

Sara Gawlowski

Greg Murray

Com 112-15

February 25, 2009

### Living in Sin

The notion of a couple living together before marriage has not always been viewed as conventional, but today it has become more widely practiced. With a constant rise in the divorce rate, more and more couples live together first to test their compatibility. While this has become more accepted today than ever before, the topic remains controversial. With the rise in premarital cohabitation parallel to the rise in the divorce rate, critics wonder if the two have a connection. Countless research has shown that couples who lived together before marriage are at a higher risk for divorce than those who did not cohabit prior to the marriage. However, the evidence that supports this research has many flaws and inconsistencies. With these flaws corrected, the research becomes less apparent whether premarital cohabitation negatively affects marriage. Therefore, research in this area needs to be recalculated, accounting for missing factors in earlier research, in order to find the truth about premarital cohabitation's effect on marriage success.

Extensive research in Australia and the United States has shown that couples who live together before marriage have a higher risk of the marriage ending in divorce. According to an article in *Family Matters* by David de Vaus, Lixia Qu, and Ruth Weston, this can be partially attributed to what is known as self-selection. Self-selection basically suggests that those people who choose to live with their partner before marriage have personality traits and personal backgrounds that also make them less likely to maintain a prolonged successful relationship.

The personal backgrounds said to affect this proposed suggestion include people who come from families of divorce, or came from other unconventional family lifestyles (35). However, this suggestion of self-selection seems to be extremely out-dated. In the same article, data is provided that shows that there has been an increase in premarital cohabitation from less than two percent in the 1950's to seventy-one percent in 2000 (34). This statistic presents a high enough number of people cohabiting before marriage to show that this practice has become more common, and therefore must include a much more diverse group of individuals within this group than ever before, not just those from unconventional family lifestyles.

Another factor that De Vaus, Qu, and Weston found in their research was that much of the existing research was based on couples who had married in the 1970s-1980s. After recalculating the evidence with research from a time when premarital cohabitation had become more customary, the results showed that the number of cohabitants with unsuccessful marriages had greatly decreased (39). As this practice becomes more and more common, the difference in divorce rate amongst the two groups should continue to decline. This concept demonstrates only the first of many flaws in this research study.

Research in this area has been conducted by comparing the length of marriages in cohabitants versus non-cohabitants. According to Jay Teachman and Karen Polonko in their article in *Social Forces*, when comparing these two groups by length of marriage, it would appear that cohabitants have a higher divorce rate. However, couples who live together first tend to have longer pre-marriage relationships than those who do not. When the research is refigured using the entire length of the couple's union, the numbers between the groups are much closer (217). De Vaus, Qu, and Weston found that after five years of marriage, including the adjusted calculation of union length, 89.6% of couples who did not live together first were still married,

and 89.2% of cohabitants were still married (36). With a mere gap of only 0.4%, the flaws in the earlier research become clear as the difference is almost indistinguishable.

In addition to the noted flaws in this area of research are also several inconsistencies that do not add up correctly. In the *Journal of Family Psychology*, Galena Kline Rhoades, Scott M. Stanley, and Howard J. Markman of the University of Denver, noted that the average cohabitating couple was of an older age at the time of engagement than those who did not cohabit prior to engagement or marriage (556). According to research by Teachman and Polonko, couples who marry at an earlier age have a higher risk of divorce than those who marry at a later age. They also go on to say that cohabitating couples are more likely to be more highly educated than non-cohabitants. Both higher levels of education and older ages at the time of marriage have been strongly linked to higher success rates for marriage (212). It would stand to suggest that if cohabitating couples are usually older and more highly educated, then their marriage success rates should be higher. Yet, countless research claims the opposite.

While the multitude of research showing that premarital cohabitation can be linked to less successful marriages must hold some merit to the argument, the flaws and inconsistencies in the research would indicate that further academic study is required to fully put this controversy to rest. Research needs to be recalculated at a time when premarital cohabitation has become more commonplace. Also, factors which have been left out in prior research need to be included, such as length of a couples relationship prior to marriage as well as the length of the marriage. Factors such as the couples ages at marriage, and education levels should also be incorporated into this study in order to find as much truth in this matter as possible.

Works Cited

- De Vaus, David, Lixia Qu, and Ruth Weston. "Premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital stability." *Family Matters* (Winter2003 2003): 34-39. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 15 Feb. 2009.
- Kline Rhoades, Galena, Scott M. Stanley, and Howard J. Markman. "Pre-engagement Cohabitation and Gender Asymmetry in Marital Commitment." *Journal of Family Psychology* 20.4 (Dec. 2006): 553-560. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 15 Feb. 2009.
- Teachman, Jay D., and Karen A. Polonko. "Cohabitation and Marital Stability in the United States." *Social Forces* 69.1 (Sep. 1990): 207-220. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 15 Feb. 2009.