EXAMINING THE PATTERNS AND IMPLICATIONS OF COHABITATION:
A GUIDEBOOK FOR YOUNG ADULT COHABITING COUPLES

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Science in Counseling,
Marriage and Family Therapy

By

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my beautiful grandma, June Marie Ward, who was always my biggest cheerleader and foundation of unconditional love.
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First I would like to thank my committee members who offered invaluable guidance and support throughout this process. To my chair, Dr. Dana Stone, you have been such an amazing mentor and supporter since our first meeting. Thank you for taking the time to thoroughly understand my vision and direct me in accomplishing it, as well as challenging me to think outside of the box along the way. I feel extremely fortunate and thankful to have had such an intelligent, committed, and patient person as the chair of my project. I also owe sincere gratitude to Dr. Rie Mitchell who has been an inspiring supervisor and supporter of my work. And thank you to Dr. Jonah Schlackman who has been a compelling professor and thoughtful editor. It is with great appreciation that I acknowledge the support, encouragement, and direction of these faculty members, without whom this project would have not been possible.

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ABSTRACT

EXAMINING THE PATTERNS AND IMPLICATIONS OF COHABITATION:
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By

Tara Rodriguez
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Between 1960 and 2012, the number of unmarried couples who lived together in the United States had grown from 450,000 to 7.5 million—more than a 1,500% increase. Young adults (approximated ages 20-35 years) are currently the majority of cohabiting couples in the U.S. In spite of the increase in the number of couples who cohabit, much research indicates that partners who live together prior to marriage—especially before an engagement or clear commitment—have a greater likelihood of relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution. The purpose of this project was to develop a guidebook for young adult couples in the United States to assist with the process of cohabitation. Specifically, the guidebook will provide relevant research concerning the topic of cohabitation, distinguish between different types of cohabiting couples, propose topics for discussion prior to moving in together, and offer suggestions for making a cohabiting relationship successful.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The term cohabitation can be utilized in a number of contexts. In a broad sense, cohabit refers to the act of sharing a living space with one or more individuals (Merriam-Webster, 2008). When referring to couples in romantic relationships, cohabitation is typically used to describe the act of living together without being married (Brown, 1996). Between 1960 and 2012, the number of unmarried couples who lived together in the United States had grown from 450,000 to 7.5 million—more than a 1,500% increase (Jay, 2012). What was once referred to as “shacking up,” cohabitation has made its presence known in the U.S. Despite opponents of cohabitation who view it as taboo and immoral and have vigorously faulted unmarried couples for the breakdown of marriage and the family, the general public has become increasingly tolerant over the last few decades about unmarried couples living together (Solot & Miller, 2002). The shift of increasing rates and acceptance of cohabitation has been attributed to the sexual revolution, which began in the 1960s, as well as the recent economic downturn (Jay, 2012).

Although there are cohabiters in every age bracket, there are more cohabiters between 25 and 34 than any other age group (Solot & Miller, 2002). According to the U.S. Census, in 1999, 37% of cohabiters were ages 25 to 34 while 18% of cohabiters were between 15 and 25 years old (Solot & Miller, 2002). Gallup polling reveals that America’s youth heavily support cohabitation. In 2004, 70% of teens aged 13 to 17 said they approve of couples living together before marriage (Lyons, 2004). With cohabitation rates continuing to rise and a younger generation who will soon be adults, it is reasonable to assume that this adolescent generation will contribute to an expected rise in
percentages of people who cohabit before marriage. Unfortunately, in spite of the increase in the number of couples who cohabit, much research indicates that partners who live together prior to marriage—especially before an engagement or clear commitment—have a greater likelihood of relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution (Axinn & Thornton; Booth & Johnson, 1988; Brown & Booth, 1996; Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Smock, 2000).

While researchers are attempting to keep up with the rapidly changing statistics and emerging patterns of cohabitation, the information gained is hardly being transferred to the people who need it the most—cohabiters themselves. Besides scholarly articles, credible information regarding issues of cohabitation is difficult to obtain. Summaries of current studies are sometimes published in metropolitan newspapers, but it is important to consider the demographics of individuals who read the newspaper. The primary source currently available to cohabiting couples is a nearly 300-page book that comprehensively covers almost all aspects of cohabitation, ranging from dealing with relationship discrimination to legal and financial issues to cohabiting with children (Solot & Miller, 2002).

Statement of the Problem

Young adults are presently the majority of cohabiting couples (Solot & Miller, 2002). As younger generations report strong support of cohabitation, it can be guessed that a large portion of this population will cohabit in adulthood. Currently, a succinct guidebook to help prepare and assist young adult couples with the process of cohabitation is either nonexistent or well-hidden. There is a breadth of knowledge surrounding the topic of cohabitation, but it appears that such information is not being distributed in an
effective manner to possible consumers.

In addition to young adults increasingly cohabiting, rates of serial cohabitation are also on the rise. Serial cohabitation is the practice of taking part in more than one cohabiting relationship. According to previous research, serial cohabitation represents a small portion of all cohabitations—approximately 15-20% (Lichter & Qian, 2008; Teachman, 2003). Data from the 1995 and 2002 waves of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), however, reveal that serial cohabitation grew by nearly 40% over that span of seven years, compared with only a 26% increase for cohabitation overall (Lichter, Turner, & Sassler, 2010). Serial cohabitation is a significant but often overlooked component of escalating rates of cohabitation among America’s young adults. Supporting previous findings, Cohen and Manning (2010) utilized data from the 2002 NSFG and found that an increasing number of women are experiencing serial cohabitation in emerging adulthood. Researchers propose that as the median age of first marriage continues to elevate, young adults will increasingly have the opportunity to explore multiple romantic relationships, which will possibly lead to serial cohabitation (Cohen & Manning, 2010; Lichter, Turner, & Sassler, 2010).

Relationship quality has a tremendous effect on other areas of one’s life and it is important for individuals to have access to resources and assistance for ensuring a high quality life. With the information that cohabitation rates are on the rise, especially among young adults, as well as the demonstration that couples who cohabit prior to marriage experience greater relationship dissolution, it is evident that a handbook to assist these individuals in the cohabitation process is necessary. A piece of literature that concisely presents useful information regarding this topic to young adult cohabiting couples is not
readily available

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this project is to develop a guidebook for young adult couples in the United States to assist with the process of cohabitation. Specifically, the guidebook will provide relevant research concerning the topic of cohabitation, distinguish between different types of cohabiting couples, propose topics for discussion prior to moving in together, and offer suggestions for making a cohabiting relationship successful. This project is intended to be user-friendly and present information in a succinct manner that will be applicable to young adult couples throughout America. Although this guidebook is intended to be utilized as a self-help tool, it may also be used to supplement couples therapy if the couple is cohabiting or the reason for treatment relates to the issue of cohabitation.

**Definition of Terms**

**Cohabitation** – To live together or in company (Merriam-Webster, 2008).

Cohabitation is used to describe the act of living together without being married (Brown, 1996). For the purpose of this project, Brown’s (1996) definition will be utilized as the focus is on romantically involved cohabiters.

**Cohabitation effect** – the greater likelihood of marital dissatisfaction and dissolution among individuals who live together before marriage compared to those who do not cohabit prior to marriage (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002).

**Constraints** – Forces that increase the cost of leaving a relationship such as social pressure, shared finances, or children (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006).

**Couple** – Two persons married, engaged, or otherwise romantically paired.
Experience perspective – The notion that it is the experience of cohabitation itself that changes people and their relationships in ways that weaken later marital quality and commitment (Amato & Rogers, 1999; Axinn & Thornton, 1992).

Inertia effect – The suggestion that sharing a household increases constraint commitment, which influences cohabiting individuals who are not engaged to eventually marry someone they might not have married if cohabitation did not take place (Manning & Smock, 2005; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006).

Marriage – The state of being united to a person as husband or wife in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law (Merriam-Webster, 2008).

National Survey of Family growth (NSFG) – A national U.S. survey that gathers information on family life, marriage, divorce, pregnancy, infertility, use of contraception, and men’s and women’s health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) – A nationally representative, multistage probability sample of individuals who were interviewed in 1987 and 1988 (Wave I), 1992 through 1994 (Wave II), and 2002 and 2003 (Wave III). This survey provides broad information on family life in the U.S. (Brown, 2003; Skinner, Bahr, Crane, and Vaughn, 2002).

Partnering – The formation and development of intimate relationships (Sassler, 2010).

Pre engagement effect- those who cohabit before engagement demonstrate the highest risk for relationship distress before marriage and this risk is not likely to diminish after marriage (Kline et al., 2004)
Selection perspective – The notion that individuals with certain characteristics that predispose them to have unstable relationships are more likely to cohabit than individuals without those characteristics (Booth & Johnson, 1988; Brown & Booth, 1996; Axinn & Thorntin, 1992).

Serial cohabitation – The entry and exit from more than one co-residential cohabiting relationship (Lichter, Turner, Sassler, 2010). Other scholars define it as two or more cohabiting relationships (Cohen & Manning, 2010). For the purpose of this project, the definition of two or more cohabiting relationships will be utilized as it provides a higher standard of acuteness.

Sexual revolution – A social movement that challenged traditional codes of behavior related to sexuality and interpersonal relationships throughout the Western world beginning in the 1960s (Allyn, 2000).

Summary

The following chapter includes an extensive literature review that explores the patterns, implications, and reasons of cohabitation. The human act of partnering is explored along with mate preferences, as well as where cohabitation fits in the general family life cycle. Chapter Three delivers the technicalities of the project. Some of the information includes how the project was developed, the intended audience of the guidebook, and an outline of the actual project. In Chapter Four, an evaluation along with a discussion of the project and results of the evaluation are presented. Finally, the Appendix consists of the cohabitation guidebook created by the author.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Partnering

Partnering can be defined as the formation and development of intimate relationships (Sassler, 2010). Studying intimate partnering has become a more complex endeavor today than it was previously as changes have occurred in the marital behavior of individuals in the United States. Although marriage continues to be the most recognized and established form of union, it now commonly follows other steps in relationship formation such as sexual involvement, shared living, and even childbearing (Sassler, 2010). Despite the variety of romantic possibilities available to individuals—marriage, casual sexual relationships, dating to find a mate, forming a cohabiting union as an alternative to living alone, a precursor to marriage, or a substitute for marriage—a commonality between all relationships is a desire for intimacy. Participation in romantic relationships, as a spouse, cohabiting partner, or in a steady dating partnership, is advantageous to mental and physical health and general sense of well-being (Brown, 2000; Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Horwitz & White, 1998). This idea will be further explored later in this paper.

Depending on which stage of life a person is in, their decision to enter into a romantic relationship, preferences for partner qualities, and goals for partnerships will vary widely. For example, it is expected that adolescents and emerging adults engage in relationships with different goals than do older single adults. A more detailed discussion of the family life course will follow later. Generally speaking, research in this area has focused on young adults’ relationships and the process of entering cohabitation and subsequently marriage. The majority of young adults have lived with a romantic partner
by their mid-20s, and cohabitation is now an acknowledged pathway into marriage (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008).

The shortage of data on the romantic desires and behaviors of older adults causes difficulties in examining their partnering behavior. However, some conclusions have been drawn from the research that has been conducted. Paralleling the younger generation, it is known that the percentage of older adults who live with their romantic partner without tying the knot has increased over the past few decades (Brown, Lee, & Bulanda, 2006). Additionally, being utilized more as an alternative to marriage than a precursor to it, cohabitation generally serves different functions for older individuals than for younger adults (King & Scott, 2005). Lastly, as older adults, the availability of partners differs substantially for men and women. Due to the fact that women’s life expectancy is longer than men’s and men tend to partner with younger women, the sex ratio is unfavorable for older women looking to form relationships (Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007).

**Mate Preferences**

Although not much research has focused on how relationships progress from friendship to romance, or how early components of relationship progression shape subsequent union transitions, a significant amount of research has investigated mate preferences and mate selection (Buss, 1989; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Todd, Penke, Fasolo, & Lenton, 2007). One of the most accepted and well-researched theories of human mating is that like attracts like—that men and women become coupled with those who are similar to themselves (Buss, 1985). This idea has gained validation from studies that show that people tend to couple surrounding factors such as age, ethnicity, religious
Taking the lead on much of the research in this area, David Buss (1989) surveyed 10,047 participants spread across 37 different cultures and found consistent sex differences between male and female preferences of mate qualities. Men placed more importance on physical attractiveness while women placed more importance on good financial prospects. With an evolutionary framework in mind, the researcher suggested that men, more than women, value physical attractiveness in a mate because a woman’s physical attractiveness offers information about her reproductive value, and women, more than men, value earning prospects in a mate because a woman’s offspring are more likely to survive if a man can make greater economic contributions (Buss, 1989).

Recent research investigating online dating has revealed similar patterns in differences between male and female mate preferences. Online dating has received much attention by researchers as it has become a common way to meet a romantic partner in the 21st century. Hitsch, Hortacsu, and Ariely (as cited in Eastwick & Finkel, 2008) conducted research on online dating and found that men’s, but not women’s, incomes predicted the number of opposite-sex emails received while Olivola et al. (as cited in Eastwick & Finkel, 2008) found that the physical attractiveness of individuals’ online photographs predicted email contact better for women than for men.

In an attempt to further understand human mate choices and mate preferences, Todd, Penke, Fasolo, and Lenton (2007) utilized a speed dating event to examine individuals in the process of attempting to find a partner. The study consisted of 20 women, whose ages ranged from 26 to 42, and 26 men, ages 26 to 44. In the speed dating
session, which is a relatively new way of meeting potential partners, each pair had five
minutes to have a “minidate” and would then rotate to meet the next person. After each
minidate, each individual would decide if they would like to further get to know the other
person and record it on a card. For people with mutual interest, contact information
would be forwarded by the event organizers. The researchers found that men appeared to
base their decisions mostly on the physical attractiveness of the women. They also
appeared to be much less discriminatory, as reflected in the greater number of offers
made by men compared with women. Women made more selective choices. They
appeared to be aware of the importance to men of their own physical attractiveness and
picked only a few men with traits that matched their own desirability as a mate. The
authors thus concluded that both men’s and women’s choices were influenced by
women’s physical attractiveness (Todd, Penke, Fasolo, Lenton, 2007).

The exploration of mate selection in same-sex relationships is much more limited
than for heterosexual relationships, but the following information has been concluded
through research. Bailey, Kim, Hill, and Linsemeier (as cited in Dillon & Saleh, 2012)
found that gay men ranked physical attractiveness as highly important in a potential mate,
similar to heterosexual men’s rankings. In an additional large scale survey regarding
preferred traits of potential mates, results indicated that homosexual men ranked
attractiveness high and were not concerned with a potential mate’s ambition or status
(Lippa, 2007). In regards to mate preferences of lesbians, Lippa determined that
homosexual women, like heterosexual women, valued intelligence, humor, honesty, and
kindness the most. Additionally, Bailey et al. (as cited in Dillon & Saleh, 2012)
discovered that lesbians exhibited a greater preference for potential mates who described
themselves as feminine. Although research surrounding same-sex mate preferences is limited, it appears that males, regardless of sexual orientation, value similar characteristics in a potential mate while there is not enough data to assess female’s preferences.

**Family Life Cycle**

The definition of “family” is subjective as it varies across cultures and is revised as norms of society change. Researchers suggest that families move through stages throughout the life course, but not necessarily in a linear fashion (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). Suggested stages of the family life cycle include leaving home, the joining of families through marriage, families with young children, families with adolescents, launching children and moving on, and families in later life. It is a complicated task to generalize these stages to all families as every family is unique and the conventional mores of society have rapidly changed in the last few decades. For instance, two paycheck marriages, unmarried cohabiting couples with children, and single-parent adoptions have become well-known occurrences in American society, which deviate from the accepted idea of the “normal” family (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989).

Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick, who have exceedingly contributed to this area of research, propose that the leading stage of the family life cycle is leaving home as a young adult. During this transition, the young adult must navigate through the process of individuation in which one differentiates themself in relation to the family of origin and reaches a position of autonomy (Regalia, Lanz, Tagliabue, & Manzi, 2011). This period is also a time to decide what one will take emotionally from the family and what they will leave behind. At this stage, there is a shifting of status in the family system,
which now includes a son or daughter being an adult. This newfound adult-to-adult relationship between child and parents requires a mutually respectful rapport in which the young adult accepts who their parents are while parents allow their offspring to achieve independence and a differentiated sense of self (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). Finding a balance between family connectedness (cohesion, emotional closeness, and support) and family distinctiveness (individual boundaries, separation, and autonomy) is key for the family to successfully deal with this transition stage (Regalia, Lanz, Tagliabue, & Manzi, 2011). It is often in this stage of the life cycle that individuals form romantic relationships and develop cohabiting unions with potential life partners.

The next stage of the family life cycle is the joining of families through marriage. The aspect of uniting families is often overlooked when marriage occurs. Marriage is typically viewed as two individuals merging to form a single union when, in fact, it represents two individuals, along with all that they bring from their family systems, joining to create a third subsystem (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). From this stage, a realignment of relationships with extended families and friends to include the other spouse typically occurs. Generally, after this stage in the family life course is families with young children. However, according to a report by the U.S. Census Bureau, women in America are waiting longer to have children, and more women than ever are choosing not to have children at all. The Census Bureau collected data that indicated that 20% of American women ages 40 to 44 have no children, which is double the amount of 30 years ago. Additionally, the census report revealed that 36% of women who gave birth in 2006 were single (separated, divorced, widowed, or never married), and 5% were unmarried but living with a partner (Zezima, 2008). Although the rate of women choosing not to
bear children has increased substantially, the majority of couples today do produce offspring. Families with young children need to adjust the marital system to make space for new family members, as well as take on new roles. In this stage, the adults move up a generation to guide and take care of the younger generation. This stage of the family life cycle is exceptionally demanding of individuals in the family system and it is the one that contains the highest rate of divorce (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989).

Families with adolescents is the next stage of the family life cycle. At this point, the relationship between parents and children is changing as the adolescent is testing boundaries and exploring independence while parents can no longer uphold complete authority. Venturing outside of the family to form meaningful relationships occurs which may bring new values and ideas into the family system. Caretaking of older family members often becomes more demanding and intensified at this stage, which can create much stress in the family (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). The next stage of the family life cycle is families at midlife and it is often one that parents are incredibly excited for but at the same time it is problematic for them. Launching children can create feelings of emptiness and depression in parents, primarily for women who dedicated much of their adult lives to raising children. This phase requires a reformation of the marital relationship as parenting responsibilities are no longer the primary focus. This may also be a time of liberation as finances will most likely be easier and parents may have time to enjoy leisure activities. Although this is a phase marked by adult children leaving the family of origin, it also typically includes the entrance of spouses and grandchildren to the family system (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989).

The final stage of the family life cycle is families in later life. Several adjustments
often need to be made in this stage, which include retirement, the loss of a spouse and other family members or friends, and declining health and increased dependence. Grandparenthood is typically a unique aspect in this stage as special relationships with grandchildren can be made without the demands of being a parent (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). It is important to be mindful of the general framework that this proposed family life cycle provides. As mentioned, not all families go through the stages in the same order and not all families experience each stage the same way. One needs to consider culture, societal norms at a given time, and other familial situations such as divorce or remarriage.

**Partnering in Context**

When it comes to the idea of family, one of the most complicated and least agreed upon issues is marriage. Ideas surrounding who should be allowed to marry, the process leading up to marriage, and the expectations after marriage occurs are incongruent in society, especially at this time as norms are shifting (Sherif Trask & Koivunen, 2007). Although notions regarding marriage are often in disagreement, demographic studies show that marriage has not lost its dominant philosophical significance and remains a deeply rooted establishment in the United States (Cherlin, 2002). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 90% of Americans will marry at some point in their lives. While the institution of marriage itself has not lost its effect, practices surrounding marriage have changed. Individuals are waiting longer to marry, some people may cohabit prior to or instead of marriage, and divorce may occur with less anguish. Additionally, increasing social acceptance of premarital sex, cohabitation, childbirth outside of marriage, and same-sex partnerships has affected marital practices as well (Sherif Trask & Koivunen, 2007).
As the demographics of the United States are changing rapidly, it is unfortunate that the majority of research surrounding partnering neglects Hispanic, Asian, and Indian American populations. However, the material focusing on White European American families is plentiful and an impressive amount concentrating on African Americans is available as well. When comparing these two groups, data reveals that Black Americans tend to marry later and have higher rates of divorce than White Americans (Sweeney & Phillips, 2004). When comparing cohabitation patterns, Whites who cohabit are much more likely to marry their partners than Blacks. According to Manning and Smock (1995), two-thirds of White cohabiting women ultimately marry their partners while merely 10% of cohabiting Black women do the same. It has been suggested that these findings indicate a possibility of different meanings of cohabitation among these groups. For Whites, cohabitation tends to be a transitional step to marriage, while Blacks often utilize it as a substitute for marriage (Sherif Trask & Koivunen, 2007). According to the same researchers, Puerto Rican women are also inclined to view cohabitation as a replacement for marriage.

Much of the current demographic literature regarding cohabitation has focused on ethnicity of individuals. Some research reveals that at a given time, African Americans and Indian Americans are most likely to cohabit while Asians are the least likely (Sherif Trask & Koivunen, 2007). Data have also shown that 45% of White and Black women and 40% of Latino women ages 19-44 have cohabitated (Smock, 2000). Another piece of information to consider is education levels of cohabiters. Research has documented that cohabitation is more prevalent among less educated individuals. Bumpass and Lu (2000) demonstrate increases in the rates of cohabitation are greater for those with only a high
school education as opposed to a college education. Additional research reveals data showing that the percentage of women aged 19-44 who have cohabitated at some point is almost 60% among high school dropouts versus 37% among college graduates (Smock, 2000). Considering class variations in terms of socioeconomic status is also important when investigating cohabiting relationships. Economic situations are often overlooked when studying cohabitation rates and patterns among different groups.

The majority of research on cohabitation to date has typically only included opposite-sex partners, which has made it difficult to provide accurate statistics of cohabitation among same-sex couples. In general, many gay and lesbian individuals are hesitant to unveil their sexual orientation due to the stigma attached to homosexuality, which makes it even more challenging to determine correct statistical information as well as obtain phenomenological data (Kurdek, 2005). For instance, the development of gay and lesbian partnerships is an area where the research is scant. Because gay and lesbian courtship is a relatively masked process, not much is known about how same-sex relationships progress from courtship to cohabitation to marriage (if possible). According to Kurdek (2004), data from the U.S. Census in 2000 suggests that 594,391 of the 5.5 million couples living together were same-sex couples (about one in nine couples). About 300,000 of those couples involved male partners while the remaining were female couples.

Although society in the United States has become more accepting of gay and lesbian rights over time, much controversy still exists surrounding issues such as family benefits of gay lesbian couples, parental rights of this population, and the legalization of same-sex marriage (Casper & Bianchi, 2002). When compared to heterosexual couples,
similarities and differences are apparent. For example, gay and lesbian cohabiters tend to reside in highly populated urban areas. According to Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor (2000), about 85% of gay and lesbian cohabiting couples reside in only 20 cities in the U.S. It is important to note that only 25% of the whole U.S. population resides in the same 20 cities. One can speculate that urban areas are more attractive for the gay and lesbian population as it is easier to blend in, there are probably more people with whom they share commonalities, and there may be fewer chances of being stigmatized or discriminated against as these areas may be more accommodating than others. Black and his colleagues (2000) also found that same-sex cohabiting couples completed higher education levels than heterosexual couples, both married and not married. Although research on gay and lesbian families is limited, most conclusions indicate more similarities than differences in family functioning of same-sex and heterosexual partnerships. Examiners have found that gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples identify similar areas as sources of conflict—power, personal flaws, distrust, intimacy, social issues, and personal distance (Kurdek, 1994). Additionally, same-sex couples report relationship satisfaction levels that are at least equal to those reported by spouses from married heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 2001). Lastly, gay and lesbian relationships are influenced by the same set of factors that influence heterosexual partnerships—characteristics each partner brings to the relationship, how each partner views the relationship, how partners behave toward each other, and perceived level of support for the relationship (Kurdek, 2004).

When considering culturally diverse same-sex couples, inferences can be made regarding the prejudice and discrimination they are likely to experience. Research that
explores this phenomenon is relatively nonexistent but one can assume, unfortunately, that culturally diverse gay and lesbian couples will be subject to negative attitudes from heterosexuals as well as other gay and lesbian couples. While societal changes are occurring regarding acceptability of gay and lesbian relationships, much debate still exists surrounding the legality of same-sex marriages. Although only a handful of states in the U.S. recognize same-sex unions as legal, the public debates about this matter demonstrate that attitudes are shifting (Sherif Trask & Koivunen, 2007).

**Relationship Status and Well-Being**

Historically, a great deal of research has investigated how marriage affects individuals’ sense of well-being (Horwitz, White, & Howell-White, 1996; Kim & McKenry, 2002), but more recent studies further explore this interest by including other types of romantic relationships besides marriage (Brown, 2000; Horwitz & White, 1998; Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Marcussen, 2005; Soons & Kalmijn, 2009; Soons & Liefbroer, 2008; Soons, Liefbroer, & Kalmijn, 2009; Wienke & Hill, 2009). Lee, Seccombe, and Shehan (as cited in Brown, 2000) reveal that research consistently demonstrates that marrieds have higher levels of psychological well-being than never-married, separated, divorced, and widowed counterparts. Additionally, married people have less distress, mental illness, alcoholism, drug abuse, and mortality compared to individuals who remain unmarried (Horwitz, White, & Howell-White, 1996). Seeking to better understand the relationship between marriage and psychological well-being, Kim and McKenry (2002) utilized data from the first two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households; information from 5,991 respondents whose ages ranged from 19 to 80 years was included. After analyzing the data, the researchers found that the level
of psychological well-being differs according to different marital status categories; married individuals have higher levels of psychological well-being than representatives of other marital status groups. The results confirm the idea that marital status has a strong effect on psychological well-being, but also that relationship quality can be accounted for some of the association between marital status and well-being (Kim & McKenry, 2002).

A primary question that researchers have is whether or not cohabitation possesses the same mental health advantages as marriage. A number of studies have detected that cohabiters rest in a position between marriage and being single, with cohabiters proclaiming lower levels of well-being than marrieds but higher levels of well-being than singles (Brown, 2000; Horwitz & White, 1998). Kamp Dush and Amato (2005) sought to investigate how levels of commitment in a relationship influence subjective well-being. Prior to the study, the researchers established the notion that different types of relationships rest on a commitment continuum, with married individuals having stronger commitment than cohabiting individuals, and cohabiting individuals having stronger commitment than individuals who are dating steadily (but not living together). The investigators reached out to offspring of respondents from a 1980 nationally representative sample based on the study of Marital Instability over the Life Course. At the time of interviews, all offspring were at least 19 years old and totaled 691 individuals. The results of the study demonstrate the generally accepted idea that being in romantic relationships is beneficial to individuals’ mental health and sense of well-being. Kamp Dush and Amato found that married individuals reported the highest level of subjective well-being, followed by cohabiting individuals, individuals dating one person steadily, individuals dating multiple people, and individuals not dating, respectively. Additionally,
the data revealed that people in more satisfying relationships tend to experience higher levels of subjective well-being than do people in less happier relationships; the results show that this association is true for all types of romantic relationships, not just marriage. An important discovery resulting from this study is that married people maintained the highest levels of subjective well-being, followed by cohabiting individuals, even after controlling for relationship happiness (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005).

Additional research has produced similar findings of the differences in well-being levels between marrieds and cohabiters. Soons and Liefbroer (2008) examined differences in well-being among young adults in different types of romantic relationships. The researchers used information from 2,818 individuals (ages 18-30) who took part in a Dutch Panel study on Social Integration in the Netherlands. Consistent with previous findings, the data reveals a relationship status hierarchy in well-being among young adults. Single people had the lowest level of well-being, followed by dating, cohabiting, and married individuals, who had the highest level. The investigators proposed the availability of resources (material, personal, and social) would predict individuals’ well-being and that relationship status would be related to availability of such resources. The results determined that access to resources explained about 25-32% of the variance in well-being between single, dating, cohabiting, and married young adults (Soons & Liefbroer, 2008).

Like other researchers, Horwitz and White (1998) attempted to better understand how the mental health of cohabiters compares to that of unmarried and married counterparts. With 1,257 participants from New Jersey, the investigators utilized self-report questionnaires to gain information from 25 to 31 year olds regarding mental health.
The results of the data analysis demonstrate a complicated relationship between cohabitation and mental health. Compared with other marital groups, rates of depression among cohabiters are not significantly different from rates among either married or unmarried individuals. Other information, however, reveals a stronger relationship between cohabitation and alcohol problems than between cohabitation and depression. Cohabiting men reported considerably more alcohol problems than both married and unmarried men, while cohabiting women reported more alcohol problems than married counterparts (Horwitz & White, 1998). Limitations in this study do not allow for the results to be generalized to the larger U.S. population, but additional research can contribute to testing the validity of these findings.

Investigations of married and unmarried individuals typically exclude gay and lesbian partners. To close this gap in the research, Wienke and Hill (2009) examined how the well-being of individuals in same-sex relationships compares to that of people in other types of relationships. The researchers obtained data by merging information from several separate surveys conducted in the U.S.; the analytic sample totaled 11,431 individuals. After analyzing the data, the examiners found that partnered gays and lesbians reported lower levels of happiness than married individuals but higher happiness levels than singles, irrespective of sexual orientation. As a group, partnered gays and lesbians did not report any meaningful differences in well-being than cohabiting heterosexuals. Additionally, partnered gay men and lesbians expressed higher mean levels of health and happiness than single gays and lesbians. The results of this study have led the researchers to conclude that romantic relationships—same-sex or opposite-sex—are beneficial to individual’s health and sense of well-being (Wienke and Hill,
It is important to understand the limitations of this study when attempting to generalize findings. The total number of partnered gays and lesbians included in this study is 282, while single gays and lesbians total 59, which, together, comprise only about 3% of the entire sample. The validity of the data used is unclear as respondents were pooled from several other surveys so results should be interpreted with caution.

**Reasons Partners Cohabit**

With cohabitation rates on the rise, researchers have examined the various reasons for cohabitation. It has been proposed that many young adults’ decisions to cohabit are likely influenced by their belief that cohabitation is a good way to test their relationships before tying the knot (Axinn & Thornton, 1992). A recent U.S. study used in-depth mail surveys of 120 heterosexual couples to address the question of what reasons couples give for living together (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009a). Additionally, the researchers explored within-couple gender differences in reasons for cohabitation. Although the generalizability of the findings is limited, the results demonstrated that the couples surveyed primarily endorsed reasons for cohabitation that indicated a desire for more time together, followed by convenience-based reasons, and then by testing the relationship. The data illuminated an association between the reason given of testing the relationship through cohabitation and more negative communication and physical aggression in the relationship; more symptoms of depression and anxiety and higher levels of attachment insecurity were also correlated with the reason given of testing the relationship. Survey responses revealed that partners in about 50% of the couples had the same primary reason for cohabitation. Statistically, men proved more likely than their partners to report cohabiting as a way to test their relationships while women were more
likely than their partners to report cohabiting out of convenience (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009a).

Seeking to further understand gender differences in meanings of and reasons for cohabitation, researchers have conducted studies to examine these interests. Huang, Smock, Manning, and Bergstrom-Lynch (2011) utilized focus groups and in-depth interviews with 138 individuals whose ages ranged from early 20s to mid-30s, living in Midwestern cities in two U.S. states. After coding and analyzing the data, the researchers uncovered three primary motives to cohabit: spending more time together, sharing expenses, and evaluating compatibility. Gender differences were observed in participants’ discussions of the disadvantages of cohabitation; men appeared to be more concerned with loss of freedom while women were apprehensive about the delays in marriage. Generally, the results of this study propose gender differences are present in the perceived role of cohabitation in the union formation process. Although the magnitude of information gained from the focus groups and the in-depth interviews varied, the data reveal societal information that should be further investigated with a broader scope of participants (Huang et al., 2011).

Despite improvements in data collection that permit more in-depth studies of cohabiting individuals, information obtained on relationship development is incomplete. Sassler (2004) utilized a qualitative research format to allow studied participants to express their own perceptions of their relationships, particularly when and why they decided to move in with their romantic partners. The data was collected from 25 cohabiters in the New York metropolitan area whose ages ranged from 20 to 33 years. The majority of participants emphasized financial considerations, convenience, or
changes in housing situations as reasons for moving in with their partners regardless of how long they had been dating. The researcher found that escalating commitment to partners and the relationship seemed to develop after moving in together rather than before. The author acknowledges that more in-depth and longitudinal research among a more inclusive selection of class and ethnic groups as well as regions is needed to better understand how transitions to co-residential unions occur and shape future union formation (Sassler, 2004). Although not all research in this area of study is in agreement regarding couples’ reasons for cohabitation, these studies have provided a greater understanding of the vast amount of reasons why some individuals choose to cohabit.

Cohabitation

The amount of research conducted surrounding the trend of premarital cohabitation in the last two decades has vastly increased. Although not all conclusions are agreed upon, one finding that all researchers concur with is that rates of cohabitation have increased dramatically. It is estimated that 50% (Bumpass & Lu, 2000) to over 60% (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004) of couples live together before marriage in the United States. In 2010, 7.5 million opposite-sex couples cohabited in the U.S. (Jayson, 2010). What was once viewed as deviant behavior is now a familiar circumstance. Explanations have been made and attempts to further understand this social phenomenon are currently taking place as the changes are swiftly occurring.

Many individuals believe marrying without previously living together will lead to poorer marital outcomes than if partners do cohabit before marriage (Jose, O’Leary, & Moyer, 2010). It appears, however, that this idea is not generally the case. One trend that is consistently shown among cohabiters is a greater likelihood of marital dissatisfaction
and dissolution. This phenomenon is what researchers have called the “cohabitation effect” (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002). The cohabitation effect refers to the tendency for couples who cohabit before marriage to have a greater chance of divorce. There are varying viewpoints as to what contributes to the cohabitation effect. Some experts believe it is the types of people that cohabit (Brown & Booth, 1996) while other scholars believe it is the experience of cohabiting itself that has damaging effects on a relationship (Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003).

Researchers have looked into the demographics of people who cohabit before marriage (Buchler, Baxter, Haynes, & Western, 2009; Dempsey & de Vaus, 2004; Smock, 2000; Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992). One perspective assumes that premarital cohabiters differ in some ways from noncohabiters and that these presumed differences increase the probability of poor marital quality, which leads to divorce (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Booth & Johnson, 1988; Hall & Zhao, 1995). In favor of this selection theory, some researchers suggest that cohabiters are usually a select group of people with specific characteristics that make them more likely to have unstable relationships (Booth & Johnson, 1988). In a review of sociological research devoted to cohabitation, Smock (2000) identifies that cohabitation often occurs among people who are slightly more liberal, less religious, and more supportive of egalitarian gender roles and nontraditional family roles. Additionally, Smock explains that “cohabitation tends to be selective of people of slightly lower socioeconomic status, usually measured in terms of educational attainment or income” (p.4). Another trend that has been identified suggests that individuals with poorer communication skills may have higher odds of joining into a cohabiting relationship (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002).
Some researchers argue that it is not the type of person who cohabits or the duration of the cohabiting relationship that increase the odds of future marital dissatisfaction and dissolution but rather the experience of cohabiting itself (Amato, & Rogers, 1999; Axinn & Thornton, 1992). According to this experience perspective, cohabitation changes people and their relationships in ways that weaken later marital quality and commitment (Smock, 2000). Through a 23 year, seven-wave study, Axinn and Thornton (1992) interviewed 867 families (mothers and children) in one U.S. metropolitan area and discovered that after a cohabitation experience, individuals are more accepting of divorce than they had been before cohabiting. According to the researchers, these attitudinal changes may have repercussions for future marital quality and stability. An additional longitudinal study found that married individuals who held more accepting attitudes toward divorce report declines in marital happiness and increases in marital conflict (Amato & Rogers, 1999). Using a national sample of 1,032 married individuals, the researchers utilized telephone interviews in three waves over a period of eight years to survey the respondents. According to the authors, the second and third waves were slightly unrepresentative of the national population due to sample attrition. The researchers suggest that divorce-accepting attitudes may threaten commitment to the norm of lifelong marriages as the assumption might be that it is easier to leave an unhappy marriage than to restore it.

It appears that couples’ perceptions of marital quality decline with the duration of the marriage (Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003). The occurrence of these perceptions is even more likely for couples who cohabit before marriage. According to Bumpass and Sweet (as cited in Brown & Booth, 1996), for about half of all cohabiting couples, it is a
relationship that lasts approximately two years and ends either through dissolution or marriage. This same study found that 90% of cohabiting couples end their cohabiting union after five years. For noncohabitors, marriage is a solidifying and novel event in the relationship. One can speculate that the newness and excitement is gone in a mature relationship where couples have lived together before matrimony.

Brown (2003) also discusses the effects of union duration on relationship quality between marrieds and cohabiters. Using data from the first wave of the U.S. National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), a nationally representative, multistage probability sample of 13,008 individuals who were interviewed in 1987 and 1988 (Wave I) and then 10,008 of the same individuals who were interviewed again in 1992 through 1994 (Wave II), the researcher compared relationship quality of 646 cohabiters and 3,086 married Black and White individuals in relation to union duration. During the first ten years, both types of couples experienced a drop in interaction, as well as happiness, with cohabiters having more of a decline. However, unlike married couples, cohabiters also experienced a decline in stability in association to duration of relationship. Brown (2003) proposes that such instability is associated with possible marriage plans. Many couples who cohabit plan on getting married which keeps the level of instability low. However, the longer the cohabiting union carries on without the intention to marry, the higher the instability; the same holds true for cohabiters planning to marry for an extended period of time without marrying. Skinner, Bahr, Crane, and Vaughn (2002) used data from the NSFH to compare the relationship quality of cohabiting, remarried, and married couples (5,642 individuals) over a five-year span. According to the researchers, one significant finding of their study is that long-term cohabiting couples are lower in happiness and
fairness when compared to their married and remarried counterparts. This finding is consistent with the results that Nock found in his study (as cited in Skinner, Bahr, Crane, & Vaughn) that married couples have higher levels of happiness when compared with cohabiting couples. The fact that less than 10% of cohabiting couples are staying together for a period of more than five years illustrates the occurrence of relationship instability.

Several studies investigate relationship quality in premarital cohabiting relationships compared to marital quality of other partners. It is evident that marrieds report a higher level of union commitment and satisfaction than cohabiters (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Stanley, Whitton, and Markman surveyed 908 individuals who were in engaged, married, or cohabiting relationships; no partners of the respondents were interviewed. The average age of the participants, all heterosexual, was 38 years. Replicating and extending previous findings regarding cohabitation, the researchers found that married participants were more satisfied with their relationships than participants in cohabiting relationships. In another study, Brown and Booth (1996) used data from the first wave of the NSFH to evaluate the similarities between cohabitation and marriage. The sample was restricted to Black and White Americans between the ages of 19 and 48 who were in cohabiting or marital relationships for a period of five years or less. With restrictions applied, the number of cohabiters used was 452 while marrieds totaled 1,576 participants. When measuring relationship quality, the researchers utilized five dimensions: happiness, fairness, disagreement, conflict management, and interaction. Controlling for relationship duration and demographic characteristics of the participants, Brown and Booth (1996) replicated findings through research that demonstrated that cohabiters, in general, report poorer relationship quality than married individuals.
However, studies that take into account the marriage intentions of cohabitors reveal that the differences between cohabitors with marriage plans and married partners are small or even nonexistent. Brown and Booth concluded that most cohabitors report plans to marry their partner, and these cohabitors are involved in unions that are not considerably different from marriages. The findings suggest that 76% of cohabitors are no different than married individuals with respect to relationship quality. Additionally, the relationship quality of marrieds and cohabitors with plans to marry are affected in the same way by the presence of children in the home as well as prior marriages and previous cohabitation experiences. Results from this study indicate that cohabitation is highly similar to marriage (Brown & Booth, 1996).

The majority of research surrounding cohabitation has been conducted in America. Wiik, Bernhardt, and Noack (2009), however, organized a study to explore commitment and relationship quality between nearly 3,000 cohabitors and married individuals in Scandinavia. Commitment and relationship quality were measured in terms of relationship seriousness, relationship satisfaction, and breakup considerations. In Norway and Sweden, the location of this study, cohabitation is more common than in most other countries and such a living arrangement is fundamentally equivalent to marriage as reflected by public policy and social acceptance. Wiik, Bernhardt, and Noack found that even in Scandinavia, relationship commitment and quality vary with the type of union. Like Brown and Booth (1996), married individuals reported higher levels of relationship quality and commitment than cohabitors without marriage plans. Correspondingly, substantial differences were noticeable between cohabitors with and without marriage plans. Cohabitors with marital intentions were far more serious,
satisfied, and less often had plans of dissolution (Wiik, Bernhardt, & Noack, 2009).

Kamp Dush, Cohan, and Amato (2003) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between cohabitation and marital quality and stability in respect to two different cohorts—when cohabitation was less common (1964-1980) and when cohabitation was more common (1981-1997). The researchers interviewed 1,425 spouses, which constituted a representative sample of the U.S. married population at the time. Telephone interviews were utilized in this study and a random procedure was put into place to select the husband or wife to be interviewed in each household. In hopes of understanding any cross-generational patterns or discrepancies, the researchers found little evidence that the negative consequences of cohabitation decreased over time as cohabitation became more conventional. Spouses in both cohorts who cohabited before marriage reported poorer marital quality and greater marital instability. When comparing the selection perspective and the experience of cohabitation perspective, the examiners proposed that such findings demonstrate support for the experience perspective. After controlling for demographic variables that are often connected to cohabitation, the researchers found that premarital cohabitation remained considerably related to marital happiness, marital conflict, and divorce. The authors posit that this finding is consistent with the experience of cohabitation perspective (Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003).

As reviewed, marital intentions for cohabiters plays a role in relationship satisfaction. Some researchers have looked into the age of cohabiting partners and how it affects relationship quality. Using data from the first two waves of the NSFH (1987-1994), King and Scott (2005) pooled 966 cohabiters to investigate age differences and reported relationship quality. The researchers discovered that a difference exists between
older and younger cohorts when looking at the effect of marriage plans on relationship satisfaction. With younger cohabiters, plans to marry are positively linked to happiness in their relationships. However, this is not the case for the older cohabiters, for whom the presence of marriage intentions makes no difference in the level of relationship quality or satisfaction. As stated, previous research has found that cohabiters who plan to marry do not differ from their married cohorts in levels of relationship satisfaction. Thus, the negative influence of a lack of marriage plans on relationship quality and stability appears to be most pronounced for younger cohabiters (King & Scott, 2005).

For young cohabiters, plans to marry are positively linked to relationship quality and satisfaction. Researchers find that this phenomenon often is linked to the reasons that young couples cohabit (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008), which will be looked at in greater detail later in this review. For younger cohabiters, cohabitation is an important part of assessing compatibility prior to marriage. This goal is viewed as less relevant to older cohabiters, who more often view cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, not as a precursor (King & Scott, 2005).

Some researchers have looked into understanding how the quality of cohabiting relationships generally differs among older and younger adults. In keeping with their hypothesis, King and Scott (2005) found that older cohabiters reported higher levels of relationship quality than younger cohabiters. The investigators examined many dimensions of cohabiting older adults. They found that older couples reported higher levels of fairness, more time alone with their partner, and fewer disagreements; they also were less likely to argue heatedly or violently and were less likely to report thinking that their relationship might be in trouble. King and Scott argue that the differences between
younger and older adults are most likely related to a combination of effects resulting from aging and the experiences that come along with it. They explain that for older cohabitators, fewer life stressors exist within their relationships. Older cohabitators were less likely than their younger counterparts to have relationship features which are often negatively linked to relationship satisfaction, such as raising children and the demands of a peaking career. Older cohabitators are at a stage in their life where they are less likely than younger and middle-aged couples to be dealing with stressful responsibilities that can negatively affect their relationship quality and satisfaction. However, older cohabitators may have other characteristics that have negative implications for relationship quality and satisfaction. As King and Scott (2005) explain, as people age, they are more likely to experience divorce, widowhood, and break-ups of previous relationships. These characteristics are all negatively associated with the quality and satisfaction of subsequent unions.

**Inertia Effect**

Generally, research tends to focus on the selection and experience perspectives as explanations for the cohabitation effect, which proposes that couples who live together premaritally will face higher rates of divorce. Despite the substantial amount of research that supports these rationalizations for the cohabitation effect, newer studies investigate variables that challenge some former findings. Specifically, more recent research has focused on relationship stability as a function of commitment (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004) as well as understanding cohabitation effects on relationships by distinguishing between couples that live together after engagement and those who steadily slide into a cohabiting relationship prior to engagement and eventually marry (Kline et al., 2004; Manning & Smock, 2005; Rhoades,
Interested in couples and their sense of relationship commitment as well as at what point in relationships some couples decide to cohabit, Kline et al. (2004) conducted a study with 136 couples to investigate these curiosities. Using a convenience sample of couples who were marrying within religious organizations in a particular U.S. metropolitan area, the researchers utilized questionnaires and videotaped problem-solving discussions to code the participants. When analyzing the data, the investigators divided the couples into three groups of cohabiters: those who lived together before engagement, those who lived together after engagement, and those who did not live together until marriage. Although the sample was limited in terms of generalizability, the results indicate that the before-engagement group reported higher levels of minor physical aggression, lower confidence, lower relationship quality, and lower interpersonal commitment than the after-engagement group and the at-marriage group. The research revealed that those who cohabited before engagement demonstrated the highest risk for relationship distress before marriage and that this risk was not likely to diminish after marriage—this idea is often referred to as the “pre-engagement cohabitation effect.” Additionally, the results of the study illustrated that there were few differences in risk for those who cohabitated only after engagement and those who waited until marriage to move in together. The researchers found that these effects were significant even after controlling for age, ethnicity, education, income, length of relationship, religiosity, and duration of premarital cohabitation (Kline et al., 2004).

The rationale behind much of the research conducted in the area of the pre-engagement cohabitation effect is based on theories of commitment that differentiate
between interpersonal commitment and constraint commitment. Interpersonal commitment is essentially the dedication one has to a relationship and the internal desire to remain committed to the relationship (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). On the other hand, constraints are forces that increase the costs of leaving a relationship and they may help explain why some people stay in unhappy relationships. Constraints can include a variety of factors and are different for each couple, but some include the view that an individual has few alternatives to one’s partner or relationship, concern for children’s welfare, social pressure, sharing a bank account or rent, and termination procedures which exhibit the difficulty of taking the steps to end a relationship (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). In sticking with a commitment framework, researchers suggest that some couples, who otherwise would not have married, end up married because of the inertia of cohabitation. Inertia theory suggests that sharing a household increases constraint commitment, which influences cohabiting individuals who are not engaged to eventually marry someone they might not have married if cohabitation did not take place (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Additionally, for couples who are aware of their relationship problems and utilize cohabitation as a test-run for marriage, increasing constraint commitment rather than dedication may lead to more relationship difficulties rather than resolutions (Kline et al., 2004). Understandably, there is a greater force of inertia with cohabiting relationships than with dating because constraints are typically more pronounced with cohabitation (e.g., shared lease or pet, pregnancy, joint finances). Unfortunately, although cohabitation generally increases constraints, dedication may not match this increase, but individuals will often still choose to stay in the relationship (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006).
Studies have investigated the validity of this proposed inertia effect. Using a national sample of 1,184 individuals (ages 18-35), Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2010) utilized questionnaires to assess participants’ levels of dedication and constraints. The researchers surveyed the individuals at three different times across the span of eight months. The results of the study demonstrated that the more material constraints a couple shares, the more likely they will stay in a relationship despite uncertainty about wanting to maintain the relationship in the future. The data revealed a ten percent increase in the odds of staying together for an additional material constraint in the relationship (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010). Studies, such as the previously mentioned one, provide evidence that the occurrences of sharing a pet, bank account, or other constraints promote the inertia effect on cohabiting relationships. Interestingly, this occurrence often occurs without partners being aware of it.

The majority of cohabitation data in the United States stems from large-scale quantitative surveys. In hopes of better understanding cohabitation formation, Manning and Smock (2005) utilized in-depth interviews with 115 young adults, ages 21 to 35, in Toledo, Ohio who had recent cohabitation experience. One of the most meaningful findings from their study is that cohabitation is often a gradual transition rather than a deliberated, clear-cut decision. The researchers conclude that cohabitation is often ambiguous and cohabiting partners commonly do not possess the same perception of the course they are on together (Manning & Smock, 2005). Additionally, the study reveals that for many couples, the process is typically unplanned and incremental, which exemplifies the idea of sliding, rather than deciding, from noncohabitation to cohabitation before completely realizing what has occurred.
With the idea of inertia in mind, more research has looked into the potential effects of pre-engagement cohabitation. For couples who decide to cohabit after engagement, it is reasonable to assume that inertia does not play a role in the decision to marry as the decision had been made prior to cohabitation. Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2009b) used a random national telephone survey of 1,050 men and women who had married within the past ten years to replicate earlier findings involving the timing of engagement and the premarital cohabitation effect (Kline et al., 2004). The results of the study reveal that those who cohabit prior to engagement report poorer quality marriages and greater likelihood of divorce than couples who cohabited only after engagement or not until marriage. Even when controlling for length of marriage, education, and religiousness, the effects remained existent. There were no significant differences between partners who cohabited after engagement and after marriage, which supports a pre-engagement cohabitation effect, but not a premarital cohabitation effect. Although the effects found in this study are small, they are more generalizable and applicable to an extensive amount of individuals than previous research (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009b).

**Summary**

The amount of research conducted surrounding the area of cohabitation has mimicked the increasing rates of cohabitation in the United States. The central finding of cohabitation research is that individuals who cohabit prior to marriage have higher levels of divorce than those who do not live together before marriage (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Smock, 2000). Intuitively, many cohabitation researchers strive to provide explanations for such a phenomenon; the experience perspective and the selection
perspective are generally the most accepted explanations (Amato, & Rogers, 1999; Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Booth & Johnson, 1988; Brown & Booth, 1996; Buchler, Baxter, Haynes, & Western, 2009; Dempsey & de Vaus, 2004; Hall & Zhao, 1995; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Smock, 2000; Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992). In addition to research exclusively concerning cohabitation, the reviewed literature also included the general process of romantic partnering, mate preferences, the family life cycle, and the association between relationship status and well-being.

The subsequent chapter will demonstrate how the reviewed research was utilized to create the graduate project. Specifically, the chapter will provide a description of the development of the project and the intended audience, as well as an outline of the guidebook.
CHAPTER 3: PROJECT AUDIENCE AND IMPLEMENTATION FACTORS

Introduction

The fact that cohabitation rates are on the rise is well-known. However, research reveals that the quality of cohabiting relationships is generally poorer than that of married partnerships (Brown & Booth, 1996; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Additionally, relationships in which cohabitation took place prior to marriage have a higher divorce rate than relationships that did not include premarital cohabitation (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002). As discussed in previous chapters, young adults (approximated ages 20-35 years) encompass the majority of current cohabiting couples (Solot & Miller, 2002). This graduate project is intended to provide assistance to young adult couples who are contemplating moving in together or are already cohabiting. According to the research, a guidebook or similar tool like this project is needed to aid such cohabiters.

This chapter will provide details surrounding the project audience and implementation factors of the guidebook. First, the process of developing the cohabitation guidebook will be discussed; next, the target population for this handbook will be identified; the qualifications of the professionals who will distribute the product will then be reviewed; lastly, an outline of the guidebook will be provided.

Development of Project

The creation of this project stemmed from a personal interest in couples therapy. While studying modes of counseling for couples, it came to my attention that not all of the couples I work with will be married and, in fact, a large percentage of them might be cohabiters who are not married. After researching current cohabitation statistics, I realized that couples who cohabit face many challenges and could benefit from some type
of system in which they are given information about cohabiting relationships as well as tips on how to defeat the hardships they face as cohabiters. The idea of a guidebook came to mind as I remembered previous clients of mine enjoyed handouts I had given them that they could read on their own time and at their own pace. Additionally, they could refer back to the text on the handouts as needed. My next step in the development process included searching for any existing guidebooks relating to cohabitation. My search revealed one exceptionally comprehensive book that included just about every aspect of cohabitation—from societal pressure faced by cohabiters to parenting without a marriage license to domestic partner health benefits. Due to the length and extensive amount of information given, I was dissatisfied with what I had found and was determined to create a succinct guidebook in which partners would be enthusiastic to read.

After discussing my idea with the chair of my project, I began researching as much information as I could about cohabitation. I educated myself on the basics of life partnering, mate preferences, as well as the family life cycle and where cohabitation fits into it. My focus on cohabitation research was why cohabiters have higher divorce rates than noncohabiters and what is different about their relationships than partners who did not live together prior to marriage. When discovering phenomena such as the “selection versus experience perspectives” and the “inertia effect,” I knew that educating couples about these ideas could be helpful to the success of their relationships. In addition to including this information in the guidebook, I decided it would be helpful to include basic relationship skills and tips, some specific to cohabiters. When deciding who I would tailor this guidebook to, I wanted it to be a population in which I could relate to as well as one that would greatly benefit from the information given. As I was researching
demographic data, I discovered that the majority of cohabiters are young adults. With the hope of being able to help as many people as possible, I decided it would be meaningful to create this guidebook with the young adult population in mind. Once all of my research was compiled and organized, I created an outline for the content of the handbook. I then completed the handbook by using material from research I obtained.

**Intended Audience**

The target population of this project is young adults who are in a committed relationship and are either cohabiting or thinking about cohabiting. The expected age of this population is approximately 20 to 35 years and does not pertain to specific ethnic groups. The readers of this guidebook need to have a basic to moderate grasp of the English language. Although the guidebook does not contain a specialized section for same-sex cohabiting partners, the information provided in the handbook is intended to be applicable to the majority of young adult cohabiting relationships, including same-sex.

**Personal Qualifications**

The cohabitation guidebook is intended to be a self-help tool for couples. This guide will be available for distribution at medical offices and in educational settings. If used in conjunction with couple’s therapy, a licensed mental health professional with experience in couples counseling should be providing the aforementioned services. The licensed professional must be proficient in the English language and be familiar with the content of the guidebook as well as understand the research behind the material provided.

The creator of this guidebook is a Marriage and Family Therapy graduate student who has conducted extensive research surrounding cohabitation in addition to the general process of romantic partnering. Particular information provided in the handbook was
inspired by the knowledge gained through the author’s counseling work with couples.

**Project Outline**

I. Cohabitation data & research findings
   a. Number of cohabiting couples in U.S.
   b. Cohabitation effect
   c. Researchers’ explanations for the cohabitation effect
   d. Pre-engagement cohabitation effect
   e. Inertia effect

II. Types of cohabiting couples
    a. How decisions are made to cohabit—intentional/unintentional

III. What to talk about before cohabiting

IV. Questions to ask surrounding big picture topics

V. Tips for having effective conversations about important topics

VI. Defeating the cohabitation effect: Tools for staying together
    a. Commitment to working for the relationship
    b. Acknowledge family of origin differences
    c. Conflict resolution skills/styles
    d. Reach out to others for help
    e. Stand up to marriage pressures
    f. Focus on what works for you as a couple
    g. Enjoy each other
    h. Celebrate milestones
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Summary

The purpose of this project was to develop a guidebook for young adult couples in the United States to assist with the process of cohabitation. According to the research, young adults (approximated ages 20-35 years) are currently the majority of cohabiting couples in the U.S. (Solot & Miller, 2002). In addition, Gallup polling reveals that America’s youth heavily support cohabitation (Lyons, 2004). With cohabitation rates continuing to rise and a younger generation who will soon be adults, it is reasonable to assume that this adolescent generation will contribute to an expected rise in percentages of people who cohabit before marriage. Unfortunately, in spite of the increase in the number of couples who cohabit, much research indicates that partners who live together prior to marriage—especially before an engagement or clear commitment—have a greater likelihood of relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution (Axinn & Thornton; Booth & Johnson, 1988; Brown & Booth, 1996; Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Smock, 2000).

In light of the daunting statistics regarding the success of cohabiting—“success” being defined as a cohabiting couple who stays together for more than five years—the handbook created is intended to educate consumers as well as provide guidance regarding the cohabitation process. Specifically, the guidebook will provide relevant research concerning the topic of cohabitation, distinguish between different types of cohabiting couples, propose topics for discussion prior to moving in together, and offer suggestions for making a cohabiting relationship successful.
Discussion

Evaluating the guidebook that was created was an important part of the development process. The evaluation consisted of actual young adult cohabitors reading the handbook and providing feedback. In addition to cohabitors, my project committee provided commentary and suggestions for the guidebook. Based on the feedback I received, minor changes were made. Most of the changes made surrounded choice of words and phrasing. It was important to me that the terminology used in the handbook would be understood by the majority of individuals with a high school education, which led to phraseology changes being made. Furthermore, suggestions of additional questions to ask before cohabiting were utilized.

Based upon my knowledge of this field and the feedback I received, I can conclude that the guidebook that I created will be a valuable tool for cohabitors and potential cohabitors. Attempting to tailor the information in the handbook to young adult cohabitors appears to be worthwhile based on cohabitation statistics. However, it is important to recognize that older cohabitors could benefit from the majority of information provided in the guidebook as well. In addition to being a self-help tool, the guidebook may reach its maximum effectiveness if used in conjunction with couples therapy.

Future Work

The creation of this project is intended to help as many individuals as possible. Availability on the Internet would increase the ability to reach the most people; therefore, it is my plan to upload the guidebook to a website after further review. The current goal is to fine tune the guidebook once it is actually utilized by cohabiting couples. Perhaps an
evaluation instrument will be designed and placed in the handbook so readers can give commentary and suggestions to enhance the material. Additionally, the guidebook will have to undergo revisions as new research is published.

Further research surrounding the umbrella topic of cohabitation is needed. Research has looked into reasons behind the cohabitation effect but some questions still remain. In examining why relationships in which cohabitation took place prior to marriage have higher divorce rates than relationships that did not include premarital cohabitation, researchers could investigate the possibility that one party might not have wanted to get married in the first place, then decided to give it a shot, which may have contributed to the dissolution of the marriage. Perhaps cohabiters are really people who do not want to get married at all. These are questions that remain unanswered but can be further studied through research.
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A BEGINNER’S GUIDE TO COHABITATION: HOW DO WE MAKE THIS WORK?

Created by Tara Rodriguez

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A NOTE TO THE READER

The information and tools provided in this book were chosen with young adult cohabiters in mind although they can be applied to most relationships. If a specific tool is particularly valuable to you, you can use it while you cohabit and later if you marry, even dropping it in someone else’s toolbox along the way. The quality of any relationship is important, far more important than a person’s legal marital status. In this book, the term “marriage” is intended to describe a union between two individuals that is legally recognized by a state government. This guidebook is not intended to tell you whether to cohabit or not, but rather to assist you and your partner in making that important decision.
COHABITATION DATA & RESEARCH FINDINGS

How many couples are cohabiting in the United States?
Between 1960 and 2012, the number of unmarried couples who lived together in the United States had grown from 450,000 to 7.5 million—more than a 1,500% increase.\(^1\) There are more cohabiters between 25 and 34 than any other age group. According to the U.S. Census, in 1999, 37% of cohabiters were ages 25 to 34 while 18% of cohabiters were between 15 and 25 years old.\(^2\) It is estimated that 50%\(^3\) to over 60%\(^4\) of couples live together before marriage in the United States.

What is the “cohabitation effect”?
One trend that is consistently shown among cohabiters is a greater likelihood of marital dissatisfaction and dissolution. This phenomenon is what researchers have called the “cohabitation effect”.\(^5\) The cohabitation effect refers to the tendency for couples who cohabit before marriage to have a greater chance of divorce.

What explanations have researchers given for the “cohabitation effect”?\(^6\)
There are varying viewpoints as to what contributes to the cohabitation effect. Some experts believe it is the types of people that cohabit while other scholars believe it is the experience of cohabiting itself that has damaging effects on a relationship.\(^7\) The first perspective assumes that premarital cohabiters differ in some ways from noncohabiters and that these presumed differences increase the probability of poor marital quality, which leads to divorce.\(^8,9,10\) In favor of this selection theory, some researchers suggest that cohabiters are usually a select group of people with specific characteristics that make them more likely to have unstable relationships.\(^9\) On the other hand, some researchers argue that it is not the type of person who cohabits or the length of the cohabiting relationship that increase the odds of future marital dissatisfaction and termination but rather the experience of cohabiting itself.\(^11,12\) According to this experience perspective, cohabitation changes people and their relationships in ways that weaken later marital quality and commitment.\(^12\)
**What is the “pre-engagement cohabitation effect”?**

Some research reveals that those who cohabit before engagement demonstrate the highest risk for relationship distress before marriage and that this risk is not likely to lessen after marriage—this idea is often referred to as the “pre-engagement cohabitation effect.” Researchers have discovered that there are few differences in risk for those who cohabit only after engagement and those who wait until marriage to move in together. The researchers found that these effects were significant even after controlling for age, ethnicity, education, income, length of relationship, religiosity, and duration of premarital cohabitation.\(^{13}\)

**What is the “inertia effect”?**

Researchers suggest that some couples, who otherwise would not have married, end up married because of the inertia of cohabitation which relates to the idea of constraint commitment. Constraints are forces that increase the costs of leaving a relationship and they may help explain why some people stay in unhappy relationships. Constraints can include a variety of factors and are different for each couple, but some include the view that an individual has few alternatives to one’s partner or relationship, concern for children’s welfare, social pressure, and sharing a bank account or rent.\(^{14}\) Inertia theory suggests that sharing a household increases constraint commitment, which influences cohabiting individuals who are not engaged to eventually marry someone they might not have married if cohabitation did not take place. Additionally, for couples who are aware of their relationship problems and use cohabitation as a test-run for marriage, increasing constraint commitment rather than dedication, may lead to more relationship difficulties rather than resolutions.\(^{13}\) Understandably, there is a greater force of inertia with cohabiting relationships than with dating because constraints are typically more pronounced with cohabitation (e.g., shared lease or pet, pregnancy, joint finances).
TYPES OF COHABITING COUPLES

Some couples like to have an idea of how they relate to other partners. If you wish, it is up to you and your partner to identify what kind of cohabiters you are. Although the following list may not include every type of cohabiting couple, below are the most common types of cohabiters. Some couples may fit into more than one category.

Instant Cohabiters

These individuals are most likely to relate to the idea of “love at first sight.” Instant cohabiters move in within the first few weeks (or days) of dating. Although this may not be the wisest approach, it works for some couples.

Accidental Cohabiters

These people did not intend to live together—it just happened. After spending consecutive nights at one’s place, the other person never left. Similar to instant cohabiters, these relationships usually start off intense and passionate with partners making quick decisions.

Escapist Cohabiters

These cohabiters begin living together because they want to leave another living situation, not because of a conscious decision to share a home. Although people of any age can be an escapist cohabitor, it is most typical for young adults to move in with a partner to escape their parents’ residence.

Evolving Cohabiters

The process of moving in together for evolving cohabiters is characterized by a slow, almost unnoticeable accumulation of one partner’s possessions at the other partner’s home. There may never be an official moving day or a specific answer to how long the couple has lived together because it was a gradual moving process.

Situational Cohabiters

These cohabitations are initiated by a combination of practical or logistical issues that may or may not relate directly to the couple’s relationship. The most common matter for these cohabiters is saving money on rent. However, there are certainly other ways for situational cohabiters to get their start to sharing a home.

Deliberate Cohabiters

These individuals see cohabitation as a big move and are not afraid to wait a while. They thoroughly discuss the decision with each other, and possibly friends and family, to be sure they are making the right decision.
What to Talk About Before Cohabiting

If you already live with your partner, this section can still apply to you as it is not too late to talk about these things. It is important to establish what living together means to each one of you. Not assuming what the other person thinks and feels is critical in this process (and your relationship in general). The specific reasons that you and your partner decide to move in together are not always the most important aspect of this process, but rather, that you and your partner agree on those reasons and understand one another’s point of view. A questionnaire that you and your significant other can use to get this conversation started is shown on pages 8-9.

Questions to ask surrounding “big picture” topics

The process of moving in with a romantic partner is often unplanned and incremental, which exemplifies the idea of sliding, rather than deciding, from noncohabitation to cohabitation before completely realizing what has occurred. The better you and your partner know each other, the better your chances of making a good decision about living together. It is important to explore your expectations about issues such as career, commitment, marriage, children, money, where to live, living space and housework, and general lifestyle and goals. Below are some questions to explore either on your own or with your partner surrounding these “big picture” topics.

Commitment and Marriage

- Is it important for us to be married? If not, will I be happy without being married?
- What is your general attitude toward marriage?
- What type of commitment to each other are we willing to make?
- If I have hesitations, are they about marriage, or this particular relationship?
- If marriage is important to me, what expectations do I have about a time frame for marriage?

What if...

Our viewpoints on marriage don’t match up?

It is important to understand how each individual feels about marriage and if there is potential for marriage in this relationship. If one partner does not feel the need to be married while the other does, it is important for the partner who desires to be married to consider if not being married, but in a committed relationship, is enough for you. As a couple, think about how each person’s desires and feelings will be respected.
What if…
We don’t feel the same way about having children?
If one partner does not want to be a parent while the other does, it is important to discuss how this matter will be handled. Will the individual who wants to have kids sacrifice their desires for the relationship? Will the partner who does not want to have children change their mind? Is it best to part ways because desires surrounding this matter are so strong? These answers are what you will figure out as a couple. The most important thing to remember is that each person’s feelings are respected and neither partner is pressured into something they do not want.

Children
➢ Do I want to have children? If so, how many? When?
➢ Could I see myself having children with my current partner?
➢ If we cannot have children but want to, will we adopt?
➢ What expectations do we have of each other as parents?

Career
➢ What kind of work do you want to do? Is that different than your current job or educational path?
➢ When do you plan to retire, and what will you do then?
➢ Is it important to you that I work?

Money
➢ Do you like to save or spend money?
➢ How was money handled in your family growing up?
➢ How does your family’s way of managing money affect the way you handle your money?
➢ How will financial obligations be managed in our relationship?
➢ How will household bills be divided? Will we have a joint or separate account?
➢ Am I comfortable with my partner knowing my salary?

What if…
One of us wants to have separate bank accounts while the other wants a joint account?
Money is a common area of friction for couples. If there are opposing views of accounts, try to understand why each of you feels the way you do. Once the reasons are understood—not necessarily agreed with—discuss ways to satisfy each partner. Is one partner willing to give up their account preference? Could each of you maintain a separate account and have a joint account?

Lifestyle and Goals
➢ Do I prefer to stay at home or go out?
➢ What are my social expectations of my partner?
➢ How much individual space do I need?
➢ What would I like to experience or accomplish in my lifetime? Do I see myself accomplishing these things with my partner?
Living space and Housework

- What do you like/dislike about the space you currently live?
- If my partner is moving into my place, how will we merge our belongings?
- How do you imagine your living space will be different once you are living together?
- Do I consider my living style very clean, messy, or somewhere in between?
- What household tasks do you like the least, and which ones don’t you mind as much (if any)?
- How will you divide housework in a way that feels fair to both of you?

Geography

- Where would you like to live?
- Would you rather be in a city, the suburbs, or a rural area?
- Do you want to live in different places during different stages in life (e.g. engagement, when you have children, retirement, etc.)
- Is it important to you to be either close to or far from extended family?

What if...

We don’t agree about where to live?

Having a place to move into is an important part of moving in together. If one partner wants to live in the city while the other person wants to live in a different area, discuss the pros and cons of living in each place. Explain to your partner why you feel the way you do about living in a particular location. From your discussion, think of a solution that will be tolerable to both partners. It is important to remember that you do not have to stay in one place.
## WHY I WANT TO LIVE TOGETHER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To make sure we are compatible</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To share living expenses</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To take the next logical step in our relationship</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get to know each other better</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have a better sex life</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To spend more time together</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To save on rent/mortgage payments</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get away from my roommates</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To take a step toward getting married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have our own space</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To move out of my parents’ house</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>To get away from my ex</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>To live in a nice place</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make a commitment to each other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To take care of each other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be less lonely</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To live in the same city</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be closer to work</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To convince others to take our relationship more seriously</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To build our trust with each other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get a better sense of what you do each day</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have someone help me with my kids</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help you with your kids</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>To be able to afford to buy a house</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>To save on phone bills and transportation costs to visit each other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be closer emotionally</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>To have someone to talk to everyday</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because we have more fun when we are together</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it is better than any of my other living options right now</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because we already spend most of our time at each other’s places</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because we are engaged</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because we will probably get engaged soon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because we will be getting married soon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because we may never or cannot marry</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other reasons:</td>
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Using this worksheet can help couples begin a conversation about their reasons for wanting to move in together and determine if taking that step is the best decision for them at that moment. If you already live together, this questionnaire can assist you in becoming closer to your partner by gaining further understanding of your partner’s thoughts through discussion about each other’s answers. You may want to photocopy these pages so that you and your partner can fill them out separately and then compare notes.

Adapted from Solot & Miller, 2002.
TIPS FOR HAVING EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT IMPORTANT TOPICS

*Know your mood before beginning a conversation.*

Your attitude and emotional state can affect your thinking and ability to have a calm and effective conversation. It is helpful to not have important conversations when you are feeling tired, overloaded, or stressed about something unrelated to your partner.¹⁶

*Make enough time.*

Important conversations deserve plenty of time. Do not bring up a serious topic in line at the grocery store or right before leaving for work. It is imperative to allow enough time to properly discuss a certain subject to make sure each person has had their chance to state their views as well as understand the other person’s ideas.²

*Use “I statements.”*

The most important outcome for a conversation about moving in together is for each partner to have a good sense of the other’s thoughts and feelings. To stay focused on this outcome, use “I statements” as you talk to allow your partner to understand your thoughts, feelings, and reasons behind them. Statements like, “I wish we got to spend more time together” help conversations move forward rather than statements like, “You must not love me if you don’t want to live with me.” Using “I statements” encourages each participant to remain open without feeling attacked.¹⁶

*Use the Speaker-Listener Technique.*

This method is not necessary for everyone but it can be helpful especially with intense, difficult topics. Also referred to as the active listening model,¹⁶ this technique provides a very structured way for each person to take a turn talking while the other listens, and then to confirm the listener understood by paraphrasing what the speaker said, without responding or adding personal commentary. The following is an example of what active listening looks like:

A: It bothers me that I have to ask you daily to take your clothes out of the bathroom
after you shower.

B: You’re saying that you get frustrated when I leave my clothes in the bathroom until you ask me to pick them up. Is that right?

A: Yes. I wish I didn’t have to remind you to take your clothes with you after you shower. It makes me feel like your mother.

B: I can see how having to remind me about picking up my clothes makes you feel like my mom and why that aggravates you.

Paraphrasing convinces the talker that they were heard and understood, or gives them the opportunity to clarify what they meant. This technique is advantageous because it slows down the pace of the conversation, a valuable thing when emotions are running high, and it forces you to pay attention instead of planning the counterpoint.

Have more than one conversation.

Every issue does not need to be resolved after one conversation. In fact, in some relationships, certain issues do not have resolutions. If you need to end a talk without a resolution—because you run out of time or energy, you need to gather more information, or you want more time to think about it—it is important to schedule a time when you will return to discussing the topic.16

DeFeating the CoHABitATioN Effect: TOOLS FOR StayInG TOGETHER

Of course, knowing your partner before you decide to move in and having deep conversations regarding important issues is crucial to a successful relationship, but there are more tips to help keep your cohabiting relationship on track.

Make a commitment to working for the relationship.

In order to stay together, you will need a willingness to do the work it takes to maintain the relationship, especially in times of distress. The work—or effort that you and your partner make to nurture your relationship—will stem from and lead to a strong internal sense of why it is important to you to be together for the long-term. This idea of working can be thought of as “loyalty to the relationship.”2 Even if you do not feel comfortable promising you will be together forever, you can still agree on a certain minimum level of effort you each
would make before giving up. If you and your partner do not feel like you have enough commitment yet, you can make an effort to develop more dedication, or to identify the barriers that have kept you from developing it. It is crucial to move the threat of “moving out” a safe distance from you and to keep it there when you hit a rough patch. It is difficult to relax and trust in a relationship where the potential for breaking up is always hanging over your heads. Make a commitment to yourself and your partner that you are willing to tolerate some difficult times knowing that better ones are likely to return.2

**Acknowledge family of origin differences.** A great deal of relationship stress arises from differences—one partner believes in doing something one way, the other a different way, and both feel passionately about it. Rather than arguing which way is right, it is often better to try to understand the roots of your differences. Whatever the source of friction in your relationship, you and your partner may be able to trace your differences back to your families. It is then your challenge to agree on your own customs as partners, possibly mixing and matching from the best of both traditions.

**Resolve conflicts like pros.** Research suggests it is not the number or type of conflicts that lead some couples to break up, but the way partners interact when conflicts arise.16 You cannot control *whether* you have conflicts, but you can control *how* you deal with conflicts when they inevitably happen. Studies reveal that while calmly talking out conflicts works great for some couples, yelling at each other works just as well for others. Researchers found that no one style is necessarily better than others as long as it works for both people in the partnership. Whatever the style, a willingness is needed to tackle problems as they arise rather than waiting for many small problems to build up.16

In addition to the tips given in the “Having Effective Conversations” section, here are a few more suggestions you can utilize during conflicts.

- **Separate issues from feelings.** The early stage of resolving a conflict is a time for dealing with emotions.2 It is essential to recognize the difference between feelings and issues. You cannot mediate a feeling (e.g., how your partner felt when you forgot to pick up their dry cleaning), only express it and give it time to change. However, you can mediate issues, or concrete problems (e.g., the act of forgetting to pick up your partner’s dry cleaning).
-Stay outcome-oriented.
A usual goal of resolving conflicts is to prevent the same issue from continuing to be a problem in the future. After you know how each of you is feeling and have a clear sense of what the issues are, it is time to shift to possible solutions. Once you are calm and put your heads together, you may come up with a resolution neither of you had considered before.

-Work toward creating a fair solution.
It is important to remember that a fair solution does not always mean it is one that is perfectly equal. For instance, it may not be fair to equally divide the housework if one person enjoys doing certain household chores more than the other.

-Make peace with unsolvable problems.
According to John Gottman, 70% of couples’ issues are perpetual issues rather than solvable ones. What is important is that couples learn how to talk about these issues without expecting them to be solved. Rather than feeling like failures for not being able to resolve every issue they disagree on, people in happy long-term relationships find ways to live with their differences.

Reach out to others for help.
Unmarried cohabitors often do not receive the same kind of social support as married individuals. Finding a supportive community, whether parents or friends, is often a critical factor for relationship success. If such individuals are not available, seeking guidance from a couple you know who has been together for a long time can be an option. Therapists and counselors are also a good source of help at all stages of relationship, not just in crisis.

Stand up to marriage pressures.
Couples who have been together for a while and live together often hear the question, “When are you going to get married?” It can be discouraging and frustrating to deal with this pressure, especially when it comes from family. It can be helpful for you to educate
your pressurers to understand your views on not being married and how you would like to be treated regarding this matter. You can also find someone who’s experienced the same kind of pressure and does not mind listening to you vent. It is important to be patient. It is not uncommon for the marriage pressure to fade, especially the longer you and your partner stay together.2

**Focus on what works for you as a couple.** As cohabitators, it is important to let go of “shoulds” and the idea of “normal.” What matters is not whether you are average, but whether you and your partner agree on what works for you. For instance, some of these tools may not feel right for your relationships—that’s okay. Whatever works for you and your partner is most important.

**Enjoy each other.** Making time for the best moments of being in a relationship often requires a conscious effort. The best way to make sure you have time for each other is to schedule it. Enjoying life together does not always require a big commitment of time or money. Sometimes it is just a matter of finding little ways to connect with each other, either spontaneously or as part of your regular routine.

**Celebrate milestones.** Taking the time to celebrate your anniversary is a way to mark important or significant passages of time, take pride in the years you have spent together, and anticipate many more. Anniversaries can be a challenge for unmarried partners since it is hard to know what date to pick. Whichever date is chosen, it should be one that is meaningful to both partners and one in which traditions can be developed if desired.
RESOURCES


12Smock, P.J. (2000). Cohabitation in the United States: An appraisal of research themes,


