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Living Together in College: Implications for Courtship*

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Implications of cohabitation for courtship were explored in a two-year study of 231 college dating couples. No differences were found between living together and other "going together" couples in rates of marriage or breakup over the course of the study. Differences were found, however, in reports of satisfaction, intimacy, problems, expectations of marriage, the balance of power, and transition to marriage. Results suggest that cohabitation in college may influence the development of dating relationships, but that it does not pose a threat to the institution of marriage as feared in the popular press.

College has long served as a meeting place in the mate selection process for a significant number of young people (*cf.* Scott, 1965). Increasingly, however, courtship in college involves a new element: living together before marriage. The number of college students who live with a dating partner at some point in their college career is now estimated to be about 25 percent (Macklin, 1978). This trend has been viewed with alarm by the popular press, which has expressed concern

that cohabitation poses a threat to the institution of marriage and indicates lack of commitment to long-term relationships (Montague, 1977; Newsweek, 1977). Such concerns have led to research on the attitudes and personal characteristics of individuals who cohabit and, to a lesser extent, on the nature of the relationships of cohabiting couples.

The major finding of research on individual characteristics is that college students who cohabit tend to be less religious than other college students, as measured by rates of church attendance. They also tend to be more "liberal" on various attitude measures, including measures relevant to sex roles. On measures of family background, however, there appear to be no consistent differences, at least for college samples (see review by Macklin, 1978).

What little is known about the relationships of cohabiting couples is based almost entirely on comparisons between cohabiting

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couples and couples who are married or engaged. This research suggests that cohabiting couples are no more egalitarian than married couples, in spite of "liberal" attitudes. It also suggests that there are no differences in the degree of satisfaction reported by cohabiting couples and that reported by married couples. There is, however, some evidence that cohabiting couples are less committed to maintaining their relationship than married couples (Macklin, 1978).

At first glance, this latter finding about commitment would appear to confirm the concerns expressed in the popular press. Yet its meaning depends upon the relationship between cohabitation and marriage. For some segments of society, cohabitation may serve as an alternative to marriage (*cf.* Liebow, 1967). For most college students, however, cohabitation appears to be a stage of courtship; almost all of those who cohabit plan to marry someone eventually (Macklin, 1978). Comparisons between cohabiting and married couples make most sense when cohabitation is viewed as an alternative to marriage. If cohabitation is a stage of courtship, however, then differences between cohabiting and married couples may merely reflect differences between one stage of courtship (cohabitation) and a later stage (marriage). To separate effects associated with cohabitation from effects associated with stage of courtship, it is necessary to compare cohabiting couples with noncohabiting couples who are dating but not married. It may be, for example, that cohabiting couples are no less committed to maintaining their relationship than other couples who are "going together" but not married.

While there has been concern that cohabitation poses a threat to the institution of marriage, it might also be argued that cohabitation may lead to better marriages, by serving as a form of "trial marriage" (*cf.* Mead, 1966). By affording dating partners an opportunity to know each other better, living together may help people to achieve more intimate relationships and to avoid marriages which are fraught with unforeseen problems. In addition, cohabitation before marriage may ease the transition to marital roles (*cf.* Rapoport, 1965). Hence, there are a number of implications that cohabitation might have for the development of dating

relationships, which have not been explored in previous research.

To gain a more complete understanding of cohabitation in college, it would thus be useful to compare cohabiting and noncohabiting dating couples on a number of aspects of their relationships, including not only sex roles, satisfaction, and commitment, but also intimacy, problems, and transition to marriage. An opportunity to make such comparisons was provided by a two-year study of dating couples. At the beginning of the study there were both cohabiting and noncohabiting couples. By the end of the study, some couples had married and others had broken up. Hence, it was possible not only to examine the nature of cohabiting relationships but also to explore their development over time.

METHOD

Data reported in this paper come from a two-year study of the development of dating relationships begun in the spring of 1972 (Hill *et al.*, 1976; Peplau *et al.*, 1976, 1977; Rubin and Mitchell, 1976). Participants were 231 college-age couples recruited by letters mailed to random samples of male and female sophomores and juniors at four colleges in the Boston area, and by advertising on campus. To be included in the sample, at least one member of a couple had to define their relationship as "going together." Details of recruitment and issues of volunteer bias are discussed in Hill *et al.* (1979).

When the study began, the modal couple was a sophomore woman dating a junior man. About half the participants' fathers had graduated from college and about one fourth of the fathers held graduate degrees. Forty-four percent of the respondents were Catholic, 26 percent were Protestant, and 25 percent were Jewish, reflecting the religious composition of the colleges in the sample. At the beginning of the study, the couples had been dating for a median period of about eight months. In three fourths of the couples, both persons were dating their partner exclusively, but only 10 percent were engaged.

Data Collection

At initial testing sessions, dating partners individually completed identical versions of a long questionnaire concerning their back-

grounds, attitudes, and dating relationship. Follow-up questionnaires were administered about six months, one year, and two years after the initial session. Four fifths of the original participants returned the two-year mail questionnaire, which assessed whether or not the couples were married, still dating, or broken up. Those married were sent an additional questionnaire concerning their decision to marry and the transition to marital roles.

Cohabitation Measure

There is little consensus in the research literature concerning the best criterion for determining whether or not a couple is cohabiting. The problem arises because many couples who view themselves as living together nonetheless maintain separate residences (e.g., to conceal their cohabitation from parents, to avoid breaking dormitory or apartment leases, or to maintain independence). Some studies have specified the number of months living together (e.g., Clayton and Voss, 1977), or the number of nights per week spent together for so many months (e.g., Macklin, 1974). Most researchers, however, have dealt with the problem of specifying a criterion by relying on self-definition (e.g., Henze and Hudson, 1974; Peterman *et al.*, 1974; Clatworthy, 1975; Bower and Christopherson, 1977). In the present study, couple members were asked whether or not they and their partners were living together; possible responses were "no," "yes, some of the time," and "yes, most or all of the time." Both partners gave the same response in 72.2 percent of the couples; collapsing "no" and "some" into a single category of non-cohabitation increased agreement to 89.1 percent. For purposes of analysis, a couple was classified as cohabiting if both members answered "most or all of the time"; there were 40 such couples (17.3 percent) out of 231.

RESULTS

Differences between cohabiting and noncohabiting couples were explored in terms of sex roles, satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, problems, and transition to marriage.

Sex Roles

Previous research suggested that cohabit-

ing college students describe themselves in less sex-role stereotypic terms than noncohabiting students. To explore sex-role attitudes in the present study, participants were given a 10-item scale of sex-role traditionalism (Peplau *et al.*, 1976). Men in cohabiting couples expressed attitudes which were less traditional than those of men in noncohabiting couples (2.76 versus 3.19 on a scale ranging from 1 to 6, $t = 2.51$, $df = 229$, $p = .01$). The women in cohabiting couples were not significantly less traditional than noncohabiting women, however, because both groups held relatively nontraditional attitudes (2.40 versus 2.63, $t = 1.40$, $df = 228$, $p = .16$).

In spite of the less traditional sex-role attitudes of cohabiting men, men in cohabiting couples were not more likely to say that their relationship was egalitarian than noncohabiting men ($X^2 = 1.08$, $df = 2$, $p = .58$), on a measure of the overall balance of power (cf. Peplau *et al.*, 1976). For women, however, there was a significant difference in reports of power ($X^2 = 7.59$, $df = 2$, $p = .02$). Cohabiting women were more likely to report male dominance (45.0 percent versus 32.4 percent) and less likely to report female dominance (2.5 percent versus 19.9 percent) than noncohabiting women. Thus, in spite of more liberal sex-role attitudes on the part of their partners, cohabiting women were more likely to see themselves as being at a power disadvantage than noncohabiting women. This is interesting in light of prior findings of no difference between cohabiting and married couples. Cohabiting couples, like married couples, must decide where to live and make numerous decisions concerning finances and the division of household tasks. Such decisions which may facilitate the emergence of traditional sex-role behavior (cf. Stafford *et al.*, 1977) can be more easily avoided by couples who are not living together. Hence, it may be easier for noncohabiting couples to achieve—or at least maintain the illusion of—an egalitarian relationship, than it is for cohabiting or married couples.

Satisfaction

Satisfaction was assessed by asking (1) how satisfied couple members were with their relationship and (2) how satisfying it was to have sexual intercourse with one's

partner. Even though cohabiting women were more likely than noncohabiting women to see themselves as being at a power disadvantage, they were *more* likely to say that they were satisfied with their relationship (7.93 versus 7.15, scale range 1 to 9, $t = 3.29$, $df = 229$, $p = .001$). Apparently there were other aspects of their relationship which offset their power disadvantage. Similarly, men in cohabiting couples reported higher levels of satisfaction than men in noncohabiting couples (7.83 versus 7.33, $t = 2.09$, $df = 228$, $p = .038$).

In addition, cohabiting men were more likely than noncohabiting men to say that having sexual intercourse with their partner was satisfying (8.03 versus 7.41, $t = 2.15$, $df = 183$, $p = .03$). The difference in women's reports, however, was not statistically significant since both cohabiting and noncohabiting women reported high levels of sexual satisfaction (8.33 versus 8.03, $t = 1.28$, $df = 182$, $p = .201$).

Commitment

Commitment to long-term relationships was explored both attitudinally and behaviorally. In terms of attitudes, couple members were asked about their expectations concerning: (1) marriage in general, and (2) marriage to their current partner. The vast majority thought that they would probably eventually marry someone, although those who were cohabiting were somewhat less likely to think so than those not cohabiting (92.5 percent versus 98.4 percent for the women; 84.6 percent versus 98.9 percent for the men). When asked to estimate the probability that they would marry their current dating partner, there was no significant difference in the reports of cohabiting versus noncohabiting men (5.2 versus 4.8, scale range 0 to 9 where 9 meant 91-100 percent, $t = 0.76$, $df = 225$, $p = .45$). But cohabiting women tended to think that the probability of marrying their partner was higher than did noncohabiting women (5.9 versus 4.9, $t = 1.85$, $df = 226$, $p = .065$).

Behaviorally, commitment was assessed by seeing which couples married and which couples broke up during the period of study. If cohabitation is associated with lesser commitment, it ought to be reflected not only in lower rates of marriage by cohabiting than noncohabiting couples, but also in higher

rates of breaking up. By the end of the study two years after the initial questionnaire, 18.6 percent of the total sample of 231 couples were married, 32.0 percent were still dating but not married, and 44.6 percent had broken up (an additional 4.3 percent had an unknown status; see Hill *et al.*, 1976). There was no statistically significant association between cohabitation and relationship outcome by the end of the study. Couples who lived together were not less likely to have married, nor were they more likely to have broken up ($X^2 = 0.92$, $df = 2$, $p = .630$). Hence, although there was some evidence of differences in attitudes regarding marriage, cohabiting couples were no less committed behaviorally than noncohabiting couples. It is possible, however, that differences might have shown up had the study lasted longer than two years.

Intimacy

While cohabitation did not appear to be related to couple permanence, it was associated with measures of couple intimacy. Not surprisingly, those who were living together reported seeing each other more often than did other "going together" couples; they also reported having sexual intercourse more often (Table 1). In addition, they saw their relationship as closer, and indicated greater love for each other as measured by the Rubin (1970, 1973) Love Scale. They also reported self-disclosing more to their partner, and receiving more self-disclosure from their partner, on 17-item scales (see Rubin *et al.*, 1980). Hence, cohabiting couples were more intimate than other dating couples not only in terms of frequency of interaction and sex, but in other ways as well.

Is this greater intimacy associated with cohabitation, or is it merely an artifact of having dated longer than other dating couples? Actually, it is found that the cohabiting couples tended to have dated a shorter period of time than the noncohabiting couples (10.2 months versus 11.8 months), although the difference was not statistically significant ($t = 0.76$, $df = 229$, $p = .448$). Analyses controlling for dating length indicated that these differences in intimacy were not mediated by dating length (see Risman, 1978).¹

¹Similar analyses indicated that the other reported differences between cohabiting and noncohabiting couples were not mediated by dating length either.

TABLE 1. INTIMACY AS A FUNCTION OF COHABITATION

	Women's Responses		Men's Responses	
	Going Together	Living Together	Going Together	Living Together
Frequency of interaction (percentage seeing partner daily)	52.6	100.0**	48.9	100.0**
Frequency of intercourse (percentage 6+ times per week)	11.8	37.5**	11.6	43.6**
Closeness (Means) (9-point scale)	7.5	8.4**	7.5	8.3**
Love Scale (Means) (9 items; 9 maximum)	7.0	7.5*	6.9	7.4*
Self-disclosure given (17 items; 34 maximum)	25.0	28.3**	24.7	27.8**
Self-disclosure received (17 items; 34 maximum)	24.6	27.6**	24.2	27.2**

N = 191 Going-Together couples and 40 Living-Together couples. Tests of differences between Going-Together and Living-Together couples by X^2 or *t*: **p* < .05; ***p* < .01.

In a similar vein, it might be argued that while all cohabiting couples had sexual intercourse, not all "going together" couples had, and it is this difference rather than cohabitation which accounts for group mean differences in intimacy on other dimensions. In the present sample, 20 percent of those not living together reported they had not engaged in sexual intercourse with their current partner. Comparisons were made among three groups: couples who had not had intercourse, couples who had had intercourse but were not living together, and couples who were living together. As expected, the abstaining couples were less intimate than the other two groups. But the cohabiting couples were still more intimate on the measures in Table 1 than the noncohabiting couples who had had intercourse (Risman, 1978). Hence, not all of the greater intimacy of cohabiting couples can be accounted for by their having had sexual intercourse. What is still unclear, however, is whether greater intimacy is a result of living together, a prerequisite for deciding to live together, or both.

Problems

Since cohabiting couples interact more frequently and report self-disclosing more fully, do they also report fewer problems in their relationships? Or does living together before marriage create more problems? To explore these questions, couple members were presented a list of 14 potential problems² and asked to indicate for each whether it was likely to lead to no difficulties, some minor difficulties, or major difficulties in their relationship during the next year. A problems index was constructed by summing responses for each respondent. Cohabiting

men had a lower problems index than noncohabiting men (5.50 versus 7.01, $t = 2.37$, $df = 229$, $p = .019$), although both groups cited relatively few problems (the scale maximum was 28). There tended to be a similar difference in the women's responses, but it was not statistically significant (6.38 versus 7.28, $t = 1.25$, $df = 229$, $p = .211$). The pattern of means indicates somewhat greater optimism on the part of cohabiting men, which is not fully shared by cohabiting women. An examination of the individual problem items indicated that two of the things cohabiting men were more optimistic about were their partners' desiring (or not desiring) their independence and their partners' being (or not being) interested in someone else. Perhaps this is related to the higher expectation on the part of cohabiting women, compared to noncohabiting women, that they and their partners will eventually marry.

Transition to Marriage

While cohabitation was not related to actual rates of marriage during the period of the study, there is some evidence that living together was a factor in the transition to marriage for those who did marry. At the end of the study, those who were married were sent an additional questionnaire concerning their decision to marry. Among the 37 couples who responded, those who then reported that they had lived together before marriage ($N = 16$) had a shorter interval between the time of first dating and the time of marriage than those who had not lived together before marriage (22.8 months versus 35.8 months, $t = 2.37$, $df = 35$, $p = .023$). In interviews, those who had lived together before marriage said they had been under a great deal of pressure from parents either to marry or to end their cohabiting relation-

²The same list was later used to ask about breakup reasons (see Hill *et al.*, 1976: Table 3).

ship. Cohabitation may have sped up the need to make a commitment decision. On the other hand, it could be that the relationship development, which was already proceeding quickly, was more likely to lead to cohabitation. In some cases, couples may have decided to live together only after they decided to marry.

A second manner in which living together was a factor in the transition to marriage concerns marriage rituals. Rapaport (1965) has argued that marriage rituals ease the transition to marital roles, but that less ritual is needed when there is more premarital intimacy. Hence, those who have lived together before marriage should need less elaborate marriage rituals. This was explored by asking the married couples whether or not they had taken a honeymoon and how many guests were present at their marriage. As expected, cohabiting couples were less likely to have taken a honeymoon (58.8 percent versus 95.2 percent, $X^2 = 5.47$, $df = 1$, $p = .019$), and were likely to have had fewer wedding guests (65.6 versus 136.2, $t = 3.36$, $df = 36$, $p = .002$).

It may be, however, that elaborate wedding rituals are related to a traditional orientation toward marriage, rather than to cohabitation *per se*. The relationship between cohabitation and rituals may be due to the relationship between cohabitation and traditionalism. To explore this possibility, analyses were done controlling for sex-role traditionalism. The results remained the same; those who had cohabited had less elaborate marital rituals even when sex-role traditionalism was controlled.

Those who had married were also asked how satisfied they were with their relationship. No statistically significant differences were found between those who had or had not cohabited. At this early point in their marriages, virtually all couple members reported high levels of satisfaction. It is possible, however, that differences might have emerged at a later time.

IMPLICATIONS

Concerns have been expressed in the popular press that cohabitation poses a threat to the institution of marriage and indicates a lack of commitment to long-term relationships. Such concerns do not appear

to be justified, at least with respect to cohabitation in college. For most college students, cohabitation appears to be part of the courtship process rather than a long-term alternative to marriage. Most college students who cohabit expect to marry someone eventually. Cohabiting couples in the present study were no less likely to marry, and no more likely to break up, than noncohabiting couples who were "going together."

At the same time, there were differences between cohabiting and noncohabiting couples which suggest that cohabitation may have an impact on dating relationships. Members of cohabiting couples reported higher levels of satisfaction with their relationship than noncohabiting couple members, and cohabiting men reported greater satisfaction with sex. Cohabiting couples were also more intimate, not only in terms of frequency of interaction and sex, but also in terms of feelings of closeness, love, and self-disclosure. Cohabiting men saw fewer potential problems in their relationship than noncohabiting men, and cohabiting women had higher expectations of eventually marrying their current partners than noncohabiting women.

On the other hand, cohabiting women were more likely than noncohabiting women to see themselves as being at a power disadvantage. This finding, together with previous findings of no differences in egalitarian behavior between cohabiting and married couples, suggests that cohabiting couples were more like married couples than like other dating couples in their balance of power. With fewer decisions to make, it appears to be easier for noncohabiting couples to achieve (or at least maintain the illusion of) an egalitarian relationship. Similarities between cohabitation and marriage may also underlie differences in the transition to marriage found between cohabiting and noncohabiting couples who married. Those who cohabited apparently had less need of elaborate rituals in making the transition.

Cohabitation also appeared to influence the rate of relationship development. The greater intimacy of cohabiting couples, compared to noncohabiting couples who were "going together," existed in spite of the fact that the cohabiting couples had not dated longer than the others. Among those who

married, those who had cohabited had decided to marry sooner than those who had not cohabited. On the one hand, this faster rate of development may be the result of cohabitation. Living together provides greater opportunities to interact, and disapproval of cohabitation by parents and others may put pressure on cohabiting couples to decide sooner whether to marry or break up. On the other hand, it may be that couples whose relationships are developing rapidly are more likely to be the ones who cohabit.

To explore further the implications of cohabitation in college, research is needed which examines: (1) the impact of cohabitation on relationship stability over longer periods of time, and (2) the nature of couples' relationships at the time they decide to cohabit. Research is also needed which explores the implications of cohabitation for courtship in noncollege settings.

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