

**Differential Responses to Marital Quality:
The Divorce Decisions of Premarital Parents and Cohabitors****

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Abstract

Using longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, we trace the marital quality trajectories of premarital cohabitators, those with a premarital birth, and those who entered marriage directly. Compared to those who entered marriage directly, premarital parents have lower levels of marital quality but cohabitators do not. We then examine how marital quality is related to divorce and we find evidence of different thresholds for these three groups. Couples who entered marriage directly are quite unlikely to dissolve their marriages, except when marital quality is very low. In contrast, cohabitators and premarital parents are more likely than those who entered marriage directly to dissolve medium to high quality marriages. Those with a premarital birth are less likely than other groups to dissolve their marriages given low or declining marital quality. We discuss the implications of our findings for policies that promote marriage and relationship education.

Differential Responses to Marital Quality: The Divorce Decisions of Premarital Parents and Cohabitators

Rising rates of cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing over the past several decades have generated new debates about the consequences of nontraditional family forms for individual life chances and for the institution of marriage. Cohabitation has become the modal path of entry into marriage (Bumpass and Lu 2000) and nonmarital births have also become more common (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002). The rising prevalence of cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing should not be seen as a rejection of marriage, however; over 90 percent of cohabiting women expect to marry (Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006) and the majority of women do marry at some point in their lives (Ellwood and Jencks 2004). Even though marriage is still a common life experience for many women, the pathways into marriage have become more diverse.

These different pathways have consequences for the quality and stability of marriages. Once they marry, couples who cohabited or had a premarital birth report lower quality relationships across a range of indicators, such as marital conflict and communication (Rogers and Amato 1997; Thomson and Colella 1992), and they divorce at higher rates (Booth and Johnson 1988; DeMaris and Rao 1992; Lillard, Brien, and Waite 1995; Martin and Bumpass 1989; Waite and Lillard 1991). Despite a wealth of research documenting the less successful relationships of those who cohabit or have a nonmarital birth, we know surprisingly little about how couples *respond* to the poorer quality of these relationships once they are married.

Our study builds on past research by examining how cohabitators, premarital parents, and those who enter marriage directly react to both levels of and changes in marital quality. Specifically, we ask whether couples are more likely to divorce at similar

levels of marital quality if they cohabited or had a birth prior to marriage. Our analyses, based on panel data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) collected over a 25-year period, improve upon existing studies by using a longer series of observations of marital quality, accounting for distinct impacts of premarital cohabitation and premarital births, and controlling for unobserved differences in marriages and partners. Previous studies, using only one or two data points, have difficulty ruling out selection explanations, and also give little sense of the trends in marital quality in these couples' relationships over time. Our focus on the differential response to marital quality provides a novel way to explain why the marriages of premarital parents and cohabitators are less stable than those of couples who enter marriage directly.

BACKGROUND

Over the past several decades marriages have been increasingly preceded by cohabitation, and this is now the majority experience among married couples (Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet 1995). The percentage of marriages preceded by cohabitation rose from about 10 percent for those marrying between 1965 and 1974 to over 50 percent for those marrying between 1990 and 1994 (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Smock 2000). Cohabitation is also a relatively short-lived experience, with over 90 percent of cohabiting relationships ending in either marriage or dissolution after five years (Smock 2000). Once they marry, cohabitators have an 80 percent higher marital dissolution rate than noncohabitators, and those who lived together more than three years before marriage have a 50 percent higher divorce rate than cohabitators who lived together

for shorter periods (Bennett, Blanc, and Bloom 1988). After eight years of marriage, however, the divorce rate differentials between cohabitators and non-cohabitators disappear.

Nonmarital childbearing has also become more common. One-third of births now occur outside of marriage (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002) and about half of nonmarital births are to cohabiting parents (Kane and Lichter 2006). In fact, much of the growth of nonmarital childbearing over the past two decades can be attributed to births to cohabiting parents (Raley 2001). Although the marriage rates of women who have a nonmarital birth are lower than those of women who do not, the majority of premarital mothers, across races, do marry by age 40 (Graefe and Lichter 2002). However, Graefe and Lichter (2002) find that at least one-quarter of the marriages preceded by a premarital birth will end in five years, with two-fifths of white premarital mothers and one-half of black premarital mothers divorcing within ten years.

Models of Marital Dissolution

Couples who cohabited or had a premarital birth are more likely to divorce than those who entered marriage directly without children. Researchers have posited that lower marital quality is an important explanation for higher divorce rates among premarital cohabitators (Booth and Johnson 1988; Thomson and Colella 1992). More generally, marital quality has been tied to decisions about marital dissolution, with lower reported marital satisfaction leading to increased risks of divorce (Vaillant and Vaillant 1993; Johnson, Amoloza, and Booth 1992; Clements, Stanley, and Markman 2004).

We know that cohabitators and premarital parents have a higher likelihood of divorce and lower quality relationships, and we know that lower quality relationships predict divorce. Many researchers assume this is a causal relationship, concluding that lower

quality relationships lead to higher rates of divorce among premarital parents and cohabitators. Surprisingly, no study we know of has examined the differential divorce rates among couples with similar quality relationships.

Additionally, researchers have focused on the possibility that cohabitators' higher rates of marital dissolution are explained by selection or lack of commitment. These groups may be more likely to have characteristics, including religion, natal family structure, education, and economic disadvantage, that predispose them to divorce (Booth and Johnson 1988; Lillard, Brien, and Waite 1995). These groups could also be less committed to the norm of lifelong marriage or more accepting of nontraditional behaviors, which would make them more open to the possibility of divorce (Axinn and Thornton 1992; Bennett, Blanc, and Bloom 1988; Waite, Goldscheider, and Witsberg 1986). Of course, these selection and commitment explanations need not be mutually exclusive. However, much of this research has been done without controlling for premarital childbearing, which may bias our conclusions about the implications of cohabitation if a rising fraction of cohabitators are having children before getting married.

Similarly, research on the link between premarital childbearing and subsequent divorce has focused on potential marital problems caused by a woman's marriage to a man other than her child's biological father, with accompanying stepfamily complications, and by poorer partner choice, with the relationship propelled toward marriage by the birth of the child rather than the positive aspects of the union (Graefe and Lichter 2002). Additionally, Graefe and Lichter (2002) find evidence that the link between premarital childbearing and later divorce is due to selection because white and Hispanic women whose premarital pregnancies did not result in a live birth were also

more likely to later divorce. This suggests that those who get pregnant before marriage are substantively different than those who do not. There is also evidence that, particularly for whites, the stigma associated with a nonmarital birth could lead to marriage, creating a weaker basis for later marital stability (Pagnini and Morgan 1996). By and large, however, research on premarital childbearing has been more focused on differences between racial groups and on tracing the connections to on-going single-parenthood or marital instability, rather than exploring the mechanisms at work in these family structure trends.

In the analyses that follow, we examine whether there are differences in the likelihood of divorce given the same marital quality for premarital cohabitators, premarital parents, and those who entered marriage directly. If there are no differences, lower levels of marital quality may account for the higher rates of divorce among cohabitators and premarital parents. If we do find differences, lower marital quality does not account for the increased likelihood of divorce of premarital cohabitators and premarital parents observed in previous studies. Rather it indicates that they differ substantively from those who enter marriage directly in their commitment to the norm of lifelong marriage or in other sources of support necessary for a lasting marriage. In these analyses we build upon previous work by examining the implications of both premarital cohabitation and childbearing and by examining relationship quality as both an outcome in and of itself and as a predictor of divorce.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

We address our research question using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth – 1979 Cohort (NLSY-79). The NLSY-79 is a longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of 12,686 youth who were aged 14-22 in 1979. The study reinterviewed these youth annually through 1994 and then biannually through 2004. This dataset has several advantages for the purposes of our study. First, it contains repeated measures of marital relationship quality over seven survey waves. Second, it contains detailed information on spells of cohabitation and marriage over time.

The NLSY measures marital quality in the 1988 and 1992-2006 survey waves. It only asks the questions of married, female respondents so we thus restrict our sample to the 6,283 women in the sample. We further restrict the sample to the 3,978 women who were married and answered the marital quality survey questions in at least one survey wave. Finally, we restrict our sample to the 3,475 women who had valid measures of premarital cohabitation and premarital births.

Analysis

We structure our data in a person-period format where women enter the sample at the survey wave when they first report being married. Women contribute observations in the sample at each wave they are married, and they are censored when they divorce or separate, if they drop out of the study, or if they are still married in 2004. This results in 17,866 wave-observations for these 3,475 women, with an average of 4.2 waves per woman.

Relationship Trajectories

Our first goal is to examine the trajectories of marital quality for couples by their premarital cohabitation and premarital birth statuses. These trajectories are estimated by

the following multilevel equation, where observations of relationship quality are nested within individuals:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_{0i} + \beta_{1i} (\text{Marital Duration})_{it} + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

$$\beta_{0i} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} (\text{Cohab})_i + \gamma_{02} (\text{Birth})_i + \gamma_{03} (\text{Cohab} * \text{Birth})_i + \alpha_{0i} \quad (2)$$

$$\beta_{1i} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} (\text{Cohab})_i + \gamma_{12} (\text{Birth})_i + \gamma_{13} (\text{Cohab} * \text{Birth})_i + \alpha_{1i} \quad (3)$$

Equation (1) represents the within-individual model for change, where Y_{it} indicates the reported marital quality for individual i in time period t , β_{0i} represents the individual-specific level of marital quality when marital duration equals zero, and β_{1i} represents the linear effect of marital duration on relationship quality within individuals. Equation (2) models initial marital quality, β_{0i} as a function of premarital cohabitation and premarital birth status, with γ_{00} representing the initial marital quality of non-cohabitators. γ_{01} represents the difference between cohabitators with no premarital birth and non-cohabitators with no premarital birth in initial marital quality. γ_{02} represents the initial difference between women who had a premarital birth but did not cohabit and non-cohabitators with no premarital birth. γ_{03} represents the initial difference between cohabitators who had a premarital birth and non-cohabitators who did not. Finally, Equation (3) allows the slope of marital duration on marital quality, β_{1i} , to vary as a function of premarital cohabitation and premarital birth status, with γ_{10} representing the slope of those who neither cohabited nor had a premarital birth. γ_{11} represents the difference in slope for those who cohabited but had no premarital birth, γ_{12} is the difference in slope for those who had a premarital birth but did not cohabit, and γ_{13} represents the difference in slope for those who had both

a premarital cohabitation and a premarital birth. Thus, this series of equations model both initial levels and changes over time in marital quality, which can vary by respondents' premarital cohabitation and premarital birth statuses.

Hazard Model for Divorce

Our second goal is to examine differences in the likelihood of divorce by premarital cohabitation and premarital birth statuses. Specifically, we first determine whether lower *levels* of marital quality account for the higher propensity for divorce among those who have cohabited or had children prior to marriage. We then determine whether cohabitators and couples with a premarital birth are more likely to divorce given a *decline* in marital quality.

We fit a discrete-time event-history model to examine transitions out of marriage among three types of married couples: couples who neither cohabited nor had a premarital birth, couples who cohabited, and couples who had a premarital birth. Events are measured between survey waves and respondents contribute person-waves to the data until they experience a divorce or are censored. Our model takes the following form:

$$\log \left[\frac{P_{it}}{1 - P_{it}} \right] = \beta_0(MarDur)_{it} + \beta_1(Cohab)_{i(t-1)} + \beta_2(Quality)_{i(t-1)} + \beta_3(Cohab * Quality)_{i(t-1)} + \sum_{m=1}^M \beta_m X_{mij} + \sum_{n=1}^N \beta_n X_{nij(t-1)} \quad (4)$$

where P_{it} is the conditional probability of experiencing a divorce for a married woman i at year t since the start of the marriage, given that she had not yet experienced the divorce or been censored prior to year t . B_0 is the coefficient for the number of years since the marriage began that controls for time dependence. B_1 estimates the conditional probability of divorce for couples with a premarital cohabitation, B_2 estimates the

probability of divorce at a given level of marital quality for those with no premarital cohabitation, and B_3 estimates the interaction of cohabitation with the level of marital quality. The coefficient for B_1 tells us whether couples who cohabit are more likely to divorce at a given level of marital quality. The interaction estimated by B_3 tells us whether the disparity between cohabitators and noncohabitators differs by level of marital quality. The models include m time-constant predictors and n time-varying predictors measured at $t - 1$ (they are lagged and predict transitions into divorce between $t - 1$ and t). Because some women have more than one episode of marriage (i.e., they divorce and subsequently remarry) we use robust standard errors to correct for the nonindependence of marital episodes within each woman (White 1980). We then estimate this model for couples with a premarital birth rather than a premarital cohabitation.

Next, we modify the model to determine whether cohabitators and couples with a premarital birth are more likely to divorce given a *change* in marital quality. We modify Equation (4) to be a fixed effects, or conditional, logit model. We restrict our sample to only those 800 women in our sample who experienced a divorce and determine whether a change in marital quality from $t-2$ to $t-1$ predicts getting divorced between $t-1$ and t . We interact these marital quality measures with our premarital birth and cohabitation dummy variables to determine whether these groups are more likely to get divorced given the same change (typically a decline) in marital quality. In these models our time-varying controls remain but our time-constant controls drop out.

Measurement

Relationship Quality. We use several measures to evaluate relationship quality among the married couples in our sample. Women in the NLSY were asked a series of

questions to gauge relationship quality every two years, starting in 1990 and continuing every two years until the most recent wave available in 2004. This results in 7 potential survey waves of data on marital quality for the same couple. At each wave, we create a global measure of *marital happiness* based on the question “would you say that your marriage is...very happy, fairly happy, or not too happy?” We create a scale of *Time Together* which combines the following questions “how often do you and [spouse] do the following: calmly discuss something; laugh together; tell each other about your day?” Response categories are almost every day, once or twice a week, once or twice a month, and less than once a month. The reliability of this scale ranges from 0.73 to 0.80, depending on the survey wave. Our measure of *Relationship Conflict* asks “how frequently you and [spouse] do the following: have arguments about chores or responsibilities; have arguments about children; have arguments about money; have arguments about showing affection to each other; have arguments about leisure or free time; have arguments about drinking; have arguments about other women; have arguments about his/her relatives; have arguments about your relatives?” Response categories are often, sometimes, hardly ever, and never. The reliability of this scale ranges from 0.74 to 0.89, depending on the survey wave. These three measures of relationship quality are moderately correlated with one another. *Marital Happiness* correlates with *Time Together* at about 0.5 and with *Relationship Conflict* at about -0.35. *Time Together* and *Relationship Conflict* are correlated at about -0.25.

Marital Duration is measured as the number of years the respondent has been married to her spouse at each survey wave. For each married respondent in our sample, we also ascertain whether she *cohabited* with her current spouse prior to marriage and

include this as a dummy variable in our analyses. We also determine whether she had a *premarital birth* by whether her first birth was before her first marriage. At each wave in our study, we also determine whether the respondent had *divorced* between the prior and the current survey wave and include this as a dummy variable indicator.

Time-Invariant Controls. Exogenous family background variables included in our models are measured at 1979: whether the respondent lived in some family form other than a two-parent family at age 14, whether the respondent lived in a nonrural location at age 14, and the religion in which the respondent was raised – Christian, Catholic, other non-Christian religion, or no religion. We include the woman’s age at first birth, age at first marriage, and whether her present marriage is a remarriage (this is constant within a spell in our models, but not necessarily within a respondent). We include a measure for the length of time (in years) that cohabiting couples lived together before getting married, which is coded zero if the couple entered marriage directly. We also include controls for race – Non-Hispanic Black, Non-Hispanic White, or Hispanic – and controls for the respondent’s education – less than high school, high school graduate, some college, and college degree or more.

Time-Varying Controls. Several time-varying controls are included in our models to account for factors that may be associated with both marital duration and marital quality. These include changes in economic well-being measured by changes in the *partner’s employment status* and the *respondent’s employment status*. We also include a dummy variable indicating whether the couple *had a child* between survey waves.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for our sample by premarital cohabitation and birth status. Consistent with previous research, women who cohabited before marriage and/or had a premarital birth have less education, were more likely to grow up without two parents in the home, and are less likely to be Catholic. Mothers who had a premarital birth are much more likely to be African American, while women who did not are more likely to be white, regardless of premarital cohabitation status. Mothers who had a premarital birth also have younger ages at first birth and older ages at first marriage than women who did not. The average duration of cohabitation before marriage is 1.5 years for cohabitators without a premarital birth and 2.6 years for cohabitators with a premarital birth.

Marital Quality

Figures 1a-1c show the trajectories of marital quality by marital duration for three groups: couples who had both a premarital birth and premarital cohabitation, couples who cohabited before marriage but did not have a premarital birth, and couples who had neither a premarital birth nor a premarital cohabitation. The group of premarital parents who did not cohabit prior to marriage is rather small, and in supplemental analyses we determined that they responded similarly to premarital parents who did cohabit. We therefore group all premarital parents into one category.

Couples who had a premarital birth begin their marriages with significantly lower quality relationships than couples who did not. In contrast, couples who cohabit but do not have a premarital birth start out very similar to non-cohabitators in terms of marital quality. The disparities between couples who had a premarital birth and those who did not remain large and consistent through about the 11th year of marriage. After that time

the differences between the groups converge. Until the 11th year, relationship quality declines for all groups over time. While couples with a premarital birth have lower levels of relationship quality, there is no evidence that the quality of their relationships declines at a faster rate than those who did not have one. Among those who did not have a premarital birth, the differences between cohabitators and non-cohabitators remain quite small for the duration of the marriage.

We next formally model these trajectories. Table 2 shows the random effects models predicting trajectories of marital quality for the “reference group” of premarital cohabitators and non-cohabitators. The first intercept line shows the initial marital quality for couples who neither cohabited nor had a premarital birth, and the following lines show the differences in initial quality for those who cohabited and had a premarital birth, had a premarital birth but did not cohabit, and cohabited but did not have a premarital birth. The ‘years married’ coefficients show the relationship between marital duration and relationship quality for the reference group, and the coefficients for the other groups show the difference in slope between each group and the reference group. Model 1 shows the initial intercepts and slopes for the whole sample. Model 2 adds time-varying and time-invariant controls that could influence premarital birth, cohabitation, and marital quality.

These models confirm the observations from Figures 1a-1c. While all groups start out with lower initial marital quality than those who had no premarital birth or cohabitation, respondents with a premarital birth start out much worse off. This holds for all three measures of marital quality. In contrast, there is little difference in initial marital quality between cohabitators and non-cohabitators who did not have a premarital birth. The

significant slope for years married confirms that marital quality declines over time, and the insignificant interactions indicate that these declines do not significantly differ by premarital birth or cohabitation status. Thus, the initial disparities in marital quality observed at the start of marriage persist throughout at least the first 10 years of marriage, and are neither mitigated nor enlarged over time. In Model 2 we add a series of controls. For each of our measures of marital quality, including the controls substantially lowers the disparities in marital quality between those who had a premarital birth and those who did not although they remain marginally significant. Cohabitors who did not have a premarital birth continue to have statistically and substantively indistinguishable levels of marital quality from couples who entered marriage directly.

Marital Dissolution

Despite the fact that cohabitators without a premarital birth are largely indistinguishable from non-cohabitators in terms of marital quality, they do not *respond* to these levels of marital quality in the same way. Table 3 shows the divorce rates by cohabitation and premarital birth status. Consistent with previous research, those who cohabit and those who have premarital births are *much* more likely to get divorced than those who do not. After 15 years, only 20 percent of marriages have ended in divorce for non-cohabitators, while for cohabitators and those with a premarital birth it is closer to 50 percent.

When we examine divorce rates by level of marital quality, we find an interesting pattern. At each level of marital quality, cohabitators and those with a premarital birth are more likely to divorce than non-cohabitators. This supports the hypothesis that higher levels of divorce are not primarily due to lower quality marriages among cohabitators and

those with a premarital birth. We also find suggestive evidence of a “threshold” effect. When marital quality is very low (in the worst category for each quality measure), there are high divorce rates for all groups. But for our “reference group,” those who neither cohabited nor had a premarital birth, divorce rates are high only when marital quality is really bad and divorce rates are quite low when marital quality is either average or good. Their “threshold” at which poor marital quality leads to divorce is quite high.

In contrast, for those who cohabit, and even more strongly for those who have a premarital birth, there is a much lower “threshold” at which worse marital quality leads to higher divorce rates. The disparity in divorce rates between cohabitators and non-cohabitators and between those with and without a premarital birth is higher when marital quality is average or good. For these groups, marriage quality does not have to be particularly low before divorce rates get high.

In order to determine whether these patterns are statistically significant and hold up with the inclusion of controls, we next estimate a discrete-time event history model predicting the transition to divorce. Table 4 presents the log odds of marital dissolution relative to continuing to remain married with a focus on differences between cohabitators and non-cohabitators. We estimate the odds of marital dissolution for each unit of decline in marital quality, with the reference group (intercept) being the highest quality marital category. We also include a dummy variable for cohabitators (relative to non-cohabitators) and interactions with marital quality by premarital cohabitation to determine whether the higher divorce rates of cohabitators vary across the marital quality categories.

For Model 1 of our marital happiness measure, we see that the log odds of divorce increase by 1.082 for those who report they are “fairly happy” compared to those who

report they are “very happy” with their marriages. The log odds increase to 2.617 for those who say they are “not too happy” relative to “very happy.” The log odds of divorce for cohabitators in the following wave is 0.76 times larger than for non-cohabitators when both groups report that they are “very happy” with their marriages. The insignificant interactions mean that this greater propensity for divorce persists across the other two categories of marital quality, although the negative signs suggest that the disparity gets smaller as marital quality declines. We find a similar pattern of results for our other two measures of marital quality. For relationship conflict, lower quality is associated with a greater likelihood of divorce for everyone, but the disparities between cohabitators and non-cohabitators are largest in the medium quality categories of “sometimes” and “hardly ever.” Finally, cohabitators are much more likely to divorce when couples report spending quality time together every day, and this disparity declines as the quality of the relationship declines.

This pattern of results persists when we include a series of time-invariant and time-varying controls in Model 2 for each measure of relationship quality. Among our control variables, a college education, an older age at first birth, and husbands’ working more are tied with a lower likelihood of divorce, while being African American and being remarried are tied to a higher likelihood of divorce. The inclusion of these controls decreases the disparities between cohabitators and non-cohabitators but the differences remain statistically and substantively significant. Thus, observed characteristics and lower marital quality do not completely explain the higher likelihood of divorce among cohabitators.

We repeat the same models in Table 5, this time examining the differences between those with and without a premarital birth. Again, we find that lower reported relationship quality is very strongly related to greater odds of divorce. We also find strong and statistically significant evidence of the “threshold” effect for those who had a premarital birth. Those with a premarital birth are much more likely to divorce when relationship quality is high. This greater propensity to divorce gets significantly lower for each unit of decline in marital quality. For the lowest reported levels of marital quality, those with a premarital birth are actually *less* likely to divorce than those who did not have a premarital birth. The inclusion of controls in Model 2 weakens this pattern of results, but they remain statistically and substantively significant. Importantly, Model 2 includes a control for the number of children, which means that the results are not driven by the differences between couples with and without children. While children are associated with significantly lower marital quality, they are not associated with significantly higher propensity for divorce.

The results from Tables 4 and 5 lend statistical support to the patterns we observed in Table 3. The disparity in divorce rates between cohabitators and those with premarital births (compared to our reference group) are highest when relationship quality is average or good. For cohabitators, this greater propensity for divorce remains relatively constant across levels of relationship quality. For those who had a premarital birth, the disparity in divorce rates declines as relationship quality declines. In fact, mothers with a premarital birth are *less* likely to divorce when marital quality is poor.

We next examine what happens to the likelihood of divorce when there is a *decline* in marital quality using fixed effects logistic regression models. It is important to

examine changes in quality for several reasons. First, there may be systematic differences in how cohabitators and those with a premarital birth report on the quality of their marriages. It is possible that cohabitators or those with a premarital birth could view the same “objective” marriage conditions in a more positive light than those who did not experience cohabitation or a premarital birth. It is also possible that we did not control for all of the ways in which cohabitators and those with a premarital birth differ from other married couples so that some other unobserved difference biases our findings.

Table 6 presents the fixed effects regressions that estimate a change in marital quality from $t-2$ to $t-1$ on the likelihood of getting divorced by t . This estimates how cohabitators and those with a premarital birth respond to the same *decline* in marital quality. The marital quality measures are coded with higher values indicating worse marital quality so that a positive coefficient means there is an increase in the likelihood of divorce. The respondent can move between any two categories in each measure of marital quality. Because these fixed effects regressions are identified by changes in the independent and dependent variables, the sample is restricted to only those respondents who experienced a divorce and only those respondents who experienced a change in reported marital quality. Women who consistently reported in a single category of marital quality (such as “very happy”) and women who did not divorce are thus excluded from the models.

The first panel of Table 6 shows the results for cohabitators versus non-cohabitators. We interact the change in marital quality by cohabitation status to determine whether cohabitators react differently to a change in marital quality than non-cohabitators. For two of our three measures of relationship quality, cohabitators are marginally more likely to

divorce in response to a decline in marital quality than non-cohabitators. This result holds for our measures of marital happiness and relationship conflict, but not for our measure of time spent together. Thus, there is weak evidence that cohabitators respond differently to changes in marital quality.

The second panel of Table 6 reports the results for those with a premarital birth. Here, we find evidence that couples with a premarital birth are *less* likely to divorce after a decline in marital quality. These results hold for all three measures of marital quality and with the inclusion of time-varying controls in Model 2 for employment status and number of children. This provides support for the threshold effect we identified in Tables 3 and 5, where those with a premarital birth became less likely to divorce as marital quality declined, relative to couples who did not experience cohabitation or a premarital birth.

While fixed effects regressions provide a powerful way to test for omitted variable bias, it is important to note that the models estimated in Table 6 have limitations of their own. These change models only apply to trends in marital quality between 4 and 2 years prior to a potential divorce. It is possible that more immediate declines in marital quality are more important, such as those in the year immediately preceding a divorce. It is also possible that long-term declines in relationship quality (such as those from the start of the marriage) are more consequential. Our models test for a decline in marital quality during a very specific time frame.

DISCUSSION

Our analyses indicate that it is not premarital cohabitation that distinguishes between the quality of marriages, but rather premarital childbearing. The apparent negative correlation between premarital cohabitation and marital quality found in some previous research is actually driven by the higher incidence of premarital childbearing in the cohabiting population. This points to a need to go beyond understanding premarital experiences in isolation of one another, and to move towards studying them in combination.

However, the marital dissolution decisions of those who lived together or had a baby before marriage are both distinctive. Premarital cohabitators and premarital parents are more likely than those who entered marriage directly to end their marriages at a given level of marital quality, even with the inclusion of a variety of demographic controls. That is, two similar women may report their marriages as being of equal quality, but the woman who lived with her partner or had a premarital birth is more likely to divorce.

These findings can reflect on the debate in the cohabitation literature over whether living together before marriage is (c.f., Axinn and Thornton 1992; Hall and Zhao 1995) or is not (c.f., Teachman 2003) predictive of marital dissolution. While premarital cohabitators are more likely to divorce, the mechanism driving this outcome does not seem to be differences in marital quality. Rather premarital cohabitators, like premarital parents, appear to react differently than those who entered marriage directly in choosing to maintain or end their marriages. The threshold at which cohabitators and premarital parents are willing to end their marriages is at a much higher level of satisfaction, with those who entered marriage directly being relatively unwilling to divorce barring low levels of marital quality.

Of course our study is not without limitations. Our sample is limited to female respondents and, as such, we cannot be sure that our conclusions accurately describe the effects for men of premarital experiences for marital quality and subsequent marital dissolution decisions. Also, although we have a recent sample relative to some other studies, research in this area is, out of necessity, shooting at a target we know has passed. Because of the need to observe couples over long periods of time, we cannot actually concurrently analyze the longer-term marital consequences of people's premarital behaviors today. Our more conclusive statements about premarital experiences and marital decisions in the 1980s and 1990s can be seen as guidance for making predictions about the larger trends we can expect to observe going forward.

There are three major implications of these findings. First, these results support the idea that those who live together or have a baby before marriage are less committed to the norm of lifelong marriage. Axinn and Thornton (1992) find that those who live together before marriage are more accepting of divorce than those who do not. Our results indicate that those with a premarital birth are similarly more accepting of the divorce option. Amato (1996) finds that people who hold more favorable attitudes toward divorce are more likely to dissolve their marriages. Our results suggest that this lack of a strong commitment to marriage does not necessarily have to manifest itself in declining marital quality in order for people to choose to exit their marriages. At the same level of marital quality, premarital cohabitators and premarital parents are making different decisions than those who entered marriage directly. The demographic factors that we control for cannot explain away these findings as simply an issue of selection.

Second, our results demonstrate support for Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman's argument about inertia developing in relationships and the strength of marriages being distinguished between those who actively decide to advance their relationships versus those who 'slide' into ever-deeper levels of commitment without an active decision-making process (2006). It seems quite possible that those who have children or live together are more likely to marry *when they otherwise would not*, whereas those without children or a joint home are more likely to enter marriage based upon the qualities of their relationship, rather than upon the bonds of a shared child or household. The implication of this 'sliding versus deciding' would be premarital cohabitators and premarital parents being less willing to stick with a relationship that they never actively chose, even at the same level of marital quality as those who entered marriage directly, perhaps in a more conscious decision-making process.

Finally, the policy implications of our findings must be briefly discussed. Federal and state efforts to promote marriage, particularly among unmarried parents, must proceed cautiously. While research consistently shows that two-married-parent families are best for child well-being (cf. McLanahan and Sandefur 1994), the marriages of those who have had a premarital birth seem to be qualitatively different from those that have not. If these couples with children are to marry, there is a much greater incidence of marital dissatisfaction, arguing, and lack of quality couple time in this population, to which marriage and relationship interventions must be sensitive. Furthermore, the divorce decisions of premarital cohabitators and premarital parents are distinctive from those who enter marriage directly. Getting these groups down the aisle and even into fairly happy unions does not necessarily mean that they are on a similar relationship track to those

who enter marriage directly; this means that attention needs to be paid not just to people committing to get married but also to people committing to stay married.

Our findings indicate that future research ought to simultaneously take into account the variety of premarital experiences people bring into their marriages. In addition, future work should examine how life stressors, such as encountering financial hardship, differentially impact the relationship quality and marriage dissolution decisions of cohabitators, premarital parents, and non-cohabitators. Given the now standard place of premarital cohabitation in the courtship process and the rising prevalence of premarital childbearing, the implications of these premarital experiences for marital outcomes must be fully understood.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Married Women by Premarital Cohabitation and Birth Status

	No Premarital Birth		Premarital Birth	
	No Cohabitation N=1,579	Cohabitation N=1,134	No Cohabitation N=257	Cohabitation N=505
Education				
Less than High School	0.10	0.15	0.22	0.27
High School Graduate	0.43	0.49	0.51	0.53
Some College	0.34	0.21	0.22	0.17
College Plus	0.23	0.16	0.05	0.03
Lived in Non-Rural Setting at Age 14	0.78	0.77	0.79	0.84
Lived in Non-Intact Family at Age 14	0.21	0.30	0.46	0.51
Religion				
Christian Religion	0.45	0.46	0.61	0.53
Catholic	0.41	0.40	0.22	0.33
Other non-Christian Religion	0.12	0.11	0.12	0.10
No Religion	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.04
Hispanic	0.20	0.18	0.17	0.19
Black	0.13	0.10	0.60	0.45
Non-Hispanic White	0.67	0.72	0.24	0.36
Age at Marriage	21.6 (3.95)	21.5 (4.39)	25.5 (6.75)	25.5 (6.44)
Age at First Birth	24.5 (5.09)	24.4 (5.72)	18.9 (2.99)	19.5 (4.03)
First Marriage Observed	0.91	0.65	0.90	0.81
Second Marriage Observed	0.17	0.49	0.19	0.34
Cohabitation Duration (in Years)	-----	1.47	-----	2.62

Table 2. Multi-level Regressions Predicting Trajectories of Marital Quality

	Marital Happiness		Relationship Conflict		Time Together	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	2.842 ***	2.833 ***	1.945 ***	2.014 ***	3.793 ***	3.739 ***
	0.016	0.040	0.018	0.040	0.016	0.037
Premarital Birth & Cohabitation	-0.251 ***	-0.103 *	0.147 ***	0.100 +	-0.168 ***	-0.096 *
	0.031	0.050	0.034	0.053	0.030	0.047
Premarital Birth & No Cohabitation	-0.195 ***	-0.019	0.033	-0.006	-0.154 ***	0.037
	0.039	0.058	0.044	0.063	0.039	0.055
No Premarital Birth & Cohabitation	-0.097 ***	-0.004	0.037	0.042	-0.020	-0.038
	0.025	0.004	0.028	0.036	0.025	0.031
Years Married	-0.010 ***	-0.018 *	-0.003 **	-0.006 ***	-0.001 **	-0.003 **
	0.001	0.009	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001
Premarital Birth & Cohabitation	0.001	-0.004	-0.002	0.001	0.000	0.000
	0.002	0.003	0.003	0.003	0.030	0.003
Premarital Birth & No Cohabitation	-0.002	-0.004	0.005	0.005	-0.001	-0.003
	0.003	0.004	0.00	0.004	0.003	0.003
No Premarital Birth & Cohabitation	0.002	0.002	-0.002	0.0001	0.000	0.002
	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.002
Controls						
Education						
Less than High School	-----	0.023	-----	-0.015	-----	-0.039
		0.026		0.026		0.024
Some College	-----	0.024	-----	-0.030	-----	0.032 +
		0.019		0.020		0.018
College Plus	-----	0.063 **	-----	-0.127 ***	-----	0.090 ***
		0.023		0.024		0.022
Lived in Non-Rural Setting at Age 14	-----	-0.0003	-----	0.016	-----	0.024
		0.019		0.019		0.018
Lived in Non-Intact Family at Age 14	-----	-0.040 *	-----	-0.001	-----	0.014
		0.018		0.018		0.017
Religion						
Catholic	-----	0.002	-----	-0.033	-----	0.035 +
		0.019		0.020		0.018
Other non-Christian Religion	-----	-0.019	-----	0.009	-----	-0.005
		0.026		0.026		0.024
No Religion	-----	-0.044	-----	-0.024	-----	0.017
		0.045		0.046		0.043
Hispanic	-----	-0.047 *	-----	0.072 **	-----	-0.063 **
		0.022		0.023		0.021
Black	-----	-0.089 ***	-----	0.045 +	-----	-0.128 ***
		0.023		0.023		0.021
Age at Marriage	-----	-0.012 ***	-----	-0.005 +	-----	-0.007 **
		0.003		0.003		0.003
Age at First Birth	-----	0.003	-----	0.0016	-----	0.003
		0.002		0.0024		0.002
Remarriage		0.017		-0.105 ***		0.029
		0.019		0.019		0.018
Cohabitation Duration		-0.001		0.0131 *		-0.001
		0.005		0.0052		0.005
Weeks Worked in Past Year	-----	-0.0006 *	-----	0.0001	-----	-0.0003
		0.0002		0.0002		0.0002
Weeks Spouse Worked in Past Year	-----	0.002 ***	-----	-0.001	-----	0.0015 **
		0.000		0.000		0.0004
Number of Children	-----	-0.026 ***	-----	0.029 ***	-----	-0.015 *
		0.007		0.007		0.006
# of Women	3,475	3,475	3,475	3,475	3,475	3,475
# of Observations	17,861	17,861	17,866	17,866	17,848	17,848

+ p < .10 * p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

Notes: Values are log odds. Omitted reference categories for independent variables are Non-Cohabitors, High School Graduates, Non-Hispanic Whites, First Marriages, and Non-Catholic Christians. Omitted categories for marital quality variables are "Very Happy," "Never Argue," and spending time together "Every Day."

Table 3. Divorce Rates by Marital Quality and Premarital Birth/Cohabitation Status

	No Premarital Birth		Premarital Birth		
	Full Sample	No Cohabitation	Cohabitation	No Cohabitation	Cohabitation
Divorced					
by 5 years	6	2	6	9	17
by 10 years	19	9	24	22	43
by 15 years	38	21	50	39	65
Marital Happiness					
Not too Happy	29	24	34	25	32
Fairly Happy	10	6	11	12	14
Very Happy	4	2	5	7	7
Mean	2.67	2.72	2.66	2.55	2.54
Relationship Conflict					
Often	20	20	18	13	23
Sometimes	9	5	11	11	13
Hardly Ever	4	2	5	8	8
Never	6	3	6	16	15
Mean	1.89	1.88	1.90	1.98	2.01
Time Together					
< 1 Time a Month	32	27	36	23	34
1-2 Times a Month	18	10	26	17	21
1-2 Times a Week	7	4	9	10	11
Almost Every Day	4	2	5	7	8
Mean	3.74	3.76	3.75	3.62	3.63

Table 4. Logit Models of Transition from Marriage to Divorce by Premarital Cohabitation Status

	Marital Happiness		Frequency of Argument		Time Spent Together	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Intercept	-3.328 *** (0.116)	-2.246 *** (0.326)	Intercept	-2.418 *** (0.530)	Intercept	-3.341 *** (0.122)
Fairly Happy	1.082 *** (0.119)	1.076 *** (0.151)	Hardly Ever	-0.569 * (0.283)	1-2 Week	0.683 *** (0.121)
Not Too Happy	2.617 *** (0.180)	2.586 *** (0.237)	Sometimes	0.248 (0.283)	1-2 Month	1.540 *** (0.208)
			Often	1.462 ** (0.360)	<1 Month	2.701 *** (0.238)
Cohabitors	0.758 *** (0.103)	0.370 ** (0.139)	Cohabitors	0.402 (0.370)	Cohabitors	0.818 *** (0.104)
Fairly Happy	-0.047 (0.150)	0.011 (0.191)	Hardly Ever	0.499 (0.384)	1-2 Week	-0.082 (0.154)
Not Too Happy	-0.317 (0.226)	0.009 (0.291)	Sometimes	0.314 (0.385)	1-2 Month	0.257 (0.259)
			Often	-0.166 (0.480)	<1 Month	-0.467 (0.303)
Controls						
Years married	-0.034 *** (0.006)	-0.079 *** (0.011)		0.023 ** (0.006)		-0.029 *** (0.006)
Education						
Less than High School	-----	0.099 (0.133)		-----		-----
Some College	-----	-0.198 + (0.115)		-----		-----
College Plus	-----	-0.355 * (0.164)		-----		-----

(continued)

(Table 4, continued)

Non-Rural Setting	-----	0.076	-----	0.064	-----	0.111
		(0.111)		(0.110)		(0.114)
Non-Intact Family	-----	0.008	-----	0.071	-----	0.070
		(0.095)		(0.095)		(0.098)
Religion						
Catholic	-----	0.018	-----	0.034	-----	0.072
		(0.116)		(0.116)		(0.119)
Other Religion	-----	0.169	-----	0.231	-----	0.224
		(0.143)		(0.142)		(0.147)
No Religion	-----	-0.153	-----	-0.086	-----	-0.072
		(0.261)		(0.260)		(0.266)
Hispanic	-----	0.160	-----	0.152	-----	0.117
		(0.129)		(0.129)		(0.132)
Black	-----	0.407 **	-----	0.474 ***	-----	0.393 **
		(0.122)		(0.122)		(0.125)
Age at Marriage - 18	-----	-0.020	-----	0.001	-----	-0.012
		(0.016)		(0.015)		(0.016)
Age at First Birth - 18	-----	-0.048 ***	-----	-0.050 ***	-----	-0.048 **
		(0.012)		(0.012)		(0.013)
Remarriage	-----	1.081 ***	-----	1.081 ***	-----	1.104 ***
		(0.105)		(0.104)		(0.108)
Weeks Worked	-----	0.0026	-----	0.0039	-----	0.0032
		(0.0022)		(0.0022)		(0.0023)
Spouse's Weeks Worked	-----	-0.012 ***	-----	-0.015 ***	-----	-0.014 ***
		(0.004)		(0.004)		(0.004)
Number of Children - 1	-----	-0.045	-----	-0.024	-----	-0.012
		(0.046)		(0.045)		(0.046)
# of Women	3,475	3,475	3,475	3,475	3,475	3,475
# of Observations	17,861	17,861	17,866	17,866	17,848	17,848

+ p < .10 * p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

Notes: Values are log odds. Omitted reference categories for independent variables are Non-Cohabitors, High School Graduates, Non-Hispanic Whites, First Marriages, and Non-Catholic Christians. Omitted categories for marital quality variables are "Very Happy," "Never Argue," and spending time together "Every Day."

Table 5. Logit Models of Transition from Marriage to Divorce by Premarital Birth Status

	Marital Happiness		Relationship Conflict		Time Spent Together	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Intercept	-3.335 *** (0.122)	-2.111 *** (0.317)	Intercept	Intercept	Intercept	Intercept
Fairly Happy	1.142 *** (0.096)	1.141 *** (0.113)	Hardly Ever	Hardly Ever	1-2 Week	1-2 Week
Not Too Happy	2.792 *** (0.152)	2.879 *** (0.179)	Sometimes	Sometimes	1-2 Month	1-2 Month
			Often	Often	<1 Month	<1 Month
Premarital Birth	0.907 *** (0.125)	0.326 + (0.179)	Premarital Birth	Premarital Birth	Premarital Birth	Premarital Birth
Fairly Happy	-0.352 * (0.172)	-0.188 (0.200)	Hardly Ever	Hardly Ever	1-2 Week	1-2 Week
Not Too Happy	-0.946 *** (0.261)	-0.970 ** (0.313)	Sometimes	Sometimes	1-2 Month	1-2 Month
			Often	Often	<1 Month	<1 Month
<u>Controls</u>						
Years married	-0.027 *** (0.006)	-0.082 *** (0.011)	0.012 * (0.006)	-0.060 *** (0.011)	-0.020 ** (0.006)	-0.075 *** (0.011)
Education						
Less than High School	-----	0.117 (0.131)	-----	0.045 (0.130)	-----	0.048 (0.135)
Some College	-----	-0.235 * (0.115)	-----	-0.240 * (0.114)	-----	-0.254 * (0.117)
College Plus	-----	-0.392 * (0.164)	-----	-0.419 ** (0.161)	-----	-0.393 * (0.165)

(continued)

(Table 5, continued)

Non-Rural Setting	-----	0.071	-----	0.060	-----	0.097
		(0.110)		(0.109)		(0.113)
Non-Intact Family	-----	0.023	-----	0.096	-----	0.097
		(0.128)		(0.094)		(0.097)
Religion						
Catholic	-----	0.050	-----	0.064	-----	0.106
		(0.116)		(0.115)		(0.118)
Other Religion	-----	0.163	-----	0.214	-----	0.205
		(0.142)		(0.140)		(0.146)
No Religion	-----	-0.138	-----	-0.062	-----	-0.092
		(0.259)		(0.258)		(0.266)
Hispanic	-----	0.115	-----	0.109	-----	0.067
		(0.128)		(0.127)		(0.132)
Black	-----	0.379 **	-----	0.432 ***	-----	0.345 **
		(0.122)		(0.122)		(0.125)
Age at Marriage - 18	-----	-0.021	-----	-0.001	-----	-0.015
		(0.017)		(0.017)		(0.017)
Age at First Birth - 18	-----	-0.045 **	-----	-0.043 **	-----	-0.040 **
		(0.014)		(0.014)		(0.014)
Remarriage	-----	1.197 ***	-----	1.226 ***	-----	1.252 ***
		(0.100)		(0.099)		(0.103)
Weeks Worked	-----	0.0026	-----	0.0040	-----	0.0033
		(0.0022)		(0.0022)		(0.0022)
Spouse's Weeks Worked	-----	-0.012 **	-----	-0.015 ***	-----	-0.014 ***
		(0.004)		(0.004)		(0.004)
Number of Children - 1	-----	-0.049	-----	-0.025	-----	-0.015
		(0.046)		(0.045)		(0.046)
# of Women	3,475	3,475	3,475	3,475	3,475	3,475
# of Observations	17,861	17,861	17,866	17,866	17,848	17,848

+ p < .10 * p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

Notes: Values are log odds. Omitted reference categories for independent variables are Non-Premarital Parents, High School Graduates, Non-Hispanic Whites, First Marriages, and Non-Catholic Christians. Omitted categories for marital quality variables are "Very Happy," "Never Argue," and spending time together "Every Day."

Table 6. Fixed Effects Logit Models of Transition to Divorce by Premarital Birth and Cohabitation Status

	Marital Unhappiness		Relationship Conflict		Time Spent Together	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
<u>Premarital Cohabitors</u>						
Declining Quality	0.800 *** (0.132)	0.902 *** (0.170)	-0.788 *** (0.147)	-1.079 *** (0.197)	0.689 *** (0.112)	0.779 *** (0.141)
* Cohabitor	0.290 + (0.164)	0.360 + (0.211)	0.115 (0.177)	0.310 + (0.183)	0.123 (0.137)	0.142 (0.176)
Years married	0.043 *** (0.011)	0.113 *** (0.018)	0.068 *** (0.010)	0.143 *** (0.017)	0.050 *** (0.011)	0.123 *** (0.018)
Weeks Worked	----- (0.0038)	0.0045 (0.0038)	----- (0.0037)	0.0058 (0.0037)	----- (0.0038)	0.0047 (0.0038)
Spouse's Weeks Worked	----- (0.006)	-0.002 (0.006)	----- (0.006)	-0.004 (0.006)	----- (0.006)	-0.002 (0.006)
Number of Children - 1	----- (0.171)	-0.382 * (0.171)	----- (0.186)	-0.371 * (0.167)	----- (0.169)	-0.319 + (0.169)
<u>Premarital Births</u>						
Declining Quality	1.044 *** (0.097)	1.179 *** (0.124)	-0.885 *** (0.107)	1.070 *** (0.143)	0.860 *** (0.083)	1.077 *** (0.114)
* Premarital Birth	-0.346 + (0.178)	-0.419 + (0.230)	-0.474 * (0.186)	-0.445 + (0.250)	-0.334 * (0.143)	-0.720 *** (0.189)
Years married	0.035 ** (0.011)	0.104 *** (0.019)	0.062 *** (0.011)	0.137 *** (0.019)	0.043 *** (0.011)	0.115 *** (0.019)
Weeks Worked	----- (0.0040)	0.0060 (0.0040)	----- (0.0038)	0.0074 (0.0038)	----- (0.0040)	0.0066 (0.0040)
Spouse's Weeks Worked	----- (0.0064)	-0.0003 (0.0064)	----- (0.006)	-0.002 (0.006)	----- (0.006)	0.001 (0.006)
Number of Children - 1	----- (0.173)	-0.331 + (0.173)	----- (0.172)	-0.319 + (0.172)	----- (0.173)	-0.265 + (0.173)
# of Women	800	800	800	800	800	800
# of Observations	3,341	3,341	3,341	3,341	3,337	3,337

+ p < .10 * p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

Notes: Values are log odds.