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Bowling Green State University

Working Paper Series 01-02

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Does Marriage Improve a Cohabiting Relationship?*

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Abstract

Data from both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households are used to test whether marriage improves the relationship quality of cohabitators. Cohabitators who marry report higher levels of relationship happiness as well as lower levels of relationship instability, disagreements, and violent conflict resolution than those who remain cohabiting, net of time one relationship quality and sociodemographic controls. Relationship fairness and interaction are not significantly affected by marriage. On balance, marriage significantly enhances the quality of cohabiting unions.

Key words: cohabitation, marriage, relationship quality, union dynamics

Does Marriage Improve a Cohabiting Relationship?

Cohabitation is now a normative event in the life course. A majority of people in their 20s and 30s have ever cohabited, and about one-quarter of this population is currently cohabiting (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). Recent estimates from the 2000 Census indicate that there are over 5 million cohabiting couples in America (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). Cohabitation is closely tied to marriage. Nearly 75 percent of cohabitators report plans to marry their partner although fewer than one-half of cohabitators actually tie the knot (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Still, cohabitation is the modal path of entry into marriage (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989).

The dramatic increase in cohabitation over the past few decades suggests the importance of understanding the nature of cohabitation, that is, the meanings and implications of these relationships. The purpose of this study is to determine whether moving from cohabitation to marriage affects relationship quality, or if relationship quality is primarily a function of relationship-specific variables. I use data from waves one (1987-88) and two (1992-94) of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to examine changes in relationship quality among cohabitators over a five year interval and test whether marriage at some point during this interval alters relationship quality.

Background

Research on cohabitation has been largely confined to its role in marital success and stability. Cohabitation contributes to marital instability, poor marital quality, and divorce (Thomson & Colella, 1992; Booth & Johnson, 1988; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). Spouses who cohabited prior to marriage report lower levels of interaction and higher levels of disagreement with their spouses than their counterparts who have never cohabited (Booth & Johnson, 1988). Further, marrieds who formerly cohabited report lower levels of commitment to marriage as an institution (Thomson & Colella, 1992). Cohabitators not only bring more nontraditional attitudes toward divorce to the cohabiting relationship, but after having experienced cohabitation, their nontraditional views toward divorce increase net of their views prior to cohabitation (Axinn & Thornton, 1992). Indeed, marriages involving a spouse who cohabited are 50 percent more likely to fail than marriages in which neither spouse experienced cohabitation (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989).

The higher incidence of divorce among people who cohabited premaritally appears to be largely a function of selection (Lillard, Brien, & Waite, 1995). Specifically, prior research provides evidence that cohabitation is selective of people who are poor marriage material. Moreover, the relationship between duration of marriage and marital quality does not differ for former cohabitators and those who never cohabited. The experience of cohabitation per se does not explain the higher rates of divorce among former cohabitators. Instead, negative characteristics of cohabitators account for the higher rates of divorce among former cohabitators (Booth & Johnson, 1988). Correction for selectivity into cohabitation eliminates the positive association between premarital cohabitation and divorce (Lillard, Brien, & Waite, 1995).

Research by Thomson and Colella (1992) also suggests that the effect of cohabitation on divorce is indirect. They find that the relatively low stability of marriages preceded by cohabitation is partially a function of social and economic factors associated with cohabitation. Additionally, their findings demonstrate that the effect of cohabitation on marital stability varies significantly according to the duration of the cohabitation. Longer premarital cohabitations (i.e., two or more years) are associated with a higher perceived likelihood of dissolution of the current marriage. This relationship is due to both the low marital quality and weak commitment to marriage as an institution that characterize those who experienced long cohabitations.

The present study begins one step earlier in this process by investigating the dynamics of unions which began as cohabitations. Rather than analyzing the effect of premarital cohabitation on marital stability, I evaluate whether marriage improves the quality of cohabiting relationships. The dramatic rise in cohabitation over the past few decades provides a rationale for the focus on changes in *cohabiting* relationships over time. The number of cohabiting couple households has increased more than 600 percent since 1970 (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). And, most American marriages are preceded by a period of nonmarital cohabitation (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). Thus, the impact of marriage on the quality of these unions is of particular relevance. Research that compares the relationship quality of cohabitators and marrieds offers a starting point for the present analysis.

Cohabitation, Marriage, and Relationship Quality

In an effort to understand the meaning of cohabitation relative to marriage, a few researchers (Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995) have used cross-sectional data to examine the relationship quality of cohabitators versus marrieds. On average, cohabitators report poorer relationship quality than marrieds. Cohabitators disagree more frequently, perceive less fairness in their relationship, and are also less happy with their relationship than their married counterparts. Yet, there appear to be two distinct groups of cohabitators: cohabitators with plans to marry their partner and cohabitators with no plans to marry their partner (Brown & Booth, 1996). Approximately 75 percent of cohabitators are in the former category, and these cohabitators are involved in relationships that do not significantly differ in quality from those of marrieds. Moreover, potential relationship stressors, including children and prior union experience, similarly impact the relationship quality of these cohabitators and marrieds. The 25 percent of cohabitators without marital intentions report poorer relationship quality than marrieds and cohabitators who plan to marry their partner. Cohabitators without marriage plans tend to have had prior marital and cohabiting relationships and are currently in unions of relatively long duration. Brown and Booth (1996) thus conclude that the majority of cohabitators are no different than marrieds with respect to relationship quality.

Nock (1995) compares the relationship quality of cohabitators to marrieds who never cohabited and marrieds who cohabited prior to marriage. He concludes that the two married groups are more similar to each other than either is to the cohabiting group, suggesting that "the structural and institutional aspects of marriage...define much of the differences between marriage and cohabitation" (74). On the basis of this finding, it seems that marriage does alter relationship quality, and that cohabitators who choose to marry are somehow different from their counterparts who remain cohabiting.

Motivations for Marriage

A majority of cohabitators plan to marry their partner (Brown & Booth, 1996; Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991) and approximately 50 percent of cohabitations end through marriage (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Not surprisingly, many cohabitators believe that marriage would improve their emotional and economic security as well as their overall happiness. Additionally, cohabitators maintain that their sex lives and their relationships

with their parents might also improve following marriage. Few cohabitators point to ways in which their lives would worsen after marriage (Bumpass et al., 1991). Researchers have identified several factors that might motivate cohabitators to formalize their union through marriage. After briefly discussing these factors and their likely influence on relationship quality, I consider the literature on cohabitators=union transitions, namely, the determinants of marriage entry among cohabitators.

Cohabitators might formalize their union because they feel especially committed to their partner. Marrieds (regardless of whether they cohabited with their spouse prior to marriage) report greater commitment to their relationships than do cohabitators (Nock, 1995). Moreover, marriages are much more stable than cohabiting unions (Bumpass et al., 1991; Bumpass & Sweet, 1995; Thornton, 1988). The higher levels of commitment and stability associated with marriage are likely to enhance relationship quality.

Cohabitators also might marry their partner because they view marriage as a desirable adult status. About 95 percent of young people express a desire to marry (Sweet & Bumpass, 1990; Thornton, 1989) and, for most groups (e.g., Black women, Mexican Americans, and Whites) marriage is preferable to cohabitation (Landale & Fennelly, 1992; Oropesa, 1996; South, 1993). Consequently, fulfillment of this aspiration might translate into reports of higher relationship quality. But, the effect of marriage on cohabitators' relationship quality could be contingent on cohabitators' marital intentions when the union began. Many individuals enter a cohabiting union intending to marry their partner. When marriage is the ultimate goal of these cohabitators, its realization might improve relationship quality. On the other hand, cohabitators with plans to marry their partner are not involved in relationships of significantly different quality than their married counterparts (Brown & Booth, 1996) and hence formalization of the union may have little impact on its quality.

Marriage among cohabitators also might occur in response to familial pressures. Marrieds report better relations with their parents than do cohabitators (Nock, 1995). Cohabitators may also marry to legitimate the birth of a child (Manning, 1993; Manning & Landale, 1996) and establish paternity, facilitating father involvement. Others may marry in anticipation of conceiving a child, which implicitly demonstrates the additional benefits that accrue from legalizing one's union. Indeed, a majority of European cohabitators report that they married for

[their future] children (cf. Manning, 1993).

Finally, the strong normative expectations surrounding marriage (Cherlin, 1978) might effectively enhance the relationship quality of cohabitators who marry by imposing clearly defined roles for husbands and wives. Indeed, Nock (1995) attributes the poorer relationship quality of cohabitators to the lack of institutionalization of cohabitation. Related to this clear demarcation of roles are the privileges afforded to those who are legally married, including family health insurance benefits. Tangible benefits more readily obtainable through marriage, such as resource pooling and joint investments, also could improve relationship quality by minimizing disagreements about money and the perceived fairness of the division of resources.

Union Transitions Among Cohabitators

Cohabiting unions are of relatively short duration, typically lasting about a year or two. Fewer than 10 percent persist for five or more years (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). Cohabitors=transitions into separation or marriage are a function of both sociodemographic factors (Manning & Smock, 1995; Smock & Manning, 1997) and relationship assessments and expectations (Brown, 2000). For instance, black cohabitators are significantly less likely than are their white counterparts to marry, even net of demographic controls (Manning & Smock, 1995). Notably, black and white cohabitators are equally likely to report marriage plans, yet blacks are evidently less likely to realize their plans whether because they have poorer relationship quality or are in unions of longer duration, on average (Brown, 2000). In addition to race, a key determinant of marriage entry among cohabitators is economic well-being, particularly the earnings and education levels of the male partner (Smock & Manning, 1997). The socioeconomic characteristics of the female partner are largely unrelated to cohabitators=union transitions. Cohabitors=relationship assessments, including their appraisals of relationship disagreement, conflict resolution, happiness, and interaction, are associated with separation, but are not predictive of marriage (Brown, 2000). Poor relationship quality encourages separation, although high relationship quality does not spur entry into marriage. Relationship expectations are closely tied to outcomes. Cohabitators without marriage plans are significantly more likely to separate and less likely to marry. Similarly, couples who expect their unions will dissolve are significantly more likely to separate and less likely to marry than their

counterparts who perceive a low chance of union dissolution (Brown, 2000).

The transition to marriage is often accompanied by important changes in the division of household and paid labor and, in turn, these shifts may influence relationship quality. The most economically stable cohabitators are the most likely to formalize their unions through marriage (Smock & Manning, 1997). Marrieds tend to exhibit a more traditional division of household labor than do cohabitators (South & Spitze, 1994) and they also earn higher incomes, on average (Nock, 1995; Smock, 2000). It is possible that men's and women's work hours and earnings change following marriage entry, particularly since it appears that many cohabitators enter marriage to begin childbearing. Thus, rather than simply accounting for the couple's economic status at a single point in time, the present analysis incorporates measures of change between the two time points in family income, the proportion of income earned by the respondent, the proportion of housework performed by the respondent, and the proportion of hours in paid labor worked by the respondent. This strategy ensures that any shifts in family economic status—which often accompany the transition to marriage—are accounted for in the estimations of time two relationship quality.

The Present Study

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the effect of marriage on cohabitators' relationship quality. Both behavioral and evaluative measures of relationship quality are analyzed using the regressor variable method (Allison, 1990). The model posits both a direct effect of time one relationship quality on time two relationship quality as well as a positive effect through marriage. The effects of potential moderating variables, including gender, plans to marry one's partner, the presence of children, and prior union experience, are examined in additional analyses. The justifications for their inclusion are outlined below.

The Significance of Gender

Gender is an integral component of personal relationships, particularly marriage (Bernard, 1982; Thompson & Walker, 1989). Men's and women's experiences of emotional and sexual intimacy, communication, and conflict are often substantially different. Wives are typically responsible for managing the marriage and thus they tend to be especially sensitive to its dynamics. Wives are more expressive than their husbands, on

average, and often raise issues of concern within the marriage. Simply put, wives are the caretakers of the marital union, charged with maintaining its emotional health.

Similar gendered relationship patterns apparently characterize cohabiting unions, too (Brown, 2000; Sanchez, Manning, & Smock, 1998). Moreover, these unique gendered relationship assessments influence cohabitators' union outcomes. For example, Sanchez et al. (1998) found that among cohabitators, women were more likely than men to report that the division of household labor was unfair. Partner disagreement about the perceived fairness of the division of labor was positively associated with separation. And, when women reported more egalitarian gender role attitudes than men, the odds of marriage decreased. These findings indicate mate selection is driven by a traditional, gender-specialized process. Indeed, Sanchez et al. (1998) found that men's earnings and women's time spent on housework were both positively associated with marriage.

Brown's (2000) examination of the role of relationship assessments and expectations on cohabitators' union outcomes also highlights the importance of gender. Women's negative appraisals of the cohabiting relationship encouraged separation, whereas men's simply deterred marriage. Men's expectations for the future of the relationship were closely tied to its outcome; men's expectations of separation (marriage) significantly increased the odds of separation (marriage). In contrast, women's expectations for marriage or separation had little impact on the union outcome unless their expectations mirrored those of their male partner.

Thus, women's and men's experiences of cohabitation have unique influences on union outcomes. In turn, gender shapes the experience of marriage, including perceptions of marital quality. Consequently, I pay close attention to the modifying effects of gender on the relationship between marriage and relationship quality.

Given the greater sensitivity of women to marital dynamics, I expect the transition to marriage will have an especially large positive effect on the marital quality of women.

Plans to Marry

Planning to marry one's partner implies agreement between partners about the future of the relationship.

Cohabitators without plans to marry either have no intentions of marrying, whether because they believe

cohabitation is preferable or the relationship is not perceived as viable for marriage. Plans to marry is not equivalent to relationship quality (Brown, 2000). Cohabitors ideologically opposed to marriage may assess their relationships as positively as marrieds, despite an absence of marriage plans. Those without marriage plans may not be interested in getting married in the near future, but nevertheless positively evaluate their relationship. Realization of one's intentions to wed might result in improved relationship quality at time two. However, cohabitators who intend to marry their partner but do not might show no change in their relationship quality, or perhaps even a decline. The effects of plans to marry on relationship quality at time two are examined in the analyses and whether these effects vary by union status at time two is tested, too.

Children

The presence of biological children of the couple suggests a greater level of confidence in the partner, for the respondent has deemed the partner fit to be a parent. Further, cohabitators with children are likely to operate as a married couple family; children stabilize cohabiting unions (Wu, 1995). Cohabitors with children are much less likely than their childless counterparts to dissolve their unions (Wu, 1995). These results hold regardless of the number of children, their age, and their sex. However, the presence of children also deters the transition to marriage, suggesting that cohabitators with children are a select group who prefer cohabitation as an alternative form of living (Wu & Balakrishnan, 1995). If cohabitators with children are less desirous of marriage than their childless counterparts, their relationship quality may differ little from that of their childless counterparts who marry. The impact of biological children of the couple present at time one is tested, as well as whether these effects differ by time two union status. Biological children present at time one are distinguished from children born between interview waves.

The presence of children from previous unions is likely to have the opposite effect on at least one dimension of relationship quality: instability. Stepchildren double the chance that a remarriage will dissolve (White & Booth, 1985a). Analogously, children from prior unions potentially exacerbate the instability of cohabiting relationships, making marriage less likely. Children from past unions impede the formation of marital unions (Ahlburg & DeVita, 1992; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992) and heighten marital

instability by straining parent-child relations (White & Booth, 1985a). In fact, the dissolution rates of cohabiting and married stepfamilies do not significantly differ, suggesting such unions are equally (un)stable (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995). The effects of children from previous unions is tested, as is whether these effects differ by union status at time two.

Prior Union Experience

Cohabitation is more common among divorced than never-married individuals. All of the recent decline in the rate of remarriage is due to a corresponding increase in cohabitation among ever-marrieds (Bumpass et al., 1991). By comparison, only three-fourths of the decline in marriage among never-married women under age 25 is a consequence of rising rates of cohabitation (Bumpass et al., 1991). While it is well-known that remarriages and marriages preceded by cohabitation are less stable and of poorer quality than first marriages (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Booth & Johnson, 1988; Thomson & Colella, 1992), less is known about the effects of prior marital or cohabitation experience on the quality of current cohabiting relationships. Previous cohabitation experience has negative effects on the relationship quality of both cohabitators and marrieds, whereas prior marital experience has few significant effects on the quality of these two types of unions (Brown & Booth, 1996).

On average, ever-married and never-married cohabitators differ across a variety of demographic variables. Ever-married cohabitators are older, on average, more likely to have children, and less likely to report plans to marry either their partner or someone else (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). Cohabitators with particularly poor relationship quality are characterized by prior union experience and no plans to marry their partner (Brown & Booth, 1996). Given the positive association between plans to marry and marriage entry (Brown, 2000), we can expect cohabitators with prior union experience to be less likely to marry and consequently report poorer relationship quality (relative to those cohabitators who marry). The effects of prior marital and cohabitation experience is investigated in the analyses, and differential impacts according to union status at time two are examined as well.

A Note About Selection Effects

Research on the relationship between premarital cohabitation and divorce indicates that cohabitation is a selective process (Booth & Johnson, 1988; Lillard et al., 1995). The significant associations between cohabitators' relationship assessments and expectations and their union outcomes (Brown, 2000) are clear empirical evidence that union formalization through marriage is nonrandom. Those cohabitators with the lowest levels of relationship quality are most likely to separate and thus be excluded from the present analysis, which requires a continuous partnership across two time points. Consequently, I use Heckman's (1979) correction for sample selection to minimize the bias associated with nonrandom sample attrition across waves.

In summary, the present study is designed to examine whether marriage improves the relationship quality of cohabitators. I consider the moderating influences of gender, plans to marry, children, and prior union experience. Analyses are constrained to unions that remain intact across time points and a correction is made (using Heckman's (1979) two-step procedure) for those unions that dissolve between waves.

Method

Data for these analyses come from both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), which is a national probability sample of 13,007 persons conducted in 1987-88 and 1992-94. These data are well-suited to answering the research question of interest because they contain an oversample of cohabitators and extensive information on relationship quality at both time points. In 1987-88, the NSFH interviewed 678 cohabitators, of which 502 were successfully reinterviewed in 1992-94. In addition to those who attrited between waves (N=167), cohabitators whose relationships had dissolved (N=176) or had been formalized through marriage but ended in divorce (N=50) were excluded from the analyses as there is no information about their time two relationship quality with their time one partner. These limitations result in 276 cohabiting respondents for analysis.

Measures

Dependent variables. Relationship quality is measured across six dimensions at both time points. Table 1 provides a summary of all of the variables used in the analyses. Each of these dimensions of relationship quality is measured by identical items at times one and two. *Happiness* with the relationship is measured by a

global question: "Taking all things together, how would you describe your relationship?" Responses range from very unhappy (1) to very happy (7). *Interaction*, a six-point scale, measures the reported amount of time spent alone with the partner in the past month, with higher values indicating more frequent interaction. Relationship *instability* is ascertained by asking the respondent to assess the probability that the relationship will eventually dissolve, with responses ranging from very unlikely (1) to about even (3) to very likely (5). *Disagreement* is measured by four items: the respondent's report of the frequency of disagreement about household tasks, money, spending time together, and sex (Cronbach's alpha=0.72). Higher values on this dimension indicate more frequent disagreements. The *fairness* measure gauges the perceived level of fairness in three areas of the relationship: household chores, working for pay, and spending money (Cronbach's alpha=0.69), with higher values representing greater relationship fairness. Finally, the *conflict resolution* measure pertains to the resolution of disagreements (Cronbach's alpha=0.57). High values correspond with reports of high frequencies of shouting, hitting, or throwing things at one another and low frequencies of calm discussions. Each of these dimensions has been analyzed in previous research on cohabiting relationships (Brown, 2000; Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995).

TABLE 1. Summary of Variables (Weighted means and standard deviations)

VARIABLE	MEAN (S.D.)			
	UNION STATUS AT TIME 2			
	MARRIED		COHABITING	
	T1	T2	T1	T2
Happiness	6.12 (1.20)	5.86 (1.38)	5.82 (1.38)	5.32 (1.52)
Interaction	5.42 (1.04)*	4.57 (1.49)	5.09 (1.49)	4.31 (1.57)
Instability	1.62 (0.89)*	1.51 (0.82)*	1.98 (0.98)	2.29 (1.14)
Disagreement	8.91 (3.57)	8.84 (3.28)	9.03 (3.59)	9.08 (3.77)
Fairness	8.22 (1.31)	8.05 (1.14)*	8.26 (1.35)	7.66 (1.83)
Conflict Resolution	5.38 (1.91)	5.80 (1.91)*	5.84 (1.78)	6.88 (2.03)
Age	31.37 (9.36)*		35.00 (10.58)	
Education	13.22 (2.94)*		11.93 (2.50)	
Nonwhite	0.12 (0.31)*		0.45 (0.49)	
Duration	25.96 (23.92)*		52.75 (44.99)	
Female	0.50 (0.50)		0.46 (0.50)	
Plans to Marry- T1	0.84 (0.37)*		0.66 (0.49)	
Biological Children-T1	0.21 (0.43)*		0.38 (0.38)	
Stepchildren-T1	0.30 (0.47)		0.28 (0.46)	
New Birth T1-T2	0.38 (0.49)*		0.24 (0.43)	
Previously Married	0.48 (0.50)		0.50 (0.50)	
Previously Cohabited	0.17 (0.37)		0.14 (0.38)	
? Family Income	6824.12 (38843.42)*		4398.58 (25742.19)	
? R= p of Income	0.03 (0.29)		-0.09 (0.36)	
? R= p Housework	0.46 (0.15)		-0.03 (0.16)	
? R= p Work Hours	0.50 (0.12)*		0.03 (0.13)	
N	164		112	

*Cohabitors and marrieds significantly different, $p < 0.05$

Independent variables. Marriage between interview waves is captured by a *union status* variable coded one if the respondent married his/her time one partner and zero if the respondent continued to cohabit with that partner. At time two, 164 cohabitators had married their partners from time one; the remaining 112 were still cohabiting with their time one partner.

Explanatory variables include gender, plans to marry, the presence of children, and past union experience. *Gender* is coded 1 for woman and 0 for man. *Plans to marry* is measured at time one and is coded 1 if the respondent reports definite plans to marry or thinks eventually he/she will marry the cohabiting partner. At time one, 75 percent of cohabitators report plans to marry their partner. About 85 percent of cohabitators married at time two reported plans to marry their partner at time one, whereas 68 percent of cohabitators who are not married at time two reported intentions of marrying their partner at time one.

The presence of biological children and children from past unions are measured at time one as dummy variables. The birth of a child between interview waves is measured at time two. If at least one *biological child* of the couple is present at time one, then the biological children variable is coded 1 (0 otherwise). The *stepchildren* variable is coded 1 if at least one child from a previous union is present, and 0 otherwise. The occurrence of a *birth of a child* between interview waves is coded 1 (0 otherwise). At time one, nearly 30 percent of respondents report at least one biological child and approximately 30 percent have children from prior unions. About one-third of the sample experiences the birth of a child between interviews.

Union experience is measured at time one. *Prior marital experience* is coded 1 if the respondent has been married before, and *prior cohabitation experience* is coded 1 if the respondent has cohabited with someone other than his/her current partner. Prior union experience is essentially the same for both groups of cohabitators in this study. About 15 percent cohabited prior to the current union and nearly 50 percent were married prior to the current union.

Control variables. Demographic variables associated with relationship quality or marriage are included in the analyses as control variables. Specifically, the respondent's race, age, education, and union duration, all measured at time one, are included as controls. Blacks and Latinos are more likely to cohabit and

less likely to marry than whites (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Manning & Smock, 1995; Raley, 1996) and thus race, coded one for *nonwhite* and zero for white, is included as a control variable. Unfortunately, there is such a small number of nonwhites in the sample that further breakdowns are not possible. *Age*, coded in years, is also included as it is associated with both cohabitation and relationship quality (Nock, 1995; Glenn, 1990). *Education*, measured as the number of years of schooling completed, is included in the analyses because those with lower educational levels are disproportionately likely to cohabit (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Clarkberg, 1999; Smock & Manning, 1997) and education is associated with relationship quality (Nock, 1995; Glenn, 1990). The *duration* of the cohabiting union, measured in months at the first interview, is negatively related to relationship quality (Glenn, 1990) and thus included as a control variable.

Controls are also included to account for possible changes in family economic status. *Change in family income* measures the difference between time two and time one couple income. The *change in the proportion of income contributed by the respondent* is the difference between the proportions of couple income contributed by the respondent at waves two and one. Similarly, the *change in the proportion of housework performed by the respondent* is the difference between the proportions she or he performed at waves two and one. And, *the change in the proportion of hours in paid labor that the respondent works* is the difference between the proportions of total couple hours worked that were performed by the respondent at waves two and one.

Analytic Strategy

Multiple dimensions of relationship quality are examined across the two waves of data using the regressor variable method (see Allison, 1990 for a description). Time two relationship quality is regressed on time one relationship quality, union type (i.e., cohabiting versus married) at wave two, and controls. These models effectively reveal whether union type results in a significant change in relationship quality at time two (relative to the time one value). Models using the change score method (Allison, 1990), in which the dependent variable is the difference between time two and time one relationship quality, yield analogous results.

The following section begins with a brief discussion of the mean differences between cohabitators who

marry versus those who remain cohabiting. Then, results from the regressor variable models are presented, showing the effects of a transition to marriage on the multiple dimensions of relationship quality. Subsequent models examine the interactive effects of union type and gender, plans to marry, children, and prior union experience to help pinpoint whether marriage has differential effects for certain groups of cohabitators. All models incorporate lambda, the Heckman (1979) correction for sample selection, to account for nonrandom sample attrition across time points.

Results

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of all variables used in the analysis by union type at time two. Cohabitators who marry have higher levels of relationship quality. Comparing the mean levels of relationship quality reveals that cohabitators who marry report at time two significantly higher mean levels of fairness and significantly lower mean levels of instability and conflict in dispute resolution than cohabitators who remain cohabiting. Cohabitators who marry tend to be younger and more educated, on average. They are also more likely to be white and to have biological children. Cohabitators who marry spent fewer months cohabiting and were more likely to report marriage plans at time one than those who do not marry.

Multivariate models estimated using the regressor variable method reveal that union formalization has significant effects on four of the six dimensions of relationship quality, as shown in Table 2. Cohabitators who transition into marriage report greater relationship happiness as well as lower levels of instability, disagreements, and violence in conflict resolution. These benefits hold net of initial time one levels of relationship quality, sociodemographic factors and changes in family economic status. In fact, there are notably few effects of these control factors on relationship quality; apart from time one relationship quality, marriage appears to be the most consistent predictor of time two relationship quality. The presence of a biological child is associated with lower levels of relationship happiness and interaction. Similarly, the birth of a child between time points lessens happiness and interaction and heightens the frequency of disagreements. These results are consistent with the literature showing that children, particularly young children requiring constant care, create stress among marrieds by reducing spousal interaction and support (White & Booth, 1985b; White, & Booth, Edwards, 1986).

Overall, these findings provide support for the argument that marriage improves the quality of cohabiting relationships.

The inclusion of Heckman's correction for sample selection (which is not significant in any of the models) minimizes the possibility that the results produced by these models merely reflect differences in the types of cohabitators who select themselves into marriage. Nevertheless, there may be some groups of cohabitators for whom marriage is especially beneficial. Thus, several interaction effects were examined

Table 2. OLS Regression Coefficients Predicting Relationship Quality at Time Two, Net of Union Type at Time 2, Relationship Quality at Time 1, and Controls

	Relationship Quality at Time 2					
	Happiness	Interaction	Instability	Disagree	Fairness	Conflict Resolution
<i>Union Type at T2</i>						
Married	0.54*	0.28	-0.83***	-1.04*	0.18	-1.10***
(Cohabiting)						
<i>Relationship Quality at T1</i>	0.27***	-0.00	0.33***	0.27***	0.45***	0.30***
<i>Sociodemographic Controls</i>						
Age	0.21	0.11	-0.12	-0.09	0.21	-0.29
Education	0.60*	0.31	-0.32	-0.21	0.52	-0.74
Nonwhite	-4.40	-1.90	2.08	1.55	-4.31	4.69
Union Duration	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
Female	1.81	0.91	-1.02	-1.28	1.72	-2.48
Plans to Marry-T1	-0.07	-0.12	0.14	1.00	0.33	-0.25
Biological Children-T1	-0.54*	-0.63*	0.33	-0.52	-0.40	0.60
Stepchildren-T1	-0.23	0.24	-0.17	1.59**	0.13	-0.10
New Birth T1-T2	-0.67**	-0.65**	0.30	1.17*	-0.11	0.33
Previously Married	0.33	-0.06	-0.11	0.12	0.07	-0.52
Previously Cohabited	-0.33	0.03	-0.04	-0.29	-0.01	-0.18
<i>Family Economic Change</i>						
? Family Income	-0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.00	-0.00
? R-s p Income	-0.59	-0.38	-0.09	0.22	-0.05	-0.21
? R-s p Housework	0.58	1.12*	-0.67	-0.72	-0.66	-0.48
? R-s p Work Hours	0.41	1.12	-1.13**	-2.33	-0.21	-0.76
<i>Lambda</i>	22.05	8.89	-10.67	-4.44	19.16	-25.08
F (df)	3.37 (18)	3.01 (18)	5.00 (18)	4.33 (18)	3.31 (18)	4.12 (18)
R ²	0.23	0.20	0.31	0.29	0.23	0.27
N	222	231	219	212	220	223

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Subsequent models evaluate whether gender, plans to marry, the presence of children, and prior union experience modify the effects of marriage on cohabitators' relationship quality. None of the interaction terms was significant. Gender is not related to marriage entry, nor is it associated with relationship quality. Gender and marriage also do not significantly interact in their effects on time two relationship quality. Although plans to marry is positively associated with marriage, it has no direct effect on any measure of time two relationship quality. Nor does plans to marry interact with union status in its effects on time two relationship quality. The presence of biological children of the couple is positively related to marriage and it is associated with some dimensions of relationship quality, as noted above. Still, these effects hold regardless of whether the respondent marries the partner; the presence of a child does not interact with union status. Stepchildren have few significant effects on relationship quality (they are associated with more frequent disagreements), nor are there any significant interaction effects. The birth of a child between interviews has similar effects on the relationship quality of cohabitators and marrieds. Finally, including indicators for prior marital and cohabitation experience has negligible effects on all dimensions of relationship quality. Tests for interaction effects reveal that the effect of union status on time two relationship quality does not vary by prior union experience. The absence of any significant interaction effects indicates that marriage enhances relationship quality, regardless of gender, marital intentions, the presence of children, or prior union experience. Cohabitators enjoy higher levels of relationship quality following marriage.

Discussion

In this paper, the impact of marriage on cohabitators' relationship quality was evaluated using data from both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households. The purpose of this study was to test whether formalization of a cohabiting union appreciably alters its quality. On balance, marriage improves the quality of the relationship. Cohabitators who marry report more happiness with and less instability in their relationships, fewer disagreements, and conflict resolution strategies characterized by more calm discussions, compared to their counterparts who remain cohabiting. The frequency of partner interaction as well as the perceived level of fairness in the relationship remain unaffected by marriage.

This study provides the first systematic examination of the influence of marriage on multiple dimensions of cohabitators' relationship quality. Although other research has compared the relationship quality and stability of cohabiting and marital unions (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Stets, 1991), the present analysis extends prior work by investigating the *dynamics* of cohabiting unions to uncover changes in

cohabitators=relationship quality following marriage. Consistent with prior studies that have documented greater stability in marriages than in cohabitations (Bumpass & Sweet, 1995; Bumpass et al., 1991; Thornton, 1988), the present study shows that cohabitators who marry report a lower probability of union dissolution than those who remain cohabiting. The greater violence proneness of cohabitators relative to marrieds has been evidenced consistently in previous research, yet the explanation for this differential has been unclear (Stets, 1991; Stets & Straus, 1990; Yllo & Straus, 1981). The present study reveals that marriage must negate the deficits suffered by cohabitators since all of the marrieds in this analysis initially cohabited (which essentially *controls* for any selection effect). Indeed, whereas cohabitators who marry their partners report similar conflict resolution strategies in their relationships at times one and two, cohabitators who do not marry experience an escalation of conflict in their relationships over time, including heated arguments and possibly hitting or throwing things at each other. These benefits from marriage, including greater stability and happiness as well as fewer disagreements and arguments, appear to apply equally to all groups of cohabitators as the influence of marriage on the relationship quality of cohabitators is not modified by gender, plans to marry, children, or prior union experience.

The results of this study must be interpreted with some caution in light of the relatively long period of time between the first and second interview dates. In some cases, time elapsed between interviews could be as long as seven years. Less than ten percent of cohabiting unions survive more than five years (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989), meaning that the intact, nonmarital cohabiting unions in this analysis are likely a select group. Although it seems logical to assume that these cohabitators would have higher relationship quality since their unions have remained intact, in fact prior research (Brown & Booth, 1996; Thomson & Colella, 1992) indicates that longer cohabitations are associated with *poorer* relationship quality, suggesting that the effects of marriage on relationship quality presented here are conservative. A less select group of cohabitators may have higher relationship quality, on average, both before and after marriage. Ideally, the nonrandom attrition between interview waves has been largely accounted for through the Heckman (1979) correction for sample selection.

Do cohabitators=relationships change once they enter marriage? The results from this study are

emphatically affirmative; cohabitators who marry experience significant positive changes in the quality of their relationships. In fact, apart from time one levels of relationship quality, marriage appears to be the key predictor of relationship quality at reinterview. Cohabitators who marry report greater happiness, fewer disagreements, and less instability in their unions and are able to resolve their relationship conflicts through nonviolent means. Although the beneficial effects of marriage on reports of fairness in the relationship and the frequency of interaction with one's partner are negligible, on balance, cohabitators who marry their partner experience gains in relationship quality, suggesting that marriage is a unique environment that provides enhanced security, stability, and social support (cf. Ross, 1995; Waite, 1995; Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

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