Cohabitation, Marriage, and Remarriage
A Comparison of Relationship Quality Over Time

KEVIN B. SKINNER
Growth-Climate Education and Counseling Center
STEPHEN J. BAHR
D. RUSSELL CRANE
VAUGHN R. A. CALL
Brigham Young University

During the past four decades, the number of couples who are cohabiting or remarried has increased substantially. In 1980, cohabiting couples comprised about 3% of all married and cohabiting couples. This percentage increased to 5% in 1990 and to 7% in 1998 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). Of all U.S. women between the ages of 15 and 44, 41% have cohabited (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999).

In 1970, 31% of all current marriages had at least one spouse who had been previously married. This percentage increased to 44% in 1980 and to 46% in 1988 (Chadwick & Heaton, 1999). The proportion of marriages in which both spouses had been previously married increased from 16.5% in 1970 to 23.4% in 1988 (Chadwick & Heaton, 1999).

As the numbers of cohabiting and remarried couples have increased, researchers have begun to explore the quality and stability of those relationships. When compared with married couples, cohabiting couples appear to be somewhat less happy and more likely to dissolve their unions (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Nock, 1995; Thomson & Colella, 1992). Marriages preceded by cohabitation have higher dissolution rates than do other married couples (Bennett, Blanc, & Bloom, 1988; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; DeMaris & Rao, 1992; Krishan, 1998; Lillard, Brien, & Waite, 1995; Newcomb, 1986; Nock, 1995; Teachman & Polonko, 1990). However, the pattern for cohabiting couples is not uniform. Brown and Booth (1996) reported no difference between the relationship quality of married couples and cohabiting partners who plan to marry. Brines and Joyner (1999) found that the dissolution rate of marriages preceded by long-term cohabitation was not significantly different from the dissolution rate of married couples without premarital cohabitation. Thus, cohabiting couples with long-term plans might be similar to married couples in relationship quality and different from other cohabiting couples.

This study examines how relationship quality differs among married, remarried, and cohabiting couples and expands previous research in three major ways. First, we examine long-term cohabiting couples. There has been little study of long-term cohabiting couples even though Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin (1991) observed that 46% of all cohabiting relationships lasted more than 2 years and 20% lasted more than 5 years. It is important to understand the nature of these long-term cohabiting relationships and how they are similar to and different from marriages and other cohabiting couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Brines & Joyner, 1999).

Second, we use longitudinal data over a 5-year period to look at cohabitation, marriage, and remarriage developmentally. Although Brown and Booth (1996) found no difference between the relationship quality of married couples and cohabiting couples who planned to marry, they did not follow those cohabiting couples to determine which ones actually married and to what extent their marital quality differed from other married couples. With Wave II of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), we compare cohabiters who married with cohabiters who did...
not marry and compare both of them with married couples who had not cohabited. Furthermore, the longitudinal data permit us to control for relationship quality at Wave I. Thus, any differences that we observe at Wave II are not attributable to initial differences in relationship quality.

Third, we compare three different types of relationships: cohabitating, married, and remarried couples. Within married and remarried couples, we differentiate those who have and have not cohabited. Among cohabiting couples, we contrast continuous cohabiters from cohabiters who have married. The latter comparison enables us to distinguish those in which cohabitation is a prelude to marriage from those who cohabit as an alternative to marriage. If we did not include remarriages, we would miss a significant proportion of couples because remarriages comprise 46% of all married couples (Chadwick & Heaton, 1999) and more than 40% of divorced persons cohabit postmaritally (Wu & Balakrishnan, 1994).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Cohabitation may influence the later relationship quality in long-term married, cohabiting, and remarried couples in three major ways: (a) social learning, (b) differential selection, and (c) the social context in which cohabitation takes place.

SOCIAL LEARNING

According to social learning theory, individuals learn attitudes and values in communication within intimate groups (Klein & White, 1996; Sutherland, 1939; Turner, 1970). Attitudes and behaviors are reinforced or altered by the roles people play and the rewards and punishments they receive (Akers, 2000). Through the experience of cohabitation, one may learn attitudes that detract from later relationship quality, such as low commitment to marriage and acceptance of divorce as a solution to marital problems.

Axinn and Thornton (1992) found some support for the social-learning explanation. After controlling for attitudes prior to cohabitation, they observed that attitudes toward divorce became less traditional after the experience of cohabitation. With attitudes more accepting of divorce, those who have cohabited may be less willing than others to accept certain types of relationship problems, or they may be more likely to choose divorce as a solution to marital problems.

In a similar way, the experience of going through a divorce might change one’s attitudes about what is tolerable in a marriage. These changes in attitudes may affect the quality of a subsequent marriage and increase the acceptance of divorce as a solution to marital problems. Consistent with the social-learning explanation are data showing that those who have experienced a divorce are more likely to have favorable attitudes toward divorce (Amato & Booth, 1991). The experience of dissolving a cohabitation relationship might have similar effects on attitudes toward relationship commitment.

DIFFERENTIAL SELECTION

Differential selection occurs from differences between cohabiters and noncohabiters in personal and social characteristics that existed prior to the relationship. Compared to noncohabiters, cohabiters appear to be less conventional and less committed to intimate personal relationships (Gage-Brandon, 1993; Lewis, Spanier, Atkinson, & LeHecka, 1977; Nock, 1995; Thomson & Colella, 1992). Some researchers have suggested that cohabiters are more critical of their interpersonal relationships than noncohabiters (Booth & Johnson, 1988; Brown & Booth, 1996). Cohabiters tend to have poorer communication and coping skills, which inhibit relationship quality (Newcomb, 1986; Stets, 1993; Thomson & Colella, 1992). People with below-average communication skills are likely to have a higher-than-average rate of relationship dissolution, whether or not they cohabit (Blumel, 1992). Similarly, individuals who are less conventional and less committed to relationships may be more willing than others to dissolve a relationship, whether it be a cohabiting or marital relationship. Furthermore, people who are less conventional might enter cohabiting relationships more frequently than people who are more conventional and committed to marriage as an institution (Newcomb, 1986). Individuals who are religious may be less likely to cohabit, and religiosity tends to have a positive association with marital quality (Blumel, 1992; Newcomb, 1986).

Some of the same arguments made above about cohabitation may apply to remarriages. Individuals who divorce may have poorer communication skills than those who do not divorce. When they remarry, they bring those same communication skills to the remarriages, which would result in a higher probability of dissolution in remarriages than first marriages. Any differences between married and remarried persons could be due to selection based on the personal and social characteristics that existed prior.

...
to the current relationship or to unresolved issues from a previous marriage that may negatively affect the quality of a subsequent relationship.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

The lack of social support for cohabitation may affect the quality of cohabiting relationships. Because marriage is the normative preference, cohabitors might be less integrated into society and receive less support from family and friends than couples who do not cohabit. Rank (1981) noted that lack of parental support affected cohabiting couples negatively. Lack of support may hurt relationship quality and lead to more frequent divorce among married couples who have cohabited than among married couples who have not cohabited. Consistent with this model, Dykstra (1993) reported that cohabitors are less likely than others to receive familial support. Skolnick (1981) observed that in the emerging patterns of cohabitation, there is no role for parents and kin in the decision to cohabit; the result is that family and kin support for cohabitation may be small.

Bumpass and Sweet (1989) found that 50% of all cohabiting relationships changed within 2 years and that by 5 years, 90% of cohabiting relationships had changed (change refers either to relationship termination or to the transition to marriage). Societal pressure toward marriage and against cohabitation, especially for long-term cohabiting relationships, might explain some of the instability of cohabiting relationships.

Because of current norms and laws, couples who cohabit for long periods of time may be faced with uncertainty, which may inhibit investments in the relationship (Brines & Joyner, 1999; Durst, 1997). In marriages, couples invest in the relationship because of the long-term commitment. With a long-term commitment, they are likely to develop task specialization based on differential preferences and competencies. In cohabiting relationships, task specialization may threaten the strong norms of autonomy, individualism, and equity (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Brines & Joyner, 1999). The result is less investment and lower quality in cohabiting than marital relationships.

The contextual explanation applies to remarriages if social support is weaker than in first marriages. In addition to reduced social support, remarriages have other issues, such as stepchildren, child support, and exspouses, that create a context for diminishing relationship quality in remarriages.

Existing data on remarriage appear to be consistent with social context explanation. Remarriages tend to have somewhat higher dissolution rates than first marriages (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977; Bumpass & Sweet, 1972; Clarke & Wilson, 1994; McCarthy, 1978; Sweet & Bumpass, 1987; White & Booth, 1985a). However, data on marital quality suggest that there is little difference between the marital quality of first marriages and remarriages. In a meta-analysis of 16 studies, Vemer, Coleman, Ganong, and Cooper (1989) reported slightly higher marital satisfaction among first marriages than remarriages, but the differences were very small. Using four different measures of marital quality, White and Booth (1985a) found no significant differences between first marriages and remarriages. However, remarriages with stepchildren had lower scores on marital quality. They concluded that the presence of stepchildren creates strain that negatively affects remarriages. Peek, Bell, Waldren, and Sorell (1988) found that stepfamilies scored significantly lower than first-married couples on 9 of 15 standard family functioning measures, including lower scores on cohesion and interaction skills. Overall, available evidence indicates that the social context of remarriages, primarily the presence of stepchildren, creates stress that affects marital quality.

In sum, according to the social-learning explanation, we would expect that married couples who did not cohabit or remarry would have higher relationship quality than both of the other types of couples. Because of learned attitudes and behaviors, the experience of cohabitation would negatively affect relationship quality. If the selection explanation is correct, we would expect that there would be no differences among cohabiting, married, and remarried relationships after relevant social characteristics are controlled. Differences in relationship quality would be due to the prerelationship characteristics rather than the cohabitation experience. If the social context model is correct, we would expect that continuous cohabitors and couples who have been married multiple times would have lower relationship quality than couples who cohabited prior to marriage or couples who did not cohabit. The reason is the lack of social and normative support for those who continue to cohabit.

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

According to existing research and theorizing, it is important to control for four social characteristics that may affect relationship quality and the choice to cohabit. First is the existence of a child. Cohabiting couples are less likely than married couples to have a child (Spanier, 1983; U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). Cohabiting couples with a child may be more likely to marry than cohabiting couples without a child. Furthermore, couples with a child are less likely to dissolve their relationship than couples without a
child (Heaton, 1990). In addition, the presence of a child may detract from time together as a couple (White, Booth, & Edwards, 1986).

A second relevant factor is the duration of the relationship. Because cohabiting relationships tend to have shorter durations than marital relationships, duration must be taken into account (Bumpass et al., 1991). Furthermore, some have argued that marital quality may decline with age (Glenn, 1998; White & Booth, 1985b).

Third, education is an important social characteristic that might affect marital quality and attitudes about cohabitation and marriage. Blumel (1992) reported that individuals with higher levels of education tend to have higher levels of marital satisfaction and somewhat lower rates of divorce.

Fourth, some researchers have reported gender differences in relationship quality (Fowers, 1991; Thompson & Walker, 1989), whereas others found no male-female differences in relationship quality (Nock, 1995). Brown and Booth (1996) observed gender differences in perceived disagreements and fairness but not in perceived marital happiness or interaction time. Given these findings, it is important to control for presence of children, relationship duration, education, and gender when comparing the relationship quality of cohabiting and married couples.

METHOD

SAMPLE

We compared the relationship quality of cohabiting, remarried, and married couples over a 5-year span using data from the NSFH. The NSFH is 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 and 1993 (Wave II). The NSFH used a complex multistage sampling design that oversampled cohabiting couples and Blacks in addition to other characteristics. About 77% of the original respondents were interviewed in Wave II. In our analysis, we used data weights to compensate for oversampling and survey nonresponse.

Our analysis included married, remarried, or cohabiting couples who were together at both Wave I and Wave II. Because our purpose was to compare relationship quality among the three relationship types over time, we eliminated all cohabiting, remarried, and married couples who separated or divorced between Wave I and Wave II. A total of 5,642 individuals met our criteria of being in a relationship with the same person at both Wave I and Wave II of the NSFH.

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

We examined four dimensions of relationship quality: (a) happiness, (b) communication, (c) fairness, and (d) disagreements. These are commonly used measures of relationship quality, and four of the five indicators were used by Brown and Booth (1996). We did not include the fifth construct used by Brown and Booth (conflict management) because the items did not correlate adequately with each other, and in a factor analysis, they did not load adequately on any of the other four dimensions of relationship quality. We used factor analysis as a guide in constructing an index for each dimension. The 10 items that measured different aspects of relationship quality were factor analyzed using oblimin rotation. This type of rotation was used because the four dependent variables all measure a different aspect of relationship quality and are not necessarily completely independent. A summary of the factor analysis is shown in Table 1 (the item for communication was excluded in the final factor analysis and from Table 1 because it did not load on any of the other three dimensions). The factor analysis results were consistent with the work of Brown and Booth. For each construct, we summed the raw scores to form an additive scale. For comparison purposes, we also constructed the scales using the factor score coefficients from the factor analysis. The correlations between the additive scales and the factor score scales were extremely high (happiness = .989, fairness = .990, disagreements = .993). In all our analyses, we used the additive scales.

Happiness. This construct was based on three questions. First, individuals were asked to make an overall assessment of their relationship happiness. Second, we included their responses to two questions regarding their satisfaction with the understanding they received and the love and affection they received. Responses ranged from 1 (very unhappy) to 7 (very happy), which resulted in total happiness scores between 3 to 21, and higher scores indicated more happiness with the relationship (X = 17.13, SD = 3.99).

Communication. This concept was measured by a single question about how often during the past month they were alone with each other talking or sharing an activity. The responses ranged from 1 (never) to 6 (almost every day), and higher communication scores represented more
ANALYSIS

Dummy variable multiple regression was used to estimate differences among the six couple types in relationship quality. We computed a dummy variable for each of the six relationship types, and in the regression analysis, the married–no cohabitation group was the reference category. The other five dummy variables were entered as predictor variables in the regression equations. The intercept in each equation was the mean relationship quality score for the reference category, net of the other variables in the equation. The regression coefficient for each group showed its deviation from the mean relationship quality score of the reference group. We computed one regression equation for each of the four measures of marital quality. Gender, presence of a child, educational level, and relationship duration were included as control variables along with the dependent variable at Wave I. For example, when analyzing happiness at Wave II, happiness at Wave I was entered in the regression equation. Any differences among the six groups cannot be attributed to the control variables or to differences in relationship quality at Wave I.

The mean relationship duration of the six couple types varied from 4.9 years among Group 6 (cohabitation Wave I, married Wave II) to 26.3 years among Group 1 (married once, no cohabitation). Although we entered duration as a control in the regression equations, as an additional check we recomputed all of the regression equations after selecting only couples who had been together fewer than 10 years. The findings for this subgroup were almost identical to those reported below.

We computed the regression equations with and without the three dummy variables for ethnic status (with White as the reference category). Because ethnic status did not affect the findings, we did not include it in the results reported below.

RESULTS

HAPPINESS

Table 2 shows the unstandardized regression coefficients for each of the measures of marital quality. The intercept shows the mean of the reference group, which was the married couples who had not cohabited. For relationship happiness, the coefficients for each of the other five groups were negative, indicating that each had a happiness score lower than the reference group. The continuous cohabiting couples had the lowest happiness score and were almost 2 points lower than the score for the married couples who had not cohabited.

We also computed the equation with the continuous cohabiters as the reference group. Each of the coefficients of the five relationship types was statistically significant (p < .05), indicating that the happiness score for continuous cohabiters was significantly lower than the score for each of the other relationship types.

Duration of the relationship and education were not related to relationship happiness. Females reported lower happiness scores than males, those with children in the household had lower scores than those without children, and happiness at Wave I affected happiness at Wave II.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Happiness</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Fairness</th>
<th>Disagreements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>12.31*</td>
<td>3.24*</td>
<td>5.92*</td>
<td>4.69*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married once, cohabited prior to Wave I</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>-0.15*</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married two or more times, no cohabitation</td>
<td>-0.47</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married two or more times, cohabited</td>
<td>-0.43*</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.16*</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabited at Waves I and II</td>
<td>-1.80*</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>-0.49*</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabited Wave I, married Wave II</td>
<td>-1.14</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child in household at Wave II</td>
<td>-0.85*</td>
<td>-0.48*</td>
<td>-0.16*</td>
<td>0.51*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of relationship (years)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
<td>-0.03*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (grade)</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.70*</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.13*</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness at Wave I</td>
<td>1.01*</td>
<td>0.27*</td>
<td>0.28*</td>
<td>0.37*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication at Wave I</td>
<td>4,457</td>
<td>4,816</td>
<td>4,204</td>
<td>4,219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness at Wave I</td>
<td>.147</td>
<td>.183</td>
<td>.113</td>
<td>.237</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n. 0 = male, 1 = female.
*p < .05.
TABLE 1  
Factor Analysis of Nine Items Measuring Relationship Quality: Wave II of the National Survey of Families and Households

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>Satisfaction with love received</td>
<td>.921</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Satisfaction with understanding</td>
<td>.920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall happiness of relationship</td>
<td>.863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreements</td>
<td>Disagreements over time spent together</td>
<td>.836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagreements over sex</td>
<td>.817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagreements over money</td>
<td>.740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>Perceived fairness in working for pay</td>
<td>.751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived fairness in spending money</td>
<td>.742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived fairness with household chores</td>
<td>.693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalues</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.304</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: The extraction method of the factor analysis was principal components analysis, and the rotation method was oblimin with Kaiser normalization. Three components were extracted, one for each construct. The loadings for each component of the structure matrix are shown, omitting all loadings that are .400 or less. Using a varimax rotation, the size of the factor loadings were very similar to those shown in this table, and the basic pattern of coefficients was the same.

talking and activity time with one’s partner during the past month ($\bar{x} = 4.72, SD = 1.46$).

Fairness. Relationship fairness was measured by three items that asked about fairness in household chores, working for pay, and spending money. The question asked, “How do you feel about the fairness in your relationship in each of the following areas?” The responses were 1 (very unfair to me), 2 (somewhat unfair to me), 3 (fair to both), 4 (somewhat unfair to my partner), and 5 (very unfair to my partner). To construct a linear fairness scale, we recoded these responses as follows: 1 (very unfair to me or my partner), 2 (somewhat unfair to me or my partner), and 3 (fair to both). This is similar to how others have scaled this variable (Brown & Booth, 1996), and it enabled us to construct a linear score of overall relationship fairness as perceived by one partner. Although female perceptions of fairness were lower than male perceptions (8.05 compared to 8.24), we controlled for gender in the analysis. When the three fairness items were summed, the scores ranged between 3 and 9, and higher scores indicated higher perceived fairness in the relationship ($\bar{x} = 8.15, SD = 1.17$).

Disagreements. This variable was based on three questions that are common areas for disagreements in couples. The questions were, “How often, if at all, in the past year have you had open disagreements about each of the following?” The areas included were money, spending time together, and sex. The item responses ranged from 1 (never) to 6 (almost every day), which produced scale scores between 3 and 18. Higher scores indicated more disagreements in the relationship ($\bar{x} = 5.73, SD = 2.70$).

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

The major independent variable in this study was type of relationship, which had six categories according to the relationship status of the respondents. Persons in Group 1 ($n = 3,774$) were married to the same person at Wave I and Wave II, were in their first marriage, and did not cohabit prior to their marriage. The people in Group 2 ($n = 863$) were the same as Group 1 except they cohabited with their spouse prior to their marriage. The respondents in the two remarried groups (Groups 3 and 4) had been married two or more times and were married to the same person at Wave I and Wave II. Those in Group 3 ($n = 119$) did not cohabit prior to their marriage, whereas those in Group 4 ($n = 670$) cohabited before their current marriage. Group 5 ($n = 99$) included all those who were cohabiting with the same person at Wave I and Wave II. Finally, Group 6 ($n = 117$) included cohabiters at Wave I who had married their partner by Wave II.

In addition, we included presence of a child, relationship duration, gender, educational level, and ethnic status as control variables. Their inclusion ensured that any differences among the six types of couples were due to relationship type rather than other social characteristics. Gender and presence of a child were both dichotomous variables (male = 0, female = 1; no child in household at Wave II = 0, child in household at Wave II = 1). Education was measured using the number of grades completed at Wave I and ranged from 0 to 20 ($\bar{x} = 13.06, SD = 3.09$). Relationship duration was the number of years they had been in the relationship at Wave I ($\bar{x} = 21.5, SD = 14.35$). Ethnic status was coded into four dummy variables, using the following categories: Black ($n = 425$), Hispanic ($n = 401$), White ($n = 4,736$), and other ($n = 77$). Because there were not sufficient numbers of Asians or American Indians in the sample, they were grouped into the other category. All the couples in this analysis reported that they remained together from Wave I to Wave II.
cepted as a stage in relationship development, and cohabiting couples may not be stigmatized if there is an expectation that marriage will occur.

According to Brines and Joyner (1999), the normative and legal support given to marriage may decrease uncertainty and encourage individuals to invest more in the relationship than if they are cohabiting, particularly if the cohabitation is long term. The result of greater investment would be increased cohesion and relationship satisfaction. In addition, the task specialization that occurs in a long-term relationship may be less threatening and more acceptable in a married couple than in a cohabiting couple. Continuous cohabitators may receive less social support and legal support and feel less certain about their relationship. This may result in less investment in the relationship and more concern if relationship tasks become specialized between the partners.

The data are consistent with the principles outlined by Brines and Joyner (1999) and with the findings of Nock (1995) that cohabitators have lower levels of relationship commitment and happiness than comparable married individuals. (Nock only compared cohabitators and married couples.) We found that the NSFH cohabitators who married were more similar in relationship happiness to married couples who never cohabited than to long-term cohabitators.

Brines and Joyner (1999) outlined characteristics of cohabitation that may help explain the present findings. They observed that cohabitators may be more likely than husbands and wives to emphasize individualism, autonomy, equality, and equity. The strong ideals of autonomy and individualism may inhibit joint investments in the relationship. The normative and legal uncertainty of cohabitation, along with its unspecified time horizon, may further decrease the incentives to invest in the relationship. Structural equality may be costly to maintain over time because it requires frequent monitoring and because talents, preferences, and norms may continually pull couples toward specialization in division of labor.

Given that equity is an important ideal among cohabiting couples (Brines & Joyner, 1999), perhaps the most surprising finding was that long-term cohabitators had significantly lower fairness scores than the other five relationship types. Compared to married and remarried couples, long-term cohabitators perceived less fairness in working for pay, spending money, and household chores. Future researchers could explore why these differences exist, particularly how cohabitation may be linked to equality and task specialization, as implied by Brines and Joyner (1999).

REFERENCES

COMMUNICATION

The second column in Table 2 gives the coefficients for couple communication. None of the coefficients were significantly different from the reference group, although couples who were married once and had cohabited prior to marriage were lower on couple communication. Overall, the amount of communication a couple had was not affected by the relationship type.

Couples with a child in the household had lower communication scores than couples without a child, and communication scores at Wave I affected communication scores at Wave II. Those with longer durations and those with higher levels of education had slightly higher communication scores. The gender of the respondent did not affect the communication score.

FAIRNESS

An analysis of fairness is shown in Column 3 of Table 2. The couples who had been cohabiting for the 5-year period were significantly lower on fairness than the married couples who had not cohabited. The remarried couples who had cohabited were slightly lower than the reference couples. None of the other relationship types had coefficients that were significantly different from the reference group (married couples who had not cohabited).

We again recomputed the regression equation with the continuous cohabiting as the reference group. All of the five coefficients were statistically significant, indicating that perceived fairness was significantly lower among couples who had been cohabiting continuously than among the other five types of couples.

Females reported lower fairness scores than males, and couples with a child had lower scores than couples without a child in the household. Duration of relationship had a small but significant positive impact on fairness, education did not affect fairness, and fairness at Wave I affected fairness at Wave II.

DISAGREEMENTS

Column 4 of Table 2 shows the regression coefficients for disagreements. None of the coefficients were significant statistically, indicating that individuals in the six relationship types were similar in perceived levels of disagreements.

Perceptions of disagreements did not differ by gender, but if there was a child in the household, disagreements were somewhat higher. Disagreements were slightly lower among those with more education and longer relationship durations. As expected, the level of disagreements at Wave I affected the level of disagreements at Wave II.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The major finding of our study was that long-term cohabiting couples were significantly lower than the other five couple types on happiness and fairness. This was found after controlling for gender, education, duration of the relationship, the presence of children, ethnic status, and relationship happiness or fairness at Wave I. The continuous cohabiting couples did not differ from the other couples in the amount of couple communication or disagreements.

On all four measures of marital quality, couples who cohabited and then married were similar to married couples who had not cohabited. One minor exception to this finding was that married couples who had cohabited prior to Wave I were somewhat lower on communication than married couples who had not cohabited.

Compared to married couples who had not cohabited, remarried couples who had cohabited were significantly lower on happiness and fairness, although the differences were not large. On all four measures of marital quality, remarried couples who had not cohabited were similar to married couples who had not cohabited.

Overall, the females reported less happiness and less fairness than the males. The impacts of education and relationship duration tended to be small, although disagreements were slightly less among those with more education and longer relationship durations. Couples with a child in the household tended to have less happiness, communication, and fairness and more disagreements than couples without a child in the household.

The findings do not support the selection explanation because differences between the long-term cohabiters and married couples were not explained by prerelationship characteristics. The social-learning explanation is not consistent with much of the data in that those who cohabited and married were no different from married couples who did not cohabit.

The data were most consistent with the social context explanation. Those who cohabited and married could not be distinguished from the married couples who did not cohabit. This suggests that cohabitation is ac-


