



Introduction

Cohabitation before marriage is becoming the norm in today's society. Although many people believe that cohabitation helps couples prepare for marriage and, as a result, leads to more successful marriages, this belief is generally not supported by research findings. Kamp Dush, Cohan, and Amato (2003) found cohabitation to be associated with less marital satisfaction, less time spent together in common activities, higher levels of marital disagreement, less supportive attitudes, more negative problem solving, more reports of marital problems, and higher risk of divorce. Couples who cohabitated before marriage separated and divorced more often, sought counseling more often, and regarded marriage as a less important part of their life than couples who did not cohabit prior to marriage (Cunningham & Antill, 1994). Furthermore, Brown and Booth (1996) found that the longer couples cohabitated before marriage, the greater was their likelihood of divorce.

There are two perspectives to explain the correlations between cohabitation and marital quality and stability. The first is the selection perspective, which presumes that individuals who cohabit before marriage differ from non-cohabiters and it is those differences that increase the likelihood of lower marital quality and divorce (Brown & Booth, 1996). These characteristics include having a low level of education, being poor, experiencing parental divorce, having nontraditional attitudes toward marriage, and not being religious (Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003). The second perspective is the experience of cohabitation perspective, which states that cohabitation itself alters people and their relationships in ways that weaken later marital quality and commitment (Stafford, Kline, & Rankin, 2004). For example, if either individual is uncertain of the other's commitment to the future, divorce is more likely and accepted.

One purpose of this study is to investigate college students' attitudes about cohabitation before and after exposure to research findings about disadvantages of cohabitation. A second purpose is to investigate the relationship between egalitarian beliefs and intentions to cohabit. Couples who are higher in egalitarianism, which is when partners share equal amounts of power in the relationship, tend to possess more non-traditional attitudes than couples who are lower in egalitarianism (Matlin, 2008). It is hypothesized that participants will report a greater likelihood of cohabitating before reading research findings on disadvantages of cohabitation than after. It is also hypothesized that participants who are higher in egalitarianism will report a greater likelihood of cohabitating than participants who are lower in egalitarianism.

Method

Participants

Participants (N = 130) were UW-Eau Claire students who identified as heterosexual and had never cohabitated. Ninety-one participants were women and 39 were men. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23 years ($M = 19.74$, $SD = 1.18$).

Materials

Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale (SRES)

The SRES (King & King, 1993) was developed to measure attitudes toward the equality of women and men. This scale contains 95 items that require judgments about both women assuming nontraditional roles and men assuming nontraditional roles. The response format for each item is a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. For the purposes of this study, only the 19 items that form the Marital Roles domain were used. A total score on this domain is obtained by summing across all items. Scores above the median were coded as high egalitarianism and scores below the median were coded as low egalitarianism.

Cohabitation Survey

The researchers developed a two-part survey to measure participants' knowledge about and attitudes toward cohabitation. The first half of the survey listed a definition of cohabitation (i.e., "The lifestyle of unmarried couples who have a sexually intimate relationship and who share a residence."). Participants were then asked about their knowledge of possible advantages and disadvantages to cohabitation, as well as if they were likely to cohabit before marriage and reasons for this decision. The second half of the survey listed several research findings indicating that cohabitation does not necessarily help couples prepare for marriage, nor does it lead to more successful marriages.

Procedure

In the first phase of the study, participants used UW-Eau Claire's Qualtrics system to complete the Marital Roles domain of the SRES and provide demographic information. This phase was completed at a time and location selected by participants. For the second phase, participants were asked to come to a classroom on campus. They were given the first half of the cohabitation survey. Upon completion, researchers collected these questions and distributed the second half of the survey. An email address or codename provided by participants was used to match responses across surveys administered during phases one and two.

Results and Discussion

A 2 (cohabitation: pretest, posttest) x 2 (gender: female, male) x 2 (egalitarianism: high, low) repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, with repeated measures on the cohabitation variable.

The three-way interaction (cohabitation/gender/egalitarianism) was not significant. The analysis yielded a significant effect for cohabitation ($F = 56.57$, $p < .001$); however, significant two-way interactions between cohabitation and gender ($F = 5.71$, $p < .05$) and cohabitation and egalitarianism ($F = 7.19$, $p < .01$) qualified the outcome on the cohabitation variable. Women reported a greater likelihood of cohabitating than men, as did high egalitarians compared to low egalitarians.

In this study, we examined the relationship between college students' reported likelihood of cohabitation before marriage and their egalitarian tendencies. We also examined whether exposure to research findings about possible disadvantages of cohabitation would impact reported likelihood of cohabitation. Previous research shows that people who say they are more likely to cohabit before marriage tend to be more non-traditional and more egalitarian than those who state that they are less likely to cohabit before marriage (Matlin, 2008). Our results are consistent with these findings. Participants who are higher in egalitarianism report greater intent to cohabit than those who are lower in egalitarianism. Female participants in our sample report a greater intent to cohabit than do male participants. This finding suggests that women may be more egalitarian and non-traditional than men.

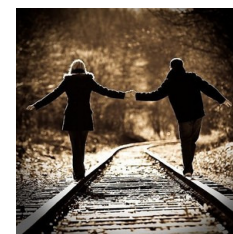
A significant difference emerged between intent to cohabit at the pretest and intent to cohabit at the posttest (i.e., before and after reading research findings about possible disadvantages of cohabitation). Before reading the research findings, participants reported a greater intent to cohabit before marriage. However, after having read the research findings, participants reported a lesser intent to cohabit before marriage. This is an extremely interesting and important finding. If more college students knew the research findings associated with the relationship between cohabitation and interpersonal difficulties, would they still choose to cohabit? Our findings are important because if people in this age group knew all the risks involved with cohabitating with their significant other before marriage, then they may engage in more effective decision-making about their relationship. This may, in turn, have an impact on divorce rates in the United States.

This study does have limitations, one of which is a small sample size. It is not clear how representative the participants are of college students in general. We also recognize the limitations inherent in collecting data via self-report measures, and the fact that attitude change does not necessarily translate into behavioral change. It is entirely possible that the attitude shift that occurred following exposure to research findings on cohabitation might have no relationship with participants' immediate or future behaviors.

Future research should be done with larger sample sizes and with more diverse samples, including people of different ages, ethnicities and sexual orientations. Studies should also investigate the most effective ways to communicate research findings about advantages and disadvantages of cohabitation to the general public, so that people can utilize this information when forming attitudes, making decisions, and engaging in actual behaviors related to their long-term romantic relationships.



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References and Acknowledgements

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