

FIRST-PERSON: Cohabitation & divorce there is a correlation

by Glenn T. Stanton, Posted on Oct 4, 2011

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (BP) -- How many computers or cars do you think Toshiba and Toyota would sell if they didn't let you test them out first? Who in their right mind would make a big commitment of purchase without trying it out first?

But don't we do the same with marriage? We ask young people to make one of the biggest commitments of their lives -- rivaled only by their decision to become parents -- without any prior experience of what marriage is actually like.

More than 60 percent of marriages today are preceded by some form of cohabitation. And 75 percent of current cohabitators enter these relationships with some plans toward marriage, even seeing this live-in relationship as a smart move toward marriage. But does the experience of cohabiting teach couples things that help make them better spouses once they do marry? Does cohabitation contribute to stronger, happier marriages?

Unfortunately, it does not. Not even close!

This is a rare instance where there's a Grand Canyon sized chasm between what many young adults believe and the proven reality of their experience. And it is not the moralizing preachers and traditionalists saying so. A massive body of robust, diverse and conclusive scientific research on this question leaves no doubt about whether cohabiting is helpful to marriage. Graduate and postdoctoral seminars in sociology are held on this topic, and this is what they learn.

Sociologists investigating this question -- working from two leading schools of sociology, the Universities of Chicago and Michigan -- tell us clearly that the "expectation of a positive relationship between cohabitation and marital stability ... has been shattered in recent years by studies conducted in several Western countries, including Canada, Sweden, New Zealand, and the United States."

Their data indicates that people with cohabiting experience who marry have a 50 to 80 percent higher likelihood of divorcing than married couples who never cohabited. A Canadian sociologist explains:

"Contrary to conventional wisdom that living together before marriage will screen out poor matches and therefore improve subsequent marital stability, there is considerable empirical evidence demonstrating that premarital cohabitation is associated with lowered marital stability."

After surveying the data on this question, another leading scholar contends that the only conclusion one could honestly reach was to wholesale "reject the argument" that cohabitation contributes to stronger marriages.

In fact, if a couple wanted to substantially increase their likelihood of divorcing, there are few things they could do to so efficiently guarantee such an outcome than live together before marriage. In fact, this is such a consistent finding in the social science research that scholars have coined a term for it: "the cohabitational effect."

This finding has become a truism partly because the process of cohabiting itself is shown to influence couples to learn to communicate, negotiate and settle differences in ways that are less healthy and honest than do couples who didn't cohabit before marriage. This is probably because without a clearly defined relationship, the cohabiting couple can learn to be more controlling

and manipulative with each other. And this leads to relational resentment and mistrust.

And this has nothing to do with social acceptance or rejection of living together. Doctors Claire Kamp-Dush and Paul Amato conducted a unique investigation that tracked two groups of cohabitators who eventually married: one that married between 1964 and 1980 and another that did so between 1981 and 1997. This allowed them to see if there were any changes in the cohabitation effect as cohabitation became more common and more accepted by society.

But they found "there was little evidence that the negative consequences of cohabitation dissipated over time as cohabitation became more prevalent." Even after controlling for various social and economic factors that could account for such a difference, they discovered premarital cohabitators in both groups were significantly more likely to have lower levels of marital happiness, more marital

conflict, and higher levels of divorce.

"One of the most clearly defined correlates of cohabitation is an increased risk of marital dissolution," says professor Jay Teachman of Western Washington University. In a more recent examination of cohabitation's impact, he calls cohabitation one of the most "robust predictors of marital dissolution" -- making living together first one of the worst things you can do for your marriage. Teachman also warns that even premarital sex by itself is associated with an increased risk of marital disruption, though at lower rates than living together before marriage.

A 2010 "meta-analysis" looked at 26 peer-reviewed, published studies that followed various couples over time. This analysis found that marrieds who had cohabiting pasts were more likely to face divorce, and that "noncohabitators seem to have more confidence in the future of their relationship, and have less accepting attitudes toward divorce."

And as with other studies, the married couples with no cohabiting past are less likely to engage in aggressive and negative interactions, experience more overtly positive interactions, and enjoy more positive communications. These researchers conclude, based on their review of the best studies to date:

"The major practical implication of this review is that psychologists can inform the public, that despite popular belief, cohabitation is generally associated with negative outcomes both in terms of marital quality and marital stability...."

You see, marriage is not a consumer product that you give a try to see how it suits you. Marriage is a leaving of all other relationships to give yourself completely to your beloved. Cohabitation says, "I'm not sure about you. Can I give you test-drive to see what I think?" Melts your hearts doesn't it, ladies? Marriage says, "I want all of you and I want to give all of myself to you!" This is why cohabitation and marriage are such very different kinds of relationships. It is why the social sciences have come to the conclusions they have about living together before marriage being a poor and unhealthy idea.
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This is an edited excerpt from Glenn T. Stanton's book, "The Ring Makes all the Difference: The Hidden Consequences of Cohabitation and the Strong Benefits of Marriage." Stanton is the director for family formation studies at Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, Colo.

