanic White	73.23	76.81		75.02	74.94	
Non-Hispanic Black	6.32	4.97		2.76	3.61	
Hispanic	14.55	12.22		14.67	14.59	
Non-Hispanic Other	5.90	5.99		7.54	6.86	
Children < 18 in Household	50.57	49.09		49.62	49.10	
Income						
< \$20,000	11.19	11.39		3.93 <sup>a</sup>	3.14 <sup>a</sup>	
\$20-\$40,000	15.07	14.30		11.23	10.02	
\$40-\$60,000	21.36	22.91		16.09	16.87	
\$60-\$100,000	29.33	29.46		43.21 <sup>a</sup>	45.59 <sup>a</sup>	
\$100,000+	23.04	21.94		25.53	24.38	
Employment						
Employed	75.73	57.80	***	82.67	54.29	***
Unemployed/Not in Labor Force	11.39	31.27	***	6.76 <sup>a</sup>	30.54	***
Other (Retired/Disabled)	12.87	10.92		10.56	15.17	
Marital Duration in Years	14.75	16.66		22.75 <sup>a</sup>	24.58 <sup>a</sup>	
Unweighted N	380	380		369	369	

+ p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

Notes: Descriptive statistics are weighted using national sampling weights.

Asterisks indicate significance tests for difference between male and female means.

a. Significant difference between same-sex premarital cohabitators and non-cohabitators at p < 0.05.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Relationship Stage Measures

	Premarital Cohabitors		Non-Cohabiting Marrieds	
	Husband	Wife	Husband	Wife
<b><u>Dating</u></b>				
Date started dating	20-Jan-92	2-Jan-92	27-Mar-85 <sup>a</sup>	22-Jun-85 <sup>a</sup>
# months between dating and first spending the night together	10.58	11.38	24.11 <sup>a</sup>	23.62 <sup>a</sup>
Separate, got back together while dating	17.98	18.95	10.96 <sup>a</sup>	14.08 <sup>a</sup>
<b><u>Spending the Night</u></b>				
Spent the night together before officially living together	73.76	80.01	29.37 <sup>a</sup>	27.34 <sup>a</sup>
# weeks between first spending the night together and officially living together	9.52	9.06	7.66	7.65
# nights per week spent the night together before officially lived together	2.25	2.35	0.06 <sup>a</sup>	0.08 <sup>a</sup>
<b><u>Cohabiting</u></b>				
Date started living together	10-May-93	7-Feb-93	-----	-----
# months between officially living together and getting married	23.67	21.61	-----	-----
Separate, got back together while living together	6.58	6.84	-----	-----
Decided to marry before living together	42.33	48.43 *	-----	-----
<b><u>Married</u></b>				
Date Married	6-July-95	2-Aug-95	13-Aug-87 <sup>a</sup>	13-Mar-87 <sup>a</sup>
Separate, got back together while married	5.38	5.21	4.67	4.17

+ p <0.1, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

Notes: Descriptive statistics are weighted means and percentages.

Significance tests indicate difference between male and female means.

a. Same-sex difference in means between premarital cohabitators and non-cohabiting marrieds is significant at the p<0.05 level.

Table 3. Couple Disagreement on Relationship Stage Measures

	Premarital Cohabitors		Non-Cohabiting Marrieds	
	% Disagree	Correlation	% Disagree	Correlation
<b><u>Dating</u></b>				
Date started dating <sup>a</sup>	42.97%	0.749	37.39%	0.825
# months between dating and first spending the night together <sup>a</sup>	67.96%	0.193	54.29%	0.239
Separate, got back together while dating	9.74%	-----	8.44%	-----
<b><u>Spending the Night</u></b>				
# months between first spending the night together and officially living together <sup>a</sup>	60.90%	0.302	27.95%	0.574
# nights per week spent the night together before officially lived together <sup>b</sup>	36.34%	0.469	3.90%	0.625
<b><u>Cohabiting</u></b>				
Date started living together <sup>a</sup>	49.32%	0.766	-----	-----
# months between officially living together and getting married <sup>a</sup>	57.18%	0.382	-----	-----
Separate, got back together while living together	5.00%	-----	-----	-----
Decided to marry before living together	22.37%	-----	-----	-----
<b><u>Married</u></b>				
Date married <sup>a</sup>	13.98%	0.792	9.56%	0.807
Separate, got back together while married	2.64%	-----	3.27%	-----

Notes: Intra-couple (dis)agreement measured by correlations (r) for continuous and ordinal measures and by % disagreement for all measures.

a. Disagreement measured by > 1 month (31 day) difference

b. Disagreement measured by > 1 day difference

Table 4a. Regression of Couple Disagreement on Background Characteristics - All Respondents

	Date started dating <sup>a</sup>	Months between dating and spending the night <sup>a</sup>	Separate while dating	Months between spending the night and officially living together <sup>a</sup>	Nights/week spent the night before officially lived together <sup>b</sup>	Date married <sup>a</sup>	Separate while married
Premarital Cohabitor	1.42 *	2.06 ***	1.47	4.34 ***	2.56 ***	1.41	0.93
Age							
30-44	1.87 +	2.13 *	0.95	1.03	1.63	1.48	0.37
45-59	2.85 *	2.16 *	1.08	1.77	1.94 +	2.58	0.12 +
60+	4.63 *	2.85 *	2.09	2.50 +	3.01 *	3.14	0.03 *
Education							
Less than High School	1.32	1.21	2.25	0.53	0.50	2.76 *	----
Some College	1.06	1.07	0.82	0.81	0.95	1.16	0.53
College Graduate	1.08	1.43 +	0.89	1.94 **	1.79 **	1.42	0.09 *
Race							
Non-Hispanic Black	1.44 *	0.82	0.58	1.40	1.44	2.65	----
Hispanic	1.50 *	0.95	1.80	0.91	0.68	2.18 *	1.52
Non-Hispanic Other	3.22 *	1.03	0.47	0.65	0.68	1.75	3.32
Children < 18 in Household	0.91	1.12	0.79	0.91	1.00	1.12	0.67
Income							
\$20-\$40,000	2.15	1.78	0.87	1.15	1.02	1.89	0.27
\$40-\$60,000	2.31 +	1.56	0.82	0.99	0.90	1.31	0.06 *
\$60-\$100,000	2.75 *	1.61	1.18	1.41	1.30	2.36	0.34
\$100,000+	2.15	1.55	0.72	1.63	1.59	2.34	0.49
Employment							
Unemployed	1.28	0.65	0.32	1.39	1.25	1.70	1.38
Other (Retired/Disabled)	1.05	0.96	1.14	0.96	0.99	0.86	3.28 +
Marital Duration in Months	0.99	1.00	1.01	0.99 **	0.98 **	1.00	1.01
Pseudo R2	0.04	0.03	0.05	0.13	0.08	0.04	0.19

+ p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001 a. Disagreement measured by > 1 month (31 day) difference. b. Disagreement measured by > 1 day difference.

Notes: Odds ratios. Omitted reference categories are age < 30, high school graduate, non-Hispanic White, no children, income < \$20,000, and employed.

Table 4b. Regression of Couple Disagreement on Background Characteristics - Cohabitors Only

	Date started living together <sup>a</sup>	# months between officially living together and getting married <sup>a</sup>	Separate while living together	Decided to marry before living together
Premarital Cohabitor	---	---	---	---
Age				
30-44	1.21	1.23	1.99	2.50 *
45-59	1.89	1.85	3.04	2.94 *
60+	4.18 +	3.81 +	---	2.12 *
Education				
Less than High School	1.17	1.32	3.21 +	2.13
Some College	1.21	1.20	0.51	0.74
College Graduate	1.37	1.19	0.72	0.73
Race				
Non-Hispanic Black	0.80	1.54	1.10	1.26
Hispanic	2.48 *	1.35	3.03	1.03
Non-Hispanic Other	2.31 +	2.06	1.42	1.97
Children < 18 in Household	0.90	0.66 +	0.78	0.87
Income				
\$20-\$40,000	2.50 +	2.42 +	0.82	0.68
\$40-\$60,000	2.53 +	1.93	1.08	0.95
\$60-\$100,000	2.89 +	2.99 *	0.23	1.68
\$100,000+	3.33 *	3.28 *	0.88	1.34
Employment				
Unemployed	1.09	1.44	0.36	0.91
Other (Retired/Disabled)	0.77	0.78	0.90	1.14
Marital Duration	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.99
Pseudo R2	0.05	0.04	0.11	0.06

+ p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001

Notes: Odds ratios. Omitted categories are age < 30, HS graduate, non-Hispanic White, no children, income < \$20,000, and employed.

a. Disagreement measured by > 1 month (31 day) difference

Table 5. Regressions of Relationship Quality Outcomes on Couple Disagreement about Relationship Stages

Disagreement on	Relationship Satisfaction		Listening Satisfaction		Partner Supportiveness		Relationship Happiness		Break Up Chance											
	Husband	Wife	Husband	Wife	Husband	Wife	Husband	Wife	Husband	Wife										
<b><u>Dating</u></b>																				
Date started dating <sup>a</sup>	-0.229	**	-0.046	-0.134	+	0.013	-0.266	***	-0.151	*	-0.167	*	-0.134	+	0.084	0.054				
# months between dating and first spending the night <sup>a</sup>	-0.208	**	-0.068	-0.069		-0.031	-0.175	*	-0.117		-0.167	*	-0.061		0.040	0.149	*			
Separate, got back together while dating	-0.205	+	-0.019	-0.184		-0.183	-0.273	*	-0.203	+	-0.216	+	-0.107		0.005	0.109				
<b><u>Spending the Night</u></b>																				
# months between first spending the night and officially living together <sup>a</sup>	-0.157	*	-0.169	*	-0.126	+	-0.195	*	-0.264	**	-0.297	***	-0.217	**	-0.236	**	0.090	0.017		
# nights per week spent the night together before officially lived together <sup>b</sup>	-0.132		-0.037	-0.189	*	-0.061	-0.295	**	-0.091		-0.099		-0.049		0.148	+	-0.028			
<b><u>Cohabiting</u></b>																				
Date started living together <sup>a</sup>	-0.240	*	0.066	-0.170	+	0.140	-0.152		-0.006		-0.215	*	0.046		-0.065	-0.053				
# months between officially living together and getting married <sup>a</sup>	-0.153		0.145	-0.078		-0.206	*	-0.077		0.055		-0.126		0.065		-0.042	-0.011			
Separate, got back together while living together	-0.369	+	-0.502	*	-0.489	*	-0.614	**	-0.651	**	-0.906	***	-0.104		-0.592	*	0.071	0.174		
Decided to marry before living together	0.033		-0.074	-0.004		-0.065		0.016		-0.081		-0.019		-0.088		-0.164	0.022			
<b><u>Marriage</u></b>																				
Date married <sup>a</sup>	-0.098		0.179	0.075		0.039		-0.173		-0.096		-0.027		-0.013		-0.075	-0.209	*		
Separate, got back together while married	-0.741	***	-0.655	**	-0.950	***	-0.869	***	-0.937	***	-0.522	*	-0.767	***	-0.524	*	0.554	*	0.419	*

+ p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001. Cohabiting results are for the premarital cohabitators sample only.

Notes: Regressions control for premarital cohabitation, age, education, race, children in household, household income, employment status, and marital duration.

a. Disagreement measured by > 1 month (31 day) difference b. Disagreement measured by > 1 day difference