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Cohabitation: Function and Dysfunction

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Current research on cohabitation has focused on the negative aspects of the cohabiting experience. After examining the type of people drawn to cohabitation as well as the perceived disadvantages of the cohabiting experience, this study has focused on the reasons couples continue to choose cohabitation. The recent departure from marriage to cohabitation by adults in "mainstream" America is in part due to societal changes. Cohabitation is seen by many as a means to testing out a relationship before making the union official. Women today are continuing their education for many years and are thus postponing marriage. Cohabitation has presented itself as a viable option for those who desire intimacy without lifelong commitment. Cohabitation is attractive to others who desire to depart from the man's authority that marriage places over the woman. Either way, cohabitation may serve as a way to limit the spread of HIV and STD's by limiting individual's sexual partners.

Context, Hypotheses, and Methodology

This study is a consequence of my prior research on divorce. I researched articles and analyzed data in search of a correlation between individuals' demographic factors and the increased likelihood of divorce among people with similar backgrounds. The dependent variable in my study was individuals who had experienced divorce. I studied how five independent variables impacted this dependent variable. These independent variables were: parental divorce, cohabitation, religiosity, age at marriage, and level of education. I hypothesized that people who divorce are more likely to have experienced parental divorce before the age of 16, cohabited, been less religious, married at a young age, and had a lower level of education. While not all of these variables were found together, I proposed that the more of these factors an individual had, the greater their likelihood for divorce. This research on factors influencing divorce led me to do a statistical analysis on the 1994 General Social Survey. I focused on questions pertaining to divorce. I found that of the participants who had experienced divorce, almost 37% had cohabited prior to marriage.

These results led me to wonder why, if over one-third of those who had cohabited prior to marriage had experienced divorce, couples continue to cohabit instead of entering directly into a marriage relationship. I also began to inquire whether cohabiters possessed specific qualities that attracted them to cohabitation and if it were these qualities that put them at a greater risk for marital instability or if it was the experience of cohabitation itself that disrupted stability. This issue will be examined followed by a section in which I look at the perceived negative results of cohabiting either as an alternative to marriage or as a precursor to it. Finally, I consider why couples continue to cohabit despite the findings that report so many negative consequences of cohabitation.

Within this study religiosity is understood as one's belief in and strong commitment to the values of their faith. I primarily focused on the Christian faith and the values that "the Church" promotes, such as a commitment to solid, stable families, which in turn promote the creation of a solid community. Many groups within the Christian church are against premarital sex and children out of wedlock and view marriage as a lifelong commitment. Those who are described as religious typically share many of these values. I define marital stability as a physically, emotionally, and financially safe and productive arena for the couple as well as children if any are involved. Obviously, divorce would be an indicator of an unstable marriage. There are many subjective aspects within a marriage, such as happiness, sexual satisfaction, and equity of housework. While these are important factors to consider, I will focus on more objective aspects such as verbal or physical abuse and financial stability. It is characteristics like these that contribute to a functional family, which is in itself a subjective experience. Due to the inability of most homosexuals to marry and therefore their primary living

arrangement being cohabitation, I imagine that their cohabiting relationship would be in some ways similar and also different to heterosexual cohabiting relationships. I will be focusing my attention solely on heterosexual relationships.

While I understand that there are many types of functioning marriages in today's society, and that cohabitation may prove a very successful and positive experience for some couples, the aim of this study is to look at cohabitation, the sort of people cohabiting in today's society, the reason couples are choosing cohabitation, and how some groups within society view this as negatively affecting community.

Opponents to cohabitation believe that cohabitation undermines marriage in several ways. First, they argue, cohabitation undermines marriage by avoiding commitment, responsibility, and obligation. Second, they believe it is difficult for individuals to successfully transition from cohabitation to marriage. Finally, they find that cohabiters may view marriage as a loss of personal freedom and an unwelcome increase in traditional husband/wife roles. It has been reasoned that cohabitation decreases marital stability because the people who are less committed to permanent relationships are those participating in the practice of cohabitation (Schoen 2003).

Through a literature search I found that many demographic factors that increase the propensity of divorce were also demographic features of cohabiting couples a few decades ago. This leaves one to question whether the experience of cohabitation decreases marital stability and leads to divorce or if it is the population of people drawn to cohabitation who are more likely to divorce, regardless of the cohabitation experience. I hypothesized that the experience of cohabitation more strongly affected a couple's marital instability than their individual demographic features.

Research in the past found that cohabiters were an off-branch of “mainstream” American society (Popenoe 2002). Cohabiters were less likely to be religious, of lower socio-economic-status, children of divorced parents, and with less than a college education. While this list is not exhaustive, cohabiters a few decades ago entered cohabitating relationships with a lot of baggage. Today, cohabitation has entered “mainstream” America; couples of all ages, education, and backgrounds are entering into cohabiting relationships. Research continues to show that cohabitation has a negative effect on marital stability, however. Following is a discussion of selection perspective verses the experience of cohabitation perspective taken from *The Relationship Between Cohabitation and Marital Quality and Stability: Change Across Cohorts?* by Dush, Cohan, and Amato (2003). This article specifically addresses the issue I was left contemplating at the end of my previous study.

The selection perspective is based on the assumption that those drawn to cohabitation have certain characteristics such as “low level of education, being poor, growing up with divorced parents, holding nontraditional attitudes toward marriage, and being nonreligious” (Dush 2003). It also holds that those who cohabit are in some way significantly different from those who do not cohabit. These assumptions, while possibly applicable a few generations ago when only a minority of couples were cohabiting, are not necessarily true of cohabiting couples today. Unconditional statements such as the above quote are perhaps the result of a poor research sample. For example, the study may have had a disproportionately large number of individual’s with low socio-economic-status, for whom the above statement may be more accurate. It is understood

that poor research samples will have a negative impact on the conclusions one reaches concerning cohabitation.

Premarital cohabitation today has become just another stage of courtship for an increased proportion of Canadian and US couples (Krishnan 1998). Cohabitation has typically been viewed as a non-traditional lifestyle, however. It has therefore attracted individuals less committed to a single lifelong marriage and more accepting of divorce. Evidence shows that couples that cohabit prior to marriage have less stable unions than couples who marry directly without first being in a cohabiting relationship.

The rise in cohabitation over the past several decades, however, has challenged the belief that cohabitation draws a specific population. In the 1960's and 1970's, when only 10% of marriages were preceded by cohabitation, cohabiters were found to engage in behavior that was uncommon and atypical (Dush 2003). It was thought that these individuals possessed some qualities that the majority of Americans lacked, making them risky marriage partners and more likely to be involved in disruptive marriages. Today, over half of marriages are preceded by cohabitation; this means that the trend may be becoming less exceptional and even normative by American standards. Researchers debate whether cohabitation continues to have the same effect on marriage today that it did a few decades ago.

Due to the increased propensity for couples to cohabit, and cohabiters from the majority population possessing a vast array of characteristics, researchers question whether it is not specific characteristics but rather the experience of cohabitation itself which decreases marital stability and increases the likelihood of divorce (Dush 2003). This theory suggests that cohabitation negatively affects people and their relationships in

ways that later undermine marital quality and commitment. This study hypothesized that for couples utilizing cohabitation as a means to finding a suitable partner, the experience cultivated individualistic behaviors that lessened one's commitment to lifelong marriage. It also theorized that this assumption would be less true for couples treating cohabitation as an alternative to marriage rather than as a trial marriage.

Owing to the increase in cohabitation throughout all sectors of society, researchers expected that after controlling for demographic selection factors there would be a weak correlation between cohabitation and later marital dysfunction (Dush 2003). They found support for the experience of cohabitation perspective, however. This asserts that there is little evidence that the negative consequences of cohabitation evaporated over time as cohabitation has become more widespread. This means that after controlling for demographic variables that are associated with cohabitation, premarital cohabitation continues to be linked to lower marital stability and higher divorce. Having come to this conclusion, I have examined the ways in which cohabitation is believed to negatively affect a couple's marital satisfaction and stability.

Regardless of demographic factors, cohabitation continues to prove detrimental to certain aspects within the institution of marriage (Popenoe 2002). Cohabitation has been linked to a rise in out-of-wedlock births, delay in marriage, and increases in the divorce rate (Teachman 1990). It also appears to contribute to a lower commitment ethic and increased individualism within the relationship (Popenoe 2002). The couple remains more autonomous and is more likely to end their union if they fall out of love or come upon hardship. If they do marry, cohabiting couples continue to be at a higher risk for divorce. Unlike married couples, those cohabiting end their relationships easier, and

once they end one relationship, it becomes easier to end future relationships. Cohabiting couples are “less happy”, and three times more likely to experience depression than are married couples (Popenoe 2002). They also report lower levels of sexual satisfaction and poorer relationships with parents.

Marriage itself increases a couple’s financial situation. Studies show that if a child is involved, cohabiting couples earn only about two-thirds the income a married couple with children have. This is due to the fact that male cohabiting income is on average half of that of a married male’s income. This, however, is influenced by other selection factors such as education and socio-economic-status. Women and children are also more likely to be physically and sexually abused in cohabiting relationships. Once again, this conclusion may be the result of poor a research sample, and largely depends on other factors such as education and social class. Finally, marriage increases a couple’s likelihood of being religiously involved in their church or synagogue. Religious involvement has been linked to healthier and more fulfilling relationships due to the ethics and community that “the Church” endorses. This type of environment has been found to be conducive to building strong relationships.

If marriage appears to benefit a couple’s relationship in so many ways, why do couples continue to enter into cohabiting relationships? I have come up with a number of reasons that, despite the evidence against cohabitation, couples continue to cohabit. There are three types of cohabiting couples: those who cohabit as a trial marriage, as an alternative to marriage, or as a precursor to marriage. While 46% of cohabiting relationships are created as a precursor to marriage, over 50% account for those cohabitating as a trial marriage or as an alternative to marriage.

Although a trial marriage would appear to lead to more stable marriages, evidence supports the claim that cohabitating unions are less stable than marriages (Teachman 1990). Yet, some cohabiters continue to use cohabitation as a means to finding a compatible mate. A recent national survey found that 66% of high school senior boys and 61% of girls "agreed" or "mostly agreed" with the statement "it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along" (Popenoe 2002). There is now a more extended and well-defined period of courtship during which an individual sorts through potential mates (Teachman 1990). In this context, premarital cohabitation is seen as a form of "trial marriage" where individuals can rehearse marital roles before tying the knot. Couples who use cohabitation as a form of trial marriage figure that, after living together for a period of time, if the arrangement does not work out, they can simply terminate the relationship without any legal or religious repercussions (Popenoe 2002).

Cohabitation as a trial marriage is essentially an individual's method for weeding out incompatible partners until finding one to suit their qualities and personal needs. Once a cohabiting relationship is terminated, however, a person's commitment to future relationships is lowered. The commitment ethic decreases with each broken relationship, which in time will weaken one's stability in marriage. By the time they are married, an individual who has cohabited with one or more other partners has decreased his/her chances of a lifelong marriage. They have formed individualistic attitudes and the autonomy they practiced in cohabitation is incompatible with a functional marriage. Marriage requires an interdependent relationship in which the couple compromises and acts for the well being of the whole. While there are always exceptions, cohabitation as a

trial marriage does not appear to be in the best interests of individuals looking for a long-term marriage partner.

Divorce is increasingly infiltrating "mainstream" America. As a result, marriage rates have begun to decline as couples choose to cohabit (Woods 2002). Children who experienced parental divorce are more likely to have a negative view of marriage as an institution. These individuals often prefer to live with their partner out of wedlock, fearful of repeating their parent's mistake. Couples hope that by sidestepping the marriage formality they will avoid the increasing rate of divorce. They choose cohabitation as an alternative to marriage.

As the rate of cohabitation increases, research has been conducted to study the effect of cohabitation on marital instability. Woods and Emery (2002) have found that cohabitation does in fact lead to relationship instability, as it is documented that people who cohabit prior to marriage are more likely to divorce. Although not being a part of my study, it is important to recognize that other variables such as personality and cultural factors may influence one's attitude about cohabitation and marriage, which in turn affects the stability of a romantic relationship.

Wolfinger (2003) presents findings from previous studies, which report that parental divorce affects a child's feelings about romantic relationships and often instills an unfavorable attitude toward marriage. Children of divorce sometimes seek out romantic involvement due to an inner neediness. When children of divorced parents enter romantic relationships, they don't always behave in ways conducive to a stable marriage. One of these behaviors is cohabitation. Those who cohabit and eventually marry, often at an early age, greatly increase their chances of divorce. This is because

they have not spent proper time finding someone who matches their personality, and who will serve as a lifelong partner. As with everything, however, there are exceptions. Cohabitation may prove beneficial to some couples in which one or both experienced parental divorce.

Living together appears to provide cohabiting couples with some of the benefits of marriage while avoiding the risk of divorce (Popenoe 2002). Couples cohabiting as an alternative to marriage, however, don't realize that cohabitation increases the risk of domestic violence for women and the risk of physical and sexual abuse for children. Unmarried couples are also "unhappier" and more prone to depression. After 5-7 years of living together, 39% of cohabiting relationships have broken up. Those who cohabit are also worse off financially. Therefore, cohabitation as an alternative to marriage has yet to prove itself a sound solution for those averted to marriage as an institution.

An article by Thornton (1991) studied the intergenerational effects of parental marital experience on the marital and cohabitational behaviors of their children. Factors that were studied were premarital pregnancy, timing of marriage, and marital disruption in the lives of both parents and children. Couples who marry young with the wife already pregnant typically have a lower level of education and fewer economic accomplishments. Children of these couples will likely have a low level of education and follow their parent's pattern of early marriage and marital disruption. They may, however, take a different route and cohabit with their partner. Children of divorce usually have negative feelings towards marriage. They may therefore see cohabitation as favorable because it is less institutionalized and less permanent. Couples who marry young and expect a child at marriage, however, report lower levels of marital satisfaction and

substantially higher levels of separation and divorce. Marital disruption is associated with children's antisocial behavior and difficulties in school. This may create an individual more prone to cohabitation later in life. While other explanations such as little education and low social class need to be factored in, this is yet another source that examines characteristics disruptive to a functioning relationship.

Those who cohabit as a precursor to marriage are less likely to be affected by the negative aspects of cohabitation. According to a study by Teachman (2003), premarital relations limited to a woman's husband do not predict a higher risk of marital dissolution. Previous research, however, shows that marriages preceded by cohabitation are 50% more likely to end in divorce than marriages not preceded by cohabitation. Experts advise that those cohabiting prior to marriage limit cohabitation to the shortest amount of time possible (Popenoe 2002). They conclude that the longer one lives with a partner, the more likely the low-commitment ethic will take hold. Because this is exactly the opposite that is necessary for a successful marriage, couples should wait as long as possible to live together before getting married. Even for those engaged, compared with couples that enter directly into marriage, cohabiting couples have a higher risk of marital dissolution (Dush 2003).

Compared to a few generations ago, people are getting married later. One reason individuals are postponing marriage is to complete their education, often excelling to a masters or doctorate degree. By today's standards, a woman with low socio-economic status is expected to finish school by 18, be married at the same age, and have her first child by 19 years of age (Berger 2005). One of the strongest and most consistent predictors of the propensity to divorce is the age at which a person is married. The

relationship between age at marriage and divorce is “one of the most empirical generalizations in family sociology” (South 1995). Early wedlock increases the chances of divorce. Marital search theory suggests that people who marry young experience a higher risk of divorce because they have spent insufficient time searching for a well-matched spouse. As young couples get older, they have the tendency to become less similar over time. This is because they were married at a time when their attitudes, interests, and goals were still forming (Amato 2003).

Women of high socio-economic-status, however, are not expected to complete their education until they are 30 years old (Berger 2005). It is predicted that women in this group postpone marriage until 32 years of age and have their first child by 34 years of age. It was once expected that the acts of sexual intercourse and child bearing were only committed within the confines of marriage. However, girls are experiencing menstruation at earlier and earlier ages today. They are beginning to mature sexually at age 12 and 13, or younger (Berger 2005). This puts them at a predisposition to enter into serious relationships earlier than their counterparts were a few generations ago. These girls are also less likely to be committed to abstinence and therefore more likely to have pre-marital sex.

Women who enter into a union at a younger age are more likely to dissolve their marriage than those who started their first union at an older age. There may be a link between economic status, autonomy, and commitment ethic, however. While couples that marry later are more likely to have found a compatible marriage partner, higher education and therefore higher occupational status may contribute to lower commitment

to marriage. This is because the individual has created strong social network ties and developed strong sentiments toward individualism (Krishnan 1998).

Women who delay marriage until their early 30's, however, are supposedly spending almost two decades of their sexually mature lives abstinent. It is an increasingly difficult task for women obtaining master and doctorate degrees to keep their sexuality at bay until marriage. Women, therefore, are beginning to enter into cohabiting relationships in order to satisfy their desire for intimacy with another. They view cohabitation as requiring less commitment and view it as a situation in which they avert loneliness while allowing themselves the freedom and autonomy to pursue a career while furthering their education.

Due to a decrease in religious participation, in addition to other societal factors, couples are finding it increasingly easy to enter into cohabiting relationships. This arrangement has become less taboo, as has premarital sex. Women who come from non-traditional households are more likely to be less religious and are less likely to postpone having sex until a later age; they also face higher risks of divorce (Kahn 1991). Early beliefs held that premarital sex would be harmful because it would make marriage "less special". Past studies show that an increasing number of brides had already had sex prior to their marriage. Today, only about 10% of brides are virgins (Berger 2005).

Physical intimacy, however, can be mistaken for emotional compatibility prior to marriage and therefore incompatible couples may get married due to their sexual connection. Experience with other partners, however, may provide non-virgin brides with higher (and unrealistic) expectations for fulfillment within marriage and thus increase their chances of disappointment. Women who have pre-marital sex most likely

have differing views on divorce than do their virgin counterparts. Those who remain a virgin until marriage are typically more traditional, and thus look negatively upon divorce. The attitudes and values of non-virgins most likely differ in that they feel less guilty about ending an unhappy marriage.

Those who attend religious services regularly usually have positive attitudes toward marriage and clear solutions to marital conflict (Wu 1992). Many religions and clergy have a belief in, and teach the permanency of, marriage and encourage couples to withstand hardships and trials. W. Bradford Wilcox said that "Churches promote the values and virtues that make for good marriages, and they also provide young people with marriage role models (Anonymous 2002). Religious leaders who have the ability to initiate and sustain strong marriages emphasize the importance of religion. This provides further background to my understanding that participation in a religious group is a positive influence concerning good values and dedication to maintaining strong marital bonds. These are some teachings that cohabiting couples fail to benefit from. As have already been discussed, cohabiting couples are not only less likely to take part in religious instruction, but they are more individualistic, less committed to finding solutions to problems, and more willing to dissolve their relationship than are those who attend religious services. For cohabiting couples that get married, the divorce rate for those who attended religious services regularly was lower than their irreligious counterparts (Wu 1992).

Thus far I have examined how the experience of cohabitation itself may be detrimental to a couple's commitment ethic as well as to their relationship in terms of money and physical and emotional well-being. There are many reasons why couples

cohabit, and this too influences the outcome of a cohabiting relationship. It is important to acknowledge that cohabitation is successful for some couples, whether as an alternative to or as a precursor to marriage. There is minimal research on the benefits to a cohabiting relationship, however, and this is why my findings have been presented from the perspective of those against cohabitation. I will now examine social theory and certain structures that have led couples to consider cohabitation as a practical alternative to marriage.

Making Sense of It All

Relationships today have become very McDonaldized. Partners in a relationship frequently opt for the easiest, most efficient way of living, often without even realizing it. If two people are in a relatively committed relationship, they think, "Why pay for two rents when we can live together and save the money for other activities?" The couple saves on everything from groceries and rent to time spent doing chores. When the two share household tasks and cut down on time spent on these chores, they are able to enjoy more time together doing activities.

Just as in the McDonaldized world, when a cohabiting relationship ceases to prove efficient, the relationship is terminated in search of a new and improved arrangement. In hopes of reestablishing the efficient, productive relationship that an individual once enjoyed, they search for someone who better fits their immediate needs. According to opponents of cohabitation, however, a couple that dissolve a cohabiting relationship lowers their commitment ethic and is more likely to end later relationships. This has the propensity to reverse the previous benefits of cohabitation. If a couple

increases their frequency of cohabiting relationships only to end them shortly after, the benefits that one gains from the relationship will be negated with the time and energies spent terminating these very relationships.

In some ways the McDonaldized theory appears more valuable for cohabiting couples than for married couples. Cohabiting couples maintain a greater degree of individuality, enjoying the benefits this arrangement provides them. They are also able to avoid conflicts of interests. Cohabiting couples typically each sustain employment, and because there is less commitment and a looser union, this presents fewer problems. This is because there are fewer expectations built into the relationship.

Contrary to this, efficiency in a married household is sometimes upset when a wife begins working and housework needs to be divided. The husband is required to move from the previous, effective structure of the home and adapt to a new model. He becomes a central figure in helping create a new model that is just as efficient as the old one. Instead of enjoying the luxury of a ready meal after work and a clean shirt in his drawer, he is required to take his turn at cooking and laundry. When aspects of the marriage are no longer controlled and the man cannot adapt to the new model, instability often results. It is at this point where the husband and wife may assume incompatibility and terminate the marriage.

Cohabiting couples, on the other hand, establish looser roles, often sharing tasks within the home. However, if they have created a cohabiting relationship as an alternative to marriage instead of a trial marriage, roles may be more strictly defined and create the same tensions married couples experience when roles are challenged. These couples have the benefit (or disadvantage), however, of terminating the union without

any legal or religious implications. Then again, this results in a return to the issue of commitment ethic and cohabitation's influence on future relationships.

Our society is increasingly equipping individuals with specialized tasks (Ritzer, 14). People who cohabit have the opportunity to divide up jobs within the home, thus becoming both efficient, as well as more productive. Two hands are better than one, and the same may be said for a couple joined together in one household. For those cohabiting, a couple has developed and agreed upon a certain degree of collectivity within their union. They, unlike two strangers, benefit from sharing responsibilities and tasks that are required within a home. Cohabiting partners enjoy the advantage of sharing rent as well as other financial benefits. Instead of shopping for one month, cooking and cleaning all for oneself, it is more economical to split the chores and provide communally for the two. Buying in bulk is less expensive than single-serving portions and this extends from food to toiletries. Dividing up chores such as cooking dinner and doing the laundry is more effective, and it creates free time that as individuals they would not typically have. This free time can be spent in leisure or as an opportunity for work and thus greater productivity.

One aspect required not only for marriage, but also for a successful cohabiting experience, is the sense of housework equity. Equity, the perceived fairness of chores verses equality, is necessary for a cohabiting couple to avoid conflict and maintain relative harmony (Ritzer, 15). If one partner feels they do more work than the other they are likely to feel used and become bitter about the situation. This in turn creates a negative environment, and one that is susceptible to lower stability and perhaps less commitment. This creates an opening for dysfunction to develop and sometimes

dissolution of the relationship. As opponents to cohabitation in the preceding section mentioned, dissolution of a cohabiting relationship undermines the commitment ethic and makes it easier for the individual to end later relationships.

A functioning cohabiting relationship also requires that the couple agree on most topics. While some may say that opposites attract, it is those who have like backgrounds and similar opinions on issues who enjoy the most harmony within their relationship. When cohabiting couples disagree on petty issues such as how to properly wash the dishes or on larger issues such as how to spend money or raise children (if any are involved), then there is a greater likelihood that the household will not run smoothly. As every partner enters into a relationship with preconceived ways of doing things, good communication and a shared mentality within the home will produce the least amount of conflict between the couple and thus the most harmony (Ritzer, 15).

Social institutions such as the Christian church have developed “norms and values which are the shared possession of the collectivity” (Ritzer, 19). Non-material social facts, as Durkheim termed them, such as pre-marital sexual relations or unrelated men and women living together were only allowed within wedded unions. This value of sexual purity used to be obediently enforced because neighbors within a community were significantly involved in each other’s lives. Our puritan society shunned individuals who defied “the Church’s” laws against free sex and promiscuity. This is strongly depicted in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), in which the main character, whose husband never joined her in America, had a child by another man. Not only was this woman publicly scorned, but also she was forced to wear a scarlet ‘A’ (for adultery) embroidered on her dress. She and her daughter lived as outcasts on the outskirts of the

community. Our society today is nothing as extreme as that portrayed in this novel, and yet at one time there was great disapproval over an unwedded couple living together or having a child out of wedlock.

The social norms have loosened a great deal in today's society, and while church communities continue to discourage cohabitation, there are no moral or legal actions taken against cohabiting couples. Now that "mainstream" America's norms and values have begun to stretch and pull away from "the Church's" teachings, there has been a growing understanding, even acceptance, of couples who choose to make these life choices. Today, opponents to cohabitation publish studies and articles like Popenoe's "Should We Cohabit?" (2005) in hopes of swaying the public against cohabitation.

Popenoe's study is significantly geared towards presenting the negative effects of cohabitation on a couple's relationship, including aspects such as their physical and psychological well being. While that publication was greatly utilized in the previous section of this study to examine the negative effects of cohabitation on marital stability, it is understood that that article came from a vastly biased perspective. While the researchers had noble intentions to educate today's generation about some of the negative effects of cohabitation, Popenoe neglected to shed light on how cohabitation can serve as a positive experience for some couples. I acknowledge that cohabitation does work positively for many couple's today and that it is in the maturity and values of each to determine if the cohabiting relationship is a viable option for them.

It appears as if people view the shift from marriage to cohabitation as a decrease in society's ability to maintain equilibrium within societal structures. This change is perceived negatively by many in the religious community, as well as by researchers who

focus on negative trends resulting from cohabiting relationships. Our world is constantly changing, and as a microcosm of this, our society is changing as well. Social practices and trends, which worked efficiently a few generations ago, don't necessarily work today. This startles many people who fear change and attempt to keep society in a motionless state.

Due to inevitable changes in social structures, such as the institution of marriage, it is necessary for people to stay open to the possibility of change. As society pushes and pulls against the norm, it is flexibility that allows structures to evolve and develop, keeping pace with other changes in society. Some conservatives' fight the growing number of cohabiting relationships, arguing cohabitation contradicts "Christian" teachings. They see young adults' decision to cohabit as yet another rejection of traditional values, and they worry about the deteriorating state of America. Nevertheless, one must consider how even these teachings have evolved from previous times.

With the decreasing religious influence in "mainstream" society, it appears as if more adolescents and young adults are experiencing a sense of anomie, in which they have few strong teachings and role models to follow. This leads to an uncertainty as to what they are supposed to do. For some, not having a secure familial or religious foundation leaves them "adrift in society and lack(ing) clear and secure moorings (Ritzer, 20). For those who grew up in divorced homes or simply with little guidance, individuals are forced to decide for themselves whether it is in their best interest to cohabit either in place of or as a precursor to marriage.

As they grow up, children learn about the world and how people interact through observing others (Berger 2005). Role models are usually parents and close relatives, as

well as influential adults in their life, such as teachers or pastors. In this context of social learning, they gather bits and pieces about how relationships function. This information may be accurate or inaccurate, depending on the child's perception. They then attempt to combine this information into a workable model for their own interactions. One such type of interaction is marriage relationships. If an individual experiences parental divorce, they are likely to form a negative perception of marriage. They may note the dysfunction, hurt, and problems their parents experienced, and reject marriage as a functional model to follow.

When this individual enters into their own romantic relationship, they may shy away from a permanent union such as marriage. They might instead opt for an arrangement such as cohabitation. This is in an effort to avoid the problems their parents experienced within their marriage. By attempting cohabitation, they are making up the rules and attempting to avoid the mistakes and potholes their parents ran into. While this is a very positive experience for many, it may not be the solution for all couples.

Avoiding divorce simply by deciding to cohabit will not necessarily prove successful in all instances. A successful union, either married or cohabiting, depends on a variety of factors. For example, a couple will experience problems if they do not have proper communication and compromising skills. Even when they do have qualities conducive to a stable relationship, couples need to weight the benefits that marriage will offer them, verses those of cohabitation. Benefits of cohabitation such as greater autonomy may appear attractive for many but for those using cohabitation as a trial marriage, greater autonomy may harm them by contributing to lower commitment ethic. For others, this freedom may be exactly what they need as they continue their education

and pursue a career. Simply put, parental divorce affects children's perception of marriage and it is the lessons they learn in their youth that colors their actions in adulthood.

Opponents of cohabitation look at the reports claiming cohabiting couples are less happy, less financially stable, etc. and assume that there are no positive aspects. They believe these statistics confirm their perception of cohabitation as a social evil. These are one-sided claims, however. There are many exceptions within the cohabiting community in which cohabitation proves a very successful and positive arrangement for those involved.

As a reaction to changes within society, cohabitation has become more prevalent. Women are taking advantage of educational opportunities and furthering their careers more than women in any other generation. This results in a departure from some traditional models, making them part of a growing minority who marry at a later age. They may choose cohabitation as a stage between single-hood and marriage. It isn't that couples are rebelling from the Christian church and instruction against premarital sex, including cohabitation, but they have found cohabitation as a viable alternative to their changing lifestyles.

Women a few generations ago rarely received more than a high school education. This is because it was impossible to pursue a college degree while simultaneously getting married and starting a family. Because the ages of social milestones were lower, the pattern many women followed was high school graduation to marriage to having children (Berger 2005). Women, however, eventually desired to further their education. This created a need for these social milestones to be adjusted. Women could not broaden their

education at the same time as beginning a family; therefore, something had to change. At the beginning it was the minority who fought against the norm to pursue an education and career before marriage. Today, there are a growing number of people, not only women, delaying marriage until they have established themselves.

Young adults were faced with yet another dilemma, however. Due to better medical care and nutrition, and due to an increased number of female adolescents growing up with an unrelated male adult in their home, teenagers are beginning puberty at younger ages than ever before (Berger 2005). This creates quite a predicament in an age where puberty is occurring as early as 12 or 13 and marriage is being delayed until the late twenties. Young adults endure over a decade between these two milestones if they attempt to delay sex until marriage. This is very difficult for individuals in our sexually charged society.

In an era where HIV, AIDS, and STD's are running rampant, an alternative has emerged which allows couples to practice relative sexual exclusivity without committing to a lifelong relationship. Cohabitation, if anything, is helping curb these diseases by limiting the number of sexual partners one has. Religious figures and parents may argue that cohabitation is simply an excuse for a deteriorating morality within society, but it can be argued that they are attempting to force old practices onto a society constantly at change. For some, cohabitation is proving itself one practical alternative in this quick paced society.

There are two kinds of power structures I will explore throughout this next section, that of power/dependence and that of authority/subordinate. I will examine similarities as well as differences within each structure.

Feminist theory supports avoiding men's control by limiting their power and therefore their control over women (Ritzer, 227). There is a strong basic link between ideology and power that allows men as the dominant sex to control the inferior sex, women. Men do this by emphasizing the differences between the sexes. Instead of valuing this diversity, however, they see women's differences as inferior and thus a reason to oppress them. For years men have worked to provide economic sustenance for the family while the wife remained home to complete domestic tasks. While women's contribution was and continues to be of great value, this value is not measured in monetary terms, and is therefore devalued by men. Because the wife was dependant on her husband to earn the money, she was subject to his demands of her, sometimes suffering under his abuse.

This power/dependence is defined as the potential cost one person (the husband) can provoke another (the wife) to accept, tempered by the potential cost the wife is willing to tolerate within the relationship (Ritzer, 181). In marriage, this balance lasts so long as the wife is dependent on the husband for financial security. Wives with little education and therefore minimal personal income are clearly more dependent on their husband than are wives with higher education and therefore more career options. Once wives begin to work outside of the home they become less dependant on their husbands, and therefore less willing to tolerate unfair and abusive treatment. They begin to put themselves on more equal footing with men.

Men, without compensating for this shift in power, may become more susceptible to divorce if they blindly ignore the shifting power and continue to dominate over the women. Women, "in response to new employment and material wealth, have created a

strategy for surviving and even resisting men's exercise of unjust power" (Ritzer, 228). The last few decades have increased many women's status outside the home, subsequently leading to a shift of power within the home. This has resulted in "erasing the historic structures of unequal power" (Ritzer, 229) that marriage, and more so the male-dominated workforce, has created.

Women who are postponing marriage to further their education are allowing themselves not only more power but also a greater voice in both the public and private spheres. Not only has education and therefore better financial stability decreased women's dependence on men, but also some women are beginning to shy away from the union of marriage. They see marriage as an institution in which they lose the status that they not only deserve, but also have worked so hard to gain. The Christian church may be scaring some women away from the institution of marriage because of its teachings of male superiority and dominance within the home. One example of this is the harsh words in 1 Timothy 2:12 which states, "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man, she must be silent." Few women are willing to retreat and allow men to exercise their control over them. While this has not discouraged the majority of Americans from getting married, it has caused certain individuals to consider other arrangements, such as cohabitation.

Some women favor the cohabiting relationship due to its more informal approach and the greater individuality and subsequent power they have in the relationship. First of all, entrance into a cohabiting relationship means less power is granted to the man. Cohabiting couples are therefore able to enjoy a more equal arrangement. Second, because there is no legal or religious decree holding the couple together, if the man does

decide to assert his perceived dominance over the woman, she has the freedom to terminate the relationship. This, however, is only true for the more educated and financially stable women. Those with less education and consequently lower income are more dependent on the man, perpetuating the power/dependence that marriages used to assert.

In respect to the power/dependence model, a second model emerges which suggests yet another reason some couples are choosing cohabitation. Positions within society have varying amounts of authority (Ritzer, 98). Within the institution of marriage this authority usually rests within the role of husband. Because this is a social construction, I realize that only generalizations can be made and that there are always exceptions. Conflict is raised between those in authority (men) and their subordinates (women) within the institution of marriage. In the past, when wives were subordinate to their husbands, religious institutions (the Christian church) legitimized this authority by allowing sanctions to be brought against the non-compliant party, the wife. This system worked for a while, but when the position of wife began to challenge the husband's authority, this system was challenged.

Those in positions of authority always hold contrary interests to those in positions of subordination. Whether or not they were aware of it, wives, as subordinates to their husbands, sought change. This is the natural state of events within an authority/subordinate position. The subordinate attempts change while the authority figure fights to maintain their position of power. This produces a conflict of interest due to the expectations and various roles attached to these positions. In the past, only the husband worked outside the home. This role as economic provider reduced the wives

role to domestic tasks within the home. Here, the relationship may have had a latent conflict of interests, but the role of authority was secure over the subordinate.

There came a time, however, when husbands went to war and wives were forced to divide their time between the home and their new place of employment. This changed their role, and while the husband was away, the authority rested with the wives. This did not last long, however. The wife's newfound power and freedom was taken away and the husband's power over them was restored with the ending of the war. Men resumed their previous jobs, sending the women back to their former roles and subordinate status within the home. These wives, however, had experienced greater personal autonomy, and it was during this time that they began to challenge the marriage structure.

Today, women have made their way into the workforce once again, forcing men to share the roles and pressures of employment. For married women, the demands of the job need to be tempered by domestic work. Unfortunately, many working women today are often expected to not only exceed expectations at work, but to somehow fit in their second job as full-time mom and housekeeper. This is an unrealistic expectation for wives to accomplish single-handedly, thus creating another conflict of interests between the husband and wife.

While many dual-income couples have begun sharing chores within the home, a desire for change was inevitable for some of these wives, as well as for women growing up in an increasingly educated, more feminist society. Some women are attempting to avoid conflict by bypassing this authority/subordinate structure. By entering into cohabiting relationships, they deny the man the power that marriage used to grant them. They have been forced to alter the perception of gender-specific roles, in order to adapt

successfully to these new egalitarian cohabiting relationships. This has proved profitable in many cohabiting relationships where men and women peaceably co-exist, sharing in the demands of domestic life.

Unfortunately today, many businesses unfairly create a glass-ceiling of advancement and income for women. This would appear to be a continued effort by men to impose their control over women and to suggest that A) they are worth less than men are and that B) their place is in the home, and that is where their 'worth' is to be found. While this does not discourage all women, it does send a negative message. It may, however, encourage women to advance their education and develop a competitive spirit in order to challenge traditional male-dominance. Women continue to fight, and through cohabitation some are attempting to alter the social structure. This limits husband's previous dominance over their wives and forces them to adapt to changing social conditions.

Summary of Personal Understanding

The articles utilized in this study create the perception that little research has been completed on contemporary cohabiting Americans. It also appears, from the conclusions reached, that study samples were lacking a full range of demographic features, such as the complete scale of socio-economic-status and education. What seem to be missing are individuals on the higher end of each of these scales.

Much more research is needed in order to understand how cohabitation affects individuals and the community as a whole. One suggestion is broader samples. This is not an all-encompassing solution, though. Upon looking at past studies and discussions

of cohabitation, many reports seem to be biased against cohabitation. Until people begin recognizing the motives behind cohabiting couples, there will not be a respectable understanding of why people cohabit. A study of this breadth and depth, however, would prove very expensive as well as very time consuming.

Without looking at the theory behind it, one might question the practicality of cohabitation. I have attempted to venture away from the statistics and generalizations in the first section of this paper in order to focus on theory and social constructs. My hope has been that by examining the different forms of cohabitation, as well as the consequences of being in different social classes, I might better understand why couples continue to cohabit today. I have endeavored to uncover the benefits cohabiters are privilege to, and whether they are simply perceived or if there are real material benefits that cohabiters enjoy.

My research has provided me with much knowledge on the topic of cohabitation. I have come up with three forms of cohabiting couples. Couples cohabit as a trial marriage, as an alternative to marriage, as well as a precursor to marriage. These reasons for cohabiting have varying consequences for each kind of couple. For example, those cohabiting in an attempt to find a suitable partner may do themselves a disservice by cohabiting. The independence and autonomy they maintain in the relationship, as well as the experience of terminating a relationship, may later result in lower commitment ethic. Those cohabiting as an alternative to marriage, however, may have the same commitment a married couple have, but simply disagree with the institution of marriage. This relationship is more likely to succeed than couples in a trial marriage. Cohabiting as a precursor to marriage, however, is less likely to be affected by the perceived negative

consequences of cohabitation. This is because the couple have committed themselves to getting married, and marriages are more difficult to dissolve than are cohabiting unions.

In addition to the types of cohabiting couples, some individuals postpone marriage in order to complete their education and begin a career. They may cohabit as a means to having a meaningful relationship without the commitment, which allows them more independence to focus on establishing themselves. Individuals, especially women, may find this arrangement favorable if they are interested in an equal union between themselves and their partners. Those who desire to avoid the power structure that marriage sometimes creates believe they may do so by avoiding the marriage institution altogether. Couples cohabiting for this reason may find that they are very successful in maintaining a dual-income while sharing the domestic tasks at home. This is favorable to women who might otherwise be stuck with the responsibilities of the home while the husband goes off to work.

Finally, due to the young age that individuals' mature sexually versus that of when the majority is getting married, cohabitation may serve as a practical interim. Limiting oneself to a few sex partners may eventually help curb the rising trend of HIV and STD's in America's young adults.

Cohabitation today may be viewed as a result of an evolving society, rather than one of decreasing morality. For many couples today, cohabitation has become, and will continue to be an attractive alternative, whether as a short or long-term arrangement.

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