The Effect of Cohabitation on Marital Dissolution

Katie Mohr

Adler Graduate School
Abstract

The number of couples who cohabitate before marriage has drastically risen in the past forty years and it continues to rise. This review of literature focuses on the effect that cohabitation has on marital dissolution. Twenty-eight articles on the topic of cohabitation and marital dissolution, published between 1980 and 2008, are examined. Countries studied include the United States, Canada, Australia, as well as a number of European countries. Overall, the studies found a positive correlation between couples who cohabitate before marriage and subsequent marital dissolution. Throughout the research, the selectivity theory was more heavily supported than the causation theory. It must be noted that when looking at the more recent studies, there is generally a negative correlation between cohabitation and marital dissolution when distinct, important factors are accounted for.
The Effect of Cohabitation On Marital Dissolution

Cohabitation has increased dramatically since the 1970’s. There has been a substantial increase in couples who cohabitate before marriage in a very short period of time. When looking primarily at the United States, the U.S. Bureau of Census (as cited in Svarer, 2004) found that 523,000 individuals were cohabitating in 1970. By 1997, this number jumped to 4,125,000. In 27 years, there was nearly an 800 percent increase in individuals cohabitating.

Cohabitation began as a very uncommon and nontraditional practice for couples. Over the years, this trend has changed. Brown (2005), Bumpass and Lu (2000), and Smock (2000) found that more than one half of persons in their twenties and thirties have experienced cohabitation (as cited in Brown, Sanchez, Nock, & Wright, 2006). A couple cohabitating has become more commonplace across the country and around the globe. Cohabitation has now become a normative stage of life, as well as a normative stage of courtship.

Divorce rates have also spiked considerably in recent years. Dumas & Peron (1992) found that since 1970, Canada’s divorce rates have soared fourfold (as cited in Hall & Zhao, 1995). In the United States, Americans are spending less time married than ever before (Casper & Bianchi, 2002; Espendshade, 1985; as cited in Brown et al., 2006). As a result, researching a link between the rising rates of cohabitation and divorce rates was a natural next step.

Early speculation suggested that cohabitation would have a negative effect on divorce rates. It was thought that couples who cohabitated before marriage would have a
trial period to see if they were compatible and successful living together. The couples who did not live together successfully would terminate before marrying, while the couples who lived together successfully would carry on into a stable, lasting marriage (Newcomb & Bentler, 1980). Research began taking a closer look at this theory and found that the data suggested otherwise.

Two major alternative theories emerged as research on the relationship between cohabitation and marital dissolution began: selectivity and causation. The idea of selectivity argues that people who choose to cohabitate are a select group with distinguishing characteristics from the group that chooses not to cohabitate. Some distinguishing characteristics of the group that chooses to cohabitate include lack of commitment to marriage, lack of stability, divorce acceptance, individualism, lacking good relationship skills, less conservative mind-set about marriage, as well as greater expectations about the quality of a union (Teachman 2003, Boyle & Kulu 2006). Selectivity argues that the high levels of marital dissolution would not be directly attributed to the effect of cohabitation, but cohabitation selects individuals who are not as committed to lasting relationships (Schoen, 1992).

The idea of causation argues that the experience of cohabitation itself negatively impacts people’s views about marriage, therefore making them less committed to the institution. Living together before marriage corrodes the belief that marriage is permanent (Teachman, 2003). This theory would find that through cohabitation, people come to believe and accept that relationships are temporary (Boyle & Kulu, 2006). Cohabitators would in turn be more likely to end the marriage if feeling unhappy.
In this review of literature, a closer look is taken at the association between cohabitation and marital dissolution. Twenty-eight articles, published between the years 1980 and 2008, are closely examined. Twenty-three of the articles focus primarily on the relationship between cohabitation and divorce. Five of the articles broaden the focus of cohabitation and marital dissolution to include very distinct and important factors: division of labor, premarital sex, pure relationships, covenant marriages, and second marriages. While there are many other factors researched and taken into consideration throughout the articles (e.g., age difference, education, personality), these five are important and deeply ingrained in each of the four research articles.

Overall, the studies found a positive correlation between cohabitation before marriage and subsequent marital dissolution. The selectivity theory was more heavily supported throughout the research, compared to the causation theory.

*General Effect of Cohabitation on Marital Dissolution – Positive Correlation*

In the majority of the articles, a positive correlation was found between cohabitation and marital dissolution. However, there were some exceptions when certain variables were controlled for. DeMaris & Rao’s study (1992), with a total sample of 3,300 men and women, examined whether cohabitators compared to noncohabitators would have a higher likelihood of marital dissolution. After using a continuous-time proportions hazard model to analyze data, a positive and significant effect of cohabitation on marital dissolution was found. They estimated that cohabitators have a 46 percent higher risk of dissolution than noncohabitators.
The study also created four categories of cohabitation in order to test the possibility that any one of these would affect the result of cohabitation on marital dissolution. The four categories tested include: couples who did not cohabitate, couples who only cohabitated with their spouse, couples who cohabitated with others as well as their spouse, and cohabitating with individuals other than the spouse. After analyzing the four types of cohabitation, it was found that compared to noncohabitators, every type who cohabited was significantly more likely to have a marriage end in dissolution.

Similar to the previous study, Lillard, Brien & Waite (1995) looked for a link between premarital cohabitation and marital dissolution. The study used data from the Longitudinal Study on the High School Class of 1972 and focused on the female respondents in the 1986 follow-up survey. As with the previous study, it was found that there was both a positive and significant correlation between cohabitating and marriage disruption. One major limitation of these data was that they only included persons who reached their senior year of high school. Therefore the study does not take into account those who never reached their senior year due to dropping out of school.

This study also tested the theory of selectivity on its data sample. The theory of selectivity argues that those who choose to cohabitate before marriage are a select group with distinguishing characteristics and are not as committed to lasting relationships (Schoen, 1992). Its findings were consistent with the theory of selectivity. The major characteristic of selectivity noted was not having a strong commitment to the institution of marriage by those who chose to cohabitate prior to marriage. The study argues that those who have a weak commitment to the institution of marriage are the most likely to eventually dissolve a marriage (Lillard et al., 1995).
Results of this study were comparable to those of Thomson & Colella (1992) in that couples who cohabitated before marriage showed a greater probability of divorce and a lower commitment to marriage as an institution than couples who did not cohabitate before marriage. These results were found through a cross-sectional survey administered through the National Survey of Families and Households.

Some major limitations of this study must be taken into consideration. Couples were excluded from the data if either or both had cohabitated or married before. Thus, the data set only included those who were cohabitating or marrying for the first time. Another major drawback is that the study relies on the respondents’ “perceived” chances of divorce. The study does not take into consideration the actual divorce rates (Thomson & Colella, 1992).

Booth & Johnson’s study (1988) again focuses primarily on the relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital success. Telephone interviews were conducted with a national sample in 1980 and 1983, focusing on comparing couples who have and have not cohabitated before marriage. The study used multiple classification analysis in analyzing the data. Findings were that cohabitation is positively related to marital disagreement and probability of divorce. Results of this study rejected the idea of cohabitation as training for marriage. The study also disputed the idea of selectivity and found no support for this hypothesis (Booth & Johnson, 1988).

Countries other than the United States also found a positive link between cohabitation and marital dissolution. A study conducted in Canada between April and June of 1984 discovered that women have higher probabilities of dissolution if they had cohabitated before their first marriage (Balakrishnan, Vaninadha, Lapierre-Adameyk, &
Krotki, 1987). Married women who cohabitated beforehand, compared to women who did not cohabitate before marriage, were shown to have a 50 percent higher risk of marriage dissolution. Data collection involved a phone interview through the Canadian Fertility Survey and focused on women between the ages of 18 and 49. Proportional hazard models were used to assess the data. Luxhoj & Shyur (1997) define the proportional hazards model as an approach for reliability estimation in which a baseline hazard function is modified multiplicatively by applied stresses.

A later study in Canada focused on determining the strength of the cohabitation effect and tested the idea of selectivity. Data were collected from the 1990 General Social Survey, which was different than the previous Canadian study. Once information was collected, analysis was done using the proportional hazards regression procedure (PHREG). Hall & Zhao (1995) found that in any year of marriage, there was twice the risk of divorce for cohabitators compared with noncohabitators. This represents a strong cohabitation effect.

In order to test the hypothesis of selectivity, four sociodemographic variables were included. Four of the variables incorporated were presence of stepchildren, age homogamy, marital status homogamy, and presence of parental divorce (D. R. Hall & Zhao, 1995). Homogamy refers to the unification of individuals with like characteristics. These four variables were used to reflect the idea of selectivity. After the four sociodemographic variables were included, Hall and Zhao (1995) still found that a significant cohabitation effect remained.

Consistent with previous studies, a study in Sweden also found a consistent, positive relationship between cohabitation and marital dissolution. This Swedish study
took place between March and May of 1981, and included a sample of women between the ages of 20 and 44. The sample size was quite large. 4,300 ever-married women were interviewed. Again, a hazards model approach was taken. Compared with previous studies (and countries) at that time, a large portion of the women (almost two-thirds) cohabitated with their husband prior to marriage (Bennett, Blanc, & Bloom, 1988).

Three distinct results came from the Swedish study. The most striking result may be that for women who cohabitate before marriage with their spouses, the dissolution rate is almost 80 percent higher than for noncohabitators. When comparing premarital cohabitators only, women who cohabitate for three years or more have a 54 percent higher rate of marital dissolution than those who cohabitate for shorter times. The last result shows that of those whose marriages have remained intact for eight years or more (both cohabitators and noncohabitators), there appears to be equivalent dissolution rates (Bennett et al., 1988).

A British study from Berrington & Diamond (1999) is consistent with past studies regarding higher risk of marriage dissolution associated with cohabitation. Yet this study differs in results regarding length of premarital cohabitation from the previous study by Bennett et al. (1988). This longitudinal study collected information from the 1958 British Cohort, with all of the cohort members having been born during one week of March in 1958. The cohort has been followed up from birth to ages 7, 11, 16, 23 and 33. The results of analyses support earlier findings in Britain. Premarital cohabitators have a higher risk of marital dissolution (Berrington & Diamond, 1999).

Length of premarital cohabitation seems to affect men and women differently. Women who cohabitate for a short time and for two years or more have a higher risk of
marital dissolution. Women who cohabit between three months and two years have a lower risk of marital dissolution. Men are one and a half times more likely than women to experience marital dissolution if they cohabit for long periods of time (Bennett et al., 1988).

A study conducted in Australia also focuses on how the amount of time cohabitating prior to marriage affects subsequent separation. The data were collected from the 1986 National Survey of the Australian Family Project. Information was gathered from 2,547 women between the ages of 20 and 59 through personal interviews. The research found that cohabitating for as few as six months with a future spouse increased a woman’s future risk of separation (Bracher et al., 1993).

Kiernan (2001) also chose to look at the link between premarital cohabitation and marital breakdown. Kiernan (2001) is a unique study in that it gathered data from fifteen member States of the European Union. The data were collected from the Eurobarometer Surveys conducted in 1996. Women between the ages of 20 and 39 were given opinion surveys spanning a range of topics.

Kiernan (2001) found that there was little variation in the risk of marital disruption according to the length of premarital cohabitation. Kiernan went on to find that specific countries (Sweden, Germany, and France) had a higher risk of marital dissolution than others when there was premarital cohabitation (Switzerland, Finland, Austria, and Norway).

Liefbroer & Dourleijn (2006) also concentrated on how premarital cohabitation affects marital stability by using data gathered from sixteen European countries. Data
were collected from Fertility and Family Surveys between 1988 and 1998, with the focus being women born between 1953 and 1967.

Data analysis found that when breaking down the sixteen countries into four distinct regions, union dissolution varied considerably. In the Nordic countries, union dissolution can be described as high and rising with fifteen percent experiencing dissolution within five years of the start of a union. In Western Europe, the pattern is described as medium and rising, with just below ten percent experiencing dissolution within five years. Central and Eastern Europe are comparable and characterized as medium and fairly stable. Lastly, Southern Europe finds three percent of all unions dissolving within five years and can be described as low and rising (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006).

When focusing on how cohabitation impacts union dissolution, results from this study show higher risks of union dissolution for cohabitators and couples who cohabitated before marriage compare to those who married directly without premarital cohabitation. Distinctively, in societies where cohabitation is a small minority, the study found that premarital cohabitators run an elevated risk of union dissolution compared to couples that enter marriage without prior cohabitation (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006).

Hohmann-Marriott (2006) explored a new link associated with cohabitation and marital dissolution. Hohmann-Marriott (2006) looked at how responses to beliefs about the division of housework affected the stability of couples; couples cohabitating, couples who cohabitated before marriage, and those who never cohabitated prior to marriage. Among cohabitators, expectations seemed to be more egalitarian and nontraditional
compared to noncohabitators. Problems may arise from the differences in values, especially when it comes to the division of housework.

Data were collected from the National Survey of Families and Households. Wave I information was gathered in 1987-88, while Wave II information was gathered in 1992-1994. This longitudinal study is ideal because it has information concerning both partners in the relationship (Hohmann-Marriott, 2006).

This research found that couples are more likely to end their relationship if they do not share the same expectations about the division of household labor. When taking into account cohabitators versus noncohabitators, noncohabitators were more likely to stay in the union even if they held divergent views about housework compared to their partners. Hohmann-Marriott pointed out that this may be because married couples and cohabitating couples respond differently to a partner with an opposing viewpoint.

Teachman (2003) also extended previous research between premarital cohabitation and marital dissolution to include premarital sex. Data were gathered in 1995 from women in the United States, ages 15-45. The ending sample size was large, including 6,577 women.

Similar to previous studies, results showed that women had a higher likelihood of marital disruption if they have had premarital sex or cohabitated before marriage. Yet the study also found that there was not an increased risk of divorce for women whose premarital relationships (cohabitation and sexual) were limited to their husbands (Teachman, 2003). A higher risk of marital dissolution was only found for women who had two or more intimate premarital relationships.
A more recent study by Kalmijn, Loeve & Manting (2007) went on to include the impact of couples’ income dynamics related to premarital cohabitation and marital dissolution. The article specifically explored if the income position of the wife has a different effect on the dissolution probability for cohabitating couples versus married couples. Data were distinctively collected from the Income Panel Study, which is tax record data from the Netherlands.

Results show that the wife’s relative earnings has a moderately positive effect on separation. Data analysis found that there was a higher risk of separation as the wife’s portion of the household income increases. When focusing on women who make more income than their husbands, the findings were the same in that for both married couples and cohabitating couples, higher income shares of the wife are connected with higher dissolution rates (Kalmijn et al., 2007).

Kalmijn et al. (2007) conducted one of the few recent studies including same-sex couples in its data analysis. Analysis was done on 731 same-sex unions in the Netherlands. Results show that more equal income shares were linked with a lower risk of dissolution in same-sex couples.

Schoen (1992) examined the link between premarital cohabitation and marital instability by studying women who were born between 1928 and 1957. The women were divided into six, five-year cohorts, beginning from 1928-32 through 1953-57. The study focused on comparing women who entered first marriages having never cohabitated before with women who entered their first marriages with their first cohabitating partner. The study found couples that cohabitated before their first marriage were less stable than
couples that had not cohabitated before their first marriage. The study reports their findings to be strongly consistent with the selectivity explanation.

This research, when examining probabilities of dissolution specific to duration of marriage and cohort, finds a trend opposite from its previous results. When focusing on the youngest two cohorts (1948-52 and 1953-57), the risk of dissolution for marriages where the partners cohabitated before marriage generally disappeared. These two groups had the highest levels of cohabitation, thus suggesting that the less select nature of cohabitators played a role in reducing the risk of marital disruption. Schoen (1992) found that the higher the proportion of the population that cohabits, the less opportunity for selection to take place.

It is important to note some limitations of Schoen’s (1992) research. The data were collected from only women, therefore examining only one perspective. The study also narrowly focused on women who were married for the first time to their first and only cohabitating partner.

An important research study by Phillips & Sweeney (2005) focuses on premarital cohabitation and marital disruption and the impact of race and ethnicity. This U.S. study found, based on race and ethnicity, mixed results including both positive and negative correlations between premarital cohabitation and marital disruption.

Data for this study were collected from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, with a sample size of 4,547 female participants between the ages of 15 and 44. Results from this study found that premarital cohabitation is positively and significantly correlated with ensuing marital destabilization among White women in the United States. No positive or significant correlation was found among Black or Mexican American
women. In fact, premarital cohabitation was associated with increased marital solidity among Mexican Americans (Phillips & Sweeney, 2005).

**General Effect of Cohabitation on Marital Dissolution – Negative Correlation**

Though there are many articles supporting the positive link between premarital cohabitation and marital dissolution, there are a smaller number of studies that have found just the opposite. Many of these articles seem to be more recent; yet one article stands out, having been published in 1980 when the trend of cohabitation before marriage was beginning to gain popularity.

Contradictory to other research on the subject, at the time, Newcomb & Bentler (1980) discovered no positive, reliable correlations between premarital cohabitation and divorce rates. Data were collected in two waves through questionnaires over a four-year span. When looking at cohabitators, 36 percent had divorced (in the four-year span) compared to 26 percent of noncohabitators. This difference was not statistically significant in the research.

When focusing on the duration of cohabitation, the lowest divorce rates (21%) were found among couples living together between three and ten months before marriage. The higher divorce rates are for those who cohabitate less than three months (50%) or longer than 11 months (42%) before marriage (Newcomb & Bentler, 1980). It is important to note that one major limitation of this study was the sample size. Only 68 marriages were compared in this research.

Georgellis (1996) went on to find that longer premarital cohabitation periods have both a positive and significant effect on the duration of first marriages. Data were
gathered from a sample of 2,318 women between the ages of 18 and 55. The information was collected from the 1991-92 General Household Survey distributed throughout the United Kingdom.

A more recent study from Denmark showed that premarital cohabitation and risk of divorce were negatively correlated. Svarer (2004) found that there was a lower risk of divorce for couples who cohabitated before marriage. Data were collected from 7,327 individuals between 1980 and 1995. Of the 7,327 marriages, 79 percent were preceded by cohabitation.

Differing from almost all studies on premarital cohabitation and marital dissolution, this research found a lower dissolution risk for long-duration cohabitators. It is noted that the difference in results may be due to more open moral codes of the Danish. Living together before marriage seems to not carry a social stigma in Denmark, compared to other countries studied (Svarer, 2004).

Another recent study in the United States found that cohabitation accounted for little difference in rates of divorce, once other factors were controlled. The main factors controlled in the study included delinquency, religion and culture. Results supported the selectivity hypothesis compared to the causation hypothesis (Woods & Emery, 2002). Unlike other research, minorities were not excluded from the sample population before and after data collection took place.

Information was gathered on both males and females who were 14 to 21 years of age, as of January 1, 1979. Before personal characteristics were controlled, a small yet significant relationship was found between premarital cohabitation and divorce. Once
these factors were included, the results of the study supported the hypothesis of selectivity (Woods & Emery, 2002).

An up-to-date study was conducted in Austria, which found that when selectivity effects were controlled, the risk of marital dissolution for those who cohabitated before marriage was significantly lower than for those who married without cohabitating together beforehand (Boyle & Kulu, 2006). This study focused primarily on geographical variations within a country and whether this affects marital dissolution related to cohabitation or non-cohabitation.

Data were gathered from the Austrian Family and Fertility Survey conducted in 1995-1996. Three specific settlement types were disaggregated and examined, including the capital city of Vienna, Austria’s remaining cities and towns, and rural areas. Boyle & Kulu (2006) found that strong selection effects were present in each of the three settlement categories.

Similar results were found in a 1999 study conducted by Bruderl, Diekmann, and Engelhardt. Data were used from the West German Family Survey conducted in 1988. A random sample of the West German population, between the ages of 18 and 55, was interviewed and detailed partnership histories were gathered. An initial analysis of data found that cohabitation prior to marriage increases the risk of subsequent divorce. Upon controlling for self-selection using a bivariate probit model, it was found that cohabitation decreases the risk of divorce. One positive aspect of this study is that the data collected included couple-specific variables, compared to many studies that include only single respondent variables.
Teachman & Polonko (1990) also found that when accounting for a specific variable (total length of union), there was no difference in marital disruption between couples who chose to cohabit and couples who did not choose to cohabit. Before total length of union was accounted for, marital instability was found to be increased by premarital cohabitation (Teachman & Polonko, 1990). In Lillard et al. (1995), data were also taken from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972. Data from the fifth follow-up in 1986 were primarily used.

An older study conducted in Canada found that when length of marriage and age at marriage were controlled for, premarital cohabitation is positively linked with marital stability. When both variables are controlled, the chances for marriages not ending are much higher for cohabitators than noncohabitators. Before each of these variables was accounted for, the same results were found. The analysis of data solidly proposes that cohabitating with a spouse prior to marriage has a substantial, positive effect on continuing marriage (White, 1987).

Data for the study conducted by White (1987) were collected in 1984 through the Family History Survey. Phone interviews were carried out on both males and females between 18 and 64 years of age.

This very unique study incorporated covenant marriages in the research of cohabitation and marital dissolution. This five-year study conducted in Louisiana used a longitudinal data set focusing on couples who married between 1998 and 2000. The sample included both standard and covenant marriages (Brown, Sanchez, Nock, & Wright, 2006).
Covenant marriages are marriages that couples enter into with a different set of rules than standard marriages. Couples must go to counseling prior to marrying, sign a “Declaration of Intent,” and understand that there are very strict limits on both entering and exiting the marriage. If couples want to separate they can do so only by proving fault which could include examples such as abuse and felony (Brown et al., 2006). Covenant marriages are explored to see if they make a difference when looking at the relationship between cohabitation and divorce.

Brown et al. (2006) found that when looking at both standard and covenant marriages, divorce rates overall are equivalent between cohabitating standard marriages, noncohabitating standard marriages, and covenant marriages that included cohabitation. Overall, divorce rates are the same, even though covenant marriages are more difficult to dissolve. Even more striking was that no link was found between cohabitation and divorce. It was noted that among recent marriage groups, the association between cohabitation and divorce may be becoming weaker.

Another unique research article from Hall (1996) looked at the link between premarital cohabitation, divorce and pure relationships. Hall (1996) described pure relationships as relationships that do not follow the norms, formal institutions or traditions of the general society or traditional marriage. Telephone interviews were administered to women between the ages of 18 and 49 living in Canada in 1984. Testing was done with the Cox regression method of proportional hazard modeling.

Results of the study showed that those who highly approved of pure relationships have a 75 percent greater chance of getting divorced than those who only moderately approve of pure relationships. When this is controlled for, premarital cohabitation fails to
Cohabitation before marriage may no longer be relevant to the event of marital dissolution (D. Hall, R., 1996).

A recent distinctive study conducted by Teachman (2008) chose to focus on the ever-growing population of second marriages in relation to premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital dissolution. Data were collected in the United States from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth. Extensive life-history data were collected from 655 Black, White and Hispanic women married at least two times.

Teachman (2008) found that premarital cohabitation with a woman’s second spouse did not increase the probability of subsequent marital dissolution. Due to the relatively young age limit of 44 years put forth by the National Survey of Family Growth, higher order marriages were not included in the data.

**Methodological Considerations**

In order to reach important empirical results, precise methods must be used when conducting research. It is critical that each instance of research is guided by an appropriate methodology to get accurate results. The methodologies of the twenty-eight studies used in this review of literature will be presented and analyzed.

Procedures for gathering information ranged from gathering information over the telephone, interviewing face-to-face, gathering income records, and conducting a survey. Gathering information over the telephone from respondents was used most frequently.

Some of the studies using the telephone for data collection included Balakrishnan et al. (1987) and Booth & Johnson (1988). Balakrishnan et al. (1987) conducted in-depth interviews with Canadian women living in private households. The average interview
lasted 36 minutes, varying both ways. Booth & Johnson (1988) used random-digit dialing in the United States to conduct telephone interviews. The interviewees were randomly selected (between husband and wife).

White (1987) went on to utilize data collected from male and female respondents through phone interviews in Canada. A representative sample of the Canadian population was interviewed with a considerable beginning sample size of 14,004 participants.

A major study by Thomson & Colella (1992) collected in-depth information by personally interviewing each of the subjects face-to-face. Both males and females were randomly selected to be interviewed. Each interview, on average, lasted one hour and forty minutes. The final sample size consisted of 957 individuals.

Personal, in-home interviews were also used in a study by Phillips & Sweeney (2005). Data were gathered in the United States from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth. Only females between the ages of 15 and 44 were extensively interviewed regarding marital history, cohabitation history, pregnancy history, education and childhood living arrangements. This study stands out from the others in that the data set includes a high number of females from different racial and ethnic backgrounds; 6,841 women were interviewed, of which 1,144 were non-Hispanic Black women and 1,020 were Hispanic women.

Bracher et al. (1993) used personal interviews as a component when gathering data from 2,547 Australian women aged 20-59 years of age. The data collected from the participants were in-depth event histories on subjects such as housing, education, marital unions, childbearing, residence, employment and hours of work, and contraception.
Schoen (1992) collected data from 3,969 individuals from the National Survey of Families and Households between March 1987 and May 1988. Women born between 1928 and 1957 were interviewed for the research.

Boyle & Kulu (2006) also conducted a survey with a large number of respondents in Austria between 1995 and 1996. Retrospective partnership and residential event-history analysis were used with 3,804 females in order to identify where each respondent was living during the time of a specific union.

A large data set was collected through the West German Family Survey of 1988. This data set included 10,043 people who took part in a personal interview between the ages of 18 and 55. The interview focused on collecting detailed information regarding respondents’ personal partnership history (Bruderl et al., 1999).

Kiernan (2001) collected data in fifteen different European countries through the Eurobarometer Surveys in 1996. The surveys gathered basic demographic information about women between the ages of 20 and 39. A downfall of this particular research study is that the data collected were basic and not as precise as those data from other more in-depth family and fertility surveys (Kiernan, 2001).

Liefbroer & Dourleijn (2006) also focused their research on collecting data from women in a number of European countries. Data were collected from sixteen European countries between 1988 and 1998. The women studied were born between 1953 and 1967. Data were broken down according to three distinguished birth cohorts, which included females born between 1953 and 1957, 1958 and 1962, and 1963 and 1967.

Each of the articles examined in this review of literature used random sampling to help reach their research population. The random sampling was conducted using a variety
of sample sizes. The smallest sample collected was from Newcomb & Bentler (1980). The sample size was 68 couples applying for marriage licenses in Los Angeles. Some of the largest sample sizes among the twenty-eight articles included Bruderl, Diekmann, & Engelhardt (1999) with a sample size of 10,043 and Hall & Zhao (1995) whose research was conducted with 8,177 individuals in Canada. Svarer (2004) also had a large sample size of 7,327 individuals. This research was conducted with individuals in Denmark. In the United States, DeMaris & Rao (1992) had a modest sample size of 3,300 persons, including both males and females. Tested sample sizes varied in number throughout the research reviewed.

Of the research articles, five gathered information through longitudinal studies. Woods & Emery (2002) collected data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. This sample included both males and females. Assessments of the respondents were gathered annually.

Berrington and Diamond’s (1999) data were gathered from a 1958 British cohort. Follow-up on each of the members was conducted at ages 7, 11, 16, 23 and 33. Analysis was done on information collected throughout the study, but focused primarily on data from when the cohort was age 23 and 33.

Brown et al. (2006) used data collected from a five-year study (over three waves). This unique data set focused on Louisiana couples who married between the years of 1998 and 2000. Both partners were included in the data. The first wave was completed three to six months after the wedding, the second wave 18 months after the first wave, and the third wave 18 to 24 months after the second wave. Differences between covenant and standard marriages were also researched in this longitudinal study.
Kalmijn et al. (2007) gathered information longitudinally between 1989 and 1999. Tax record data were gathered from the Netherland’s Income Panel Study. From the tax records, marital status was discovered, as well as the identity of the partner and the partner’s tax record information. Due to the unique means of gathering information, there was only a two percent loss of respondents, typically due to mortality or migration.

All of the articles developed their data by asking a wide range of questions. No two sets of questions were the same. Each variable was measured differently throughout the research.

Brown et al. (2006) measured marital instability on a 10-point scale, where higher values suggested a greater perceived chance of divorce. Marital happiness at the present time was also measured on a 10-point scale, where the rating of one signified the worst the marriage could be and ten signified the best the marriage could be. Thirdly, marital dependency was measured by the respondent’s apparent reliance on the marriage.

Newcomb & Bentler (1980) addressed three relationship areas by having the respondent rate questions on a three-point scale, focusing on the degree of difficulty each of the areas had created in their marriage. Personality traits were also collected and examined in the data analysis.

In one section of their survey, Bennett et al. (1988) focused on gathering information about marriage and cohabitation. In order to do this, dates and categorical information regarding the dates were requested from the respondents.

In order to process the data collected, many models were used. The most common methods used included the Cox models. The Cox proportional hazards model was used by Teachman (1992), Liefbroer & Dourleijn (2006), Hall (1996) Kiernan (2001), and
Georgellis (1996). The Cox regression model was used by Hall & Zhao (1995) as well as Brown et al. (2006). DeMaris & Rao (1992) put the discrete-time logit model to use for their data. Teachman (2008) chose to use a lesser-known parametric hazard rate model. Throughout the articles, many hazard model analyses were used, as well as multiple other methods, depending on what the researchers were measuring.

Clinical Implications

The current body of research on cohabitation and marital dissolution is increasingly important for clinicians. As cohabitation is becoming a normative stage of life, clinicians need to adjust their assistance to clients according to this new life stage. It is vitally important for clinicians to understand how to best help individuals and couples affected by this increasingly normative experience. As the number of marriages ending in divorce continues to rise, it is important to research and understand more about the different factors which cause termination (Boyle & Kulu, 2006).

Lillard et al. (1995) reported that because cohabitation is gaining importance in union formation, it is essential to fully understand both the consequences and causes in order to understand the family today. Research gathered on the link between cohabitation and marital dissolution can greatly inform clinical practice.

Research conducted gives a needed foundation of information concerning the effects of cohabitation on marital dissolution. With further research conducted and more variables explored and controlled, a clinician would be able to find the research that best fits their particular client. By finding the appropriate research for each individual client or
couple, a clinician would be able to better understand and address the needs of the client(s).

Clinicians helping their clients become aware of research findings could help guide a couple. Couples deciding upon marriage can use the information available on marital stability and marital dissolution to help guide their decisions regarding commitment (Woods & Emery, 2002).

Hohmann-Marriott (2006) noted that practitioners, programs and policies addressing the needs of couples should realize the importance of core areas of belief and how they relate to the functioning of a relationship. It is also important to help couples discover the core beliefs that are most important to them. Acknowledging and understanding these core beliefs will help guide them in understanding what an important role these core beliefs play in the relationship.

As research continues, an entirely new trend may emerge. Smock (2006) noted that the relationship between cohabitation and marital dissolution may diminish as an increasing proportion of the general population engages in cohabitation (as cited in Brown et al., 2006). Cohabitation appears to be a significant aspect of household and family behavior and does not look like a passing trend. Schoen (1992) also notes that there is a chance that as cohabitation becomes more universal and a larger component of the population cohabitates, there is less room for the selectivity argument.

Further research on cohabitation and marital dissolution may help guide practitioners in applying appropriate program strategies for their clients. Thornton (1998) recommends that programs focus on strengthening client unions and increasing the chances of steady union development.
Clinical practice with clients regarding cohabitation and marital dissolution needs to keep changing along with societal changes. Over the past 40 years, this phenomenon has rapidly evolved and will keep doing so. Clinicians need to stay current on research regarding this topic and alter their methods accordingly.

*Future Research*

Future research on cohabitation and marital dissolution is imperative. There is a rich base of research, yet much of it has become outdated because of the changing trends of cohabitation and marital dissolution over time. There are many important areas of research on this subject that need to be explored.

Research on cohabitation and marital dissolution needs to expand to include minorities. It is vital to collect and analyze data on the population as a whole. The bulk of the articles reviewed limited their focus to only include nonminorities (Booth & Johnson, 1988). When minorities were included, however rarely, adjustments were made to include only the largest minority in the sample (DeMaris & Vaninadha Rao, 1992). This does not provide a representative sample of the population. By focusing future research on minorities, clinicians will be better able to help the individual needs of each and every client.

When testing the link between cohabitation and marital dissolution, it is extremely important to include major variables in the research. Some variables to be considered include age at marriage, education level, religiosity and prior cohabitating, to name a few. Research also needs to go beyond sociodemographic variables when testing the
correlation between cohabitating and marital dissolution. Some variables to be considered include values, lifestyles and attitudes (D. R. Hall & Zhao, 1995).

Future research may also benefit from distinguishing between those who live together after they become engaged from the premarital cohabitators living together before engagement. These two groups are often combined when data are analyzed. Kline et al. (2004) suggests that these two specific groups may vary substantially.

Research also needs to focus on the link between cohabitation and marital dissolution and, more importantly, on cohabitation/marital dissolution decisions. Understanding the decisions would help understand what follows and why. Some decisions to focus on include the decision to cohabitate and the decision to dissolve marriage (Lillard et al., 1995; Woods & Emery, 2002). Newcomb & Bentler (1980) also noted the decision to marry after cohabitating needs more attention in future research and literature.

Although cohabitation and marital dissolution are somewhat of a new trend, more comprehensive research needs to be conducted, over longer periods of time. Much of the research looked at the influence between these two variables over a very short time span. Overall, short time spans do not allow for proper and full data collection. Woods & Emery (2002) found that it may be a benefit for future studies to assess lifetime cohabitation. Kline et al. (2004) also encourages longitudinal data collection in future studies. It is important to note that not all individuals who cohabitate enter a formal union. As a result, it is important for data to be collected and analyzed on all individuals who cohabit, so as to further assess the process that couples go through which may result in dissolution.
The National Center for Health Statistics (1995) has found that 40% of United States marriages created in recent years contain at least one partner who has been married previously (as cited in Teachman, 2008). Much of the research reviewed limited data analysis to first unions. As dissolution rates rise, there will be a significant increase in the number of individuals entering second unions. As a result, it is important that new research studies include all first and subsequent unions as part of the analysis. These types of research designs limit the breadth of the research, distort the data and, as a result, decrease the content-validity. All research, no matter what the topic, must be all-inclusive and install proper controls to ensure that data analysis is accurate. All of these components of our society’s evolving marital landscape must be taken into consideration to assure the validity of all future research.

The majority of research articles focused attention on collecting data from only females. It is critical in future research to include both males and females as research subjects. Our ability to understand union development and dissolution can be rendered insufficient by this data shortcoming. Including a male perspective in the data sample is vital in that it gives the researcher and audience a better understanding of the characteristics of the male partner in a cohabitating and/or marriage situation. Since males may experience and view cohabitation and marriage differently than women, it is imperative to include them in future research (Thornton, 1998).

Future research on cohabitation and martial dissolution may also benefit from collecting extensive data from both partners. Data collection from both parties may be helpful in that it gives the opportunity to examine specific couple dynamics. Kline et al.
(2004) encourages future research to include assessments from both premarriage and postmarriage time frames, for each partner.

All but one of the twenty-eight studies reviewed looked only at cohabitation and marital dissolution in regards to opposite-sex couples. Same-sex couples also need to be included in this research. Although marital dissolution could not be tested, relationship dissolution could be. Having research that includes data on opposite-sex and same-sex cohabitating and marital/relationship dissolution is vitally important in today’s society.

Overall, there needs to be more research done to keep up with rapid societal changes. More up-to-date data sets need to be collected and analyzed to fully understand the current correlation between cohabitation and marital dissolution. Svarer (2004) found that recent data focusing on cohabitation tend to be scarce. As cohabitation and marital dissolution become more evident and complex in society, it is important to understand the correlation through future research.

**Conclusion**

Research conducted in the twenty-eight studies overall show a positive correlation between cohabitation before marriage and subsequent marital dissolution. The selectivity theory was much more heavily supported throughout the research, compared to the causation theory. The studies reviewed were published between 1980 and 2008. The data were collected throughout the United States, Canada, and Australia, as well as a number of European countries.

It must also be noted that when looking at the more recent research, the results differed considerably. When important variables were accounted for, the research
generally did not find a significant correlation between cohabitation and marital dissolution.

Data were collected through surveys, face-to-face interviews, income records and telephone interviews. Random sampling was done in each of the twenty-eight articles. A handful of the studies reviewed were longitudinal, while the majority of the studies were individual. A wide range of instruments were used to measure the appropriate variables. The Cox proportional hazards model (Teachman (1992), Liefbroer & Dourleijn (2006), Hall (1996) Kiernan (2001), and Georgellis (1996), as well as the Cox regression model (Hall & Zhao, 1995; Brown et al., 2006) were used, along with many others.

The research at hand offers many clinical implications. Practitioners can take the research available that best fits their clients and their clients’ needs. The information and conclusions from the research can be shared with couples to help guide their decisions regarding commitment (Woods & Emery, 2002). As new research comes forward, the information can be used to better assist these clients. This new research may also help guide practitioners in putting together fitting program strategies for their clients.

Clinicians can stay current on the research regarding the topic of cohabitation and marital dissolution, and alter their methods with clients when needed.

Future research is essential in order to keep up with ever-changing patterns of union formation and dissolution. There are many areas that need specific attention regarding cohabitation and marital dissolution. For example, future research needs to expand to include minorities. Minorities are vastly underrepresented in the available data and its analysis. Important variables need to be included in the study of cohabitation and
marital dissolution, such as age, education, attitudes and values (D. R. Hall & Zhao, 1995).

Future research needs to shift its focus to include studying the actual decision being made when it comes to cohabitation, marriage and marriage dissolution (Lillard et al., 1995; Newcomb & Bentler, 1990; Woods & Emery, 2002). Understanding the decision itself helps one to figure out what follows and why. Future research also needs to focus on longitudinal studies to better understand the entire process of cohabiting and (potential) marital dissolution (Woods & Emery, 2002). All unions, not just first unions, should be included in upcoming research. Men, as well as women, need to be incorporated in future data sets to help better understand how the behavior and attitudes of men are different than women. Collecting data from cohabiting and/or marital partners is also recommended. Same-sex couples, as well as opposite-sex couples, need to be included in future research.

Future research is extremely important in understanding the changes taking place in union formations and dissolutions. Cohabitation and marital dissolution have been rapidly changing in society over the past 40 years and will continue to do so. It is crucial to understand the link between two variables that are playing such an important role in today’s unions and society.
References


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