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COHABITATION AND THE EVOLVING NATURE OF INTIMATE AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Edited by Sampson Lee Blair
and Yongjun Zhang

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES
IN FAMILY RESEARCH

VOLUME 24

COHABITATION AND THE
EVOLVING NATURE OF INTIMATE
AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

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RESEARCH VOLUME 24

**COHABITATION AND THE
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AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

EDITED BY

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FOREWORD

Around the globe, there are a multitude of relationships formed by partners who wish to be together. In the most traditional regard, marriage, with all of its social, legal, and economic linkages, has long been viewed as the most appropriate form of a lasting relationship between two partners. Cohabitation, on the other hand, has often been cast as a somehow “lesser” form of relationship, and cohabiting partners have, in many cultures, been viewed with scorn and derision, as the mere form of their relationship was not seen as proper or moral. While the larger cultural context of a society does, undoubtedly, affect the likelihood of partners choosing to cohabit, one simple fact is clear – cohabitation is increasingly becoming the choice of more and more couples.

The rise in cohabitation rates has been associated with many different factors, and many of these relate to relationship patterns within the familial context. Marriage rates, on the global scale, are decreasing. Young adults’ perceptions of marriage as a viable and lasting form of relationship have eroded, thus making marriage itself less desirable. For many, high rates of divorce represent an ominous possibility for their own marriages, should they go down that route. For those who may have experienced a parental divorce, the experiences of watching their own mothers and fathers going through a divorce often include emotional trauma, anxiety, and numerous other problems. Even in the most pragmatic regard, traditional marriage binds partners within a legal agreement, and divorce proceedings are often long, painful, and costly. Increasingly, many young adults are opting for singlehood, and avoid the complications of marriage by simply living alone. Quite obviously, though, many individuals want to be in a relationship which, while similar to marriage, does not carry all of the legal entanglements of traditional marriage.

Whereas partners typically enter into traditional marriage with a singular purpose, cohabitators have a multitude of rationales and reasons for choosing to cohabit. In many countries, the vast majority of couples will cohabit, often for an extended period of time, before entering into marriage. As such, cohabitation may represent a “trial marriage,” wherein the partners can better assess what their lives would be like, should they eventually opt to marry. For others, cohabitation represents a relatively carefree form of relationship, where the individuals can enjoy the intimacy, both emotional and physical, and do so with no intention of pursuing a long-term relationship. In this form, cohabitation could be regarded as a relationship of convenience, and one which is focused upon personal satisfaction. For many, cohabitation is a relationship which provides security and financial stability. Individuals may seek to be in a cohabiting relationship because of their affection for their partner, but an underlying intention is to be with someone who can provide financial and instrumental support. Among elderly

cohabitators, the desire for these forms of support is often a central motivation to be in a cohabiting relationship. Indeed, many elderly cohabitators are those whose spouse has passed away, and they now seek a partner for more pragmatic reasons.

Cohabitation is often viewed as a sharply distinct form of relationship, which bears little resemblance to traditional marriage. However, this depiction of cohabitation is far from accurate, as many cohabiting households also contain children. In some instances, cohabitators may have children from a previous relationship (e.g., a marriage which resulted in divorce), while many cohabitators have children, together. In either case, the resulting households are comprised of two adults, functioning as both partners and parents, with children present in the home. Quite obviously, the difference between cohabitators with children and married spouses with children is a very fine line, indeed. The growing prominence of cohabiting households with children does underscore both its popularity and the need for research.

Cohabiting partners come in all ages, with varied reasons for choosing cohabitation, and with a wide array of objectives for their choice of relationship. Like so many aspects of intimate relationships and household structures, cohabitation is an ever-evolving entity, and one which absolutely warrants greater examination and study. In this volume of *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research*, a collection of researchers from around the globe examine the numerous dimensions of cohabitation, including the factors leading to cohabitation, the relationships within, and the consequences, thereof.

In **“Individual and Relationship Determinants of Sexual Non-Exclusivity: Comparing Cohabiting, Dating, and Married Emerging Adults,”** Angela M. Kaufman-Parks, Monica A. Longmore, Wendy D. Manning, and Peggy C. Giordano use data from the fifth wave of data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study, and examine why levels of sexual non-exclusivity differ by union status. They find that higher levels of sexual non-exclusivity in cohabiting relationships are affected by intimate relationship characteristics and sexual histories, as opposed to sociodemographic factors, partner heterogamy, or partner- and couple-level drug use. Their work serves to demonstrate the unique and intricate nature of cohabitation and cohabiting relationships.

Cohabitation is, of course, only one possible form of relationship, particularly when considered across the life course. In **“Family Life Course Trajectories and Union Dissolution in Middle and Later Life,”** Grace Li and Margaret J. Penning use data from the Canadian General Social Survey to examine how the various relationship pathways through which people navigate their early lives may have implications for relationship dissolution in later life. They find that there is a complex interweave of union form and the presence (or absence) of children, as it pertains to possible relationship dissolution, later in life. Being married with children does not necessarily guarantee stability, nor does cohabiting with children necessarily lead to a higher risk of dissolution. The variety of possible relationship trajectories, along with the potential effects thereof, is shown to be quite complicated.

Cassie Mead examines one of the more pivotal issues within relationships – the division of household labor. In **“All is Not Fair in Love and Housework: Perceptions**

of **Household Labor and Relationship Attitudes in Cohabiting and Married Couples,**" she utilizes data from the National Survey of Families and Households to examine how perceptions concerning the fairness in the division of housework may affect relationship quality in different manners across cohabiting and married couples. Interestingly, it appears that perceptions of fairness are similar among married and cohabiting individuals, and the impact of such perceptions yields similar effects upon their levels of relationship happiness and chance of separation. In this regard, at least, it appears that the similarities between cohabitation and marriage are quite striking.

Cohabitation often involves the sharing of economic resources and responsibilities, albeit in a relationship which does not provide all of the legal ties of traditional marriage. In **"Protective Function of Cohabitation against Economic Worries,"** Daniel Baron and Ingmar Rapp examine the extent to which the transition into cohabitation affects the economic worries of women and men. Among women, they find that, particularly during times of economic recession, the transition into retirement tends to alleviate economic worries. Among men, on the other hand, cohabitation is associated with less economic worries when they or their partner have substantial financial resources. Their findings suggest that men in precarious economic situations may regard the traditional expectation of being the breadwinner as an undesirable role.

As a relationship form, cohabitation has often provided couples who have historically been marginalized by society to nonetheless pursue lasting and meaningful relationships. In **"Parental Role Construction among LGBTQ Parents in the Post-Equality Era,"** Allison Jendry James conducted a series of interviews with LGBTQ parents, in order to learn how they navigate parenting and parental roles, while doing so within a culture that still promotes heteronormative views of parenthood. The legalization of same-sex marriage, while welcomed and applauded, still left many with a variety of social and legal issues with which to contend. Changes in legislation have not necessarily led to changes in norms and the larger cultural perceptions of what constitutes a family.

As previously noted, cohabitation rates are rising around the globe. Hence, the nature of cohabitation and all of its inherent complexities, need to be understood within the given cultural and societal contexts in which it occurs. In **"Partnered, Cohabiting, or Married: Childbearing and Mothers' Mid-Life Health in the US, UK, and Norway,"** Sharon Sassler, Fenaba Rena Addo, Brienna Perelli-Harris, Trude Lappegård, and Stefanie Hoherz examine how different dimensions of partnership status at the time of a child's birth may be associated with better self-assessed health later in mid-life. Using data from Norway, the UK, and the US, they find that women who had a partner at the time of birth reported higher levels of health in mid-life. Among women in the UK and the US, being married at the time of birth was shown to be more beneficial to their later health, as compared to those who were cohabiting. Among women in Norway, though, there was no significant difference shown in terms of the impact of cohabitation versus marriage. Their research underscores not only the differences in cultural perceptions of marriage and cohabitation, but also the very impactful influence which these may have upon health and well-being.

In **“Convergence or Divergence? The Unfolding of Cohabitation in France, Germany, Italy, and Norway,”** Okka Zimmermann and Dirk Konietzka focus upon how the nature of cohabitation has undergone change across Europe. Using data from the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) and the Generation and Gender Survey (GGS), they use sequence methodology to analyze cohort-specific family trajectories in France, western Germany, Norway, and Italy. They find that, while increases in cohabitation have followed similar patterns across Europe, there are distinct factors within each country affecting cohabitation. The institutional frameworks of each nation, and possibly the cultural context within each, play a significant role in the increasing prominence of non-marital cohabitation.

Cohabiting relationships sometimes contain many of the problems found within marital relationships, and most notable among these is the problem of intimate partner violence. In **“Intimate Partner Violence in Cohabiting Relationships: Young Women’s Voices from Rural Vhembe District, South Africa,”** Matamela Makongoza, Peace Kiguwa, and Simangele Mayisela utilize a qualitative constructivism paradigm to examine IPV within cohabiting relationships. Their work draws upon interviews with individuals who are participating in the Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Programme, in Vhembe District in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The cultural importance of Ubuntu (African communal justice and fairness) and also economic factors (e.g., women’s financial independence) are shown to play important roles in women’s cohabitation experiences, as well as their likelihood of being victimized by a cohabiting partner. Their work demonstrates the need to view cohabitation through a lens which fully comprehends the larger cultural context in which cohabitation takes place.

The evolving nature of cohabitation, relative to marriage, also requires a consideration of its legal attributes. In **“Marriage by Cohabitation (Common Law Marriage) in Seychelles: Emerging Issues,”** Jamil Ddamulira Mujuzi examines the legal aspects of common law marriages in the island nation of Seychelles, located off the eastern coast of Africa. He focuses upon how many of the traditional legal rights, such as the right to form a family, are not always granted to those in cohabiting unions. Being granted recognition as a married couple, via the demonstration of a common law marriage, is not as easy as it may first seem, and cohabiting couples sometimes find their rights, in this regard, to be challenged by the complex nature of stated rights and their interpretations by government officials, as well as by the courts. There are ways in which the rights of cohabiting partners could be better protected and enforced, and these are addressed by the author.

Rosemary Obeng-Hinne provides further explanation of the complex nature of cohabitation in her chapter, **“Defining Cohabitation in the Ghanaian Context: Some Historical and Contemporary Perspectives.”** The mixture of both traditional social practices and current legal definitions can often lead to a challenging situation for those seeking to cohabit. Depending upon the situation, some cohabiting couples may be regarded as being legally married, per the constraints of Ghana’s legal framework, yet other cohabiting couples may be viewed, rather subjectively, as mere cohabitators. The author calls into question the oversimplified interpretations of cohabitation, wherein cohabitation and marriage are viewed as two

dichotomous forms, and examines the need for recognition of the more fluid and continuous nature of these relationship forms.

In **“Cohabitation in the Southern Cone: Recent Evolution, Associated Factors and Convergence,”** Carla Arévalo and Jorge Paz examine the increase in cohabitation in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay), with a particular focus upon why people choose cohabitation, instead of marriage. While a variety of sociodemographic factors, such as educational attainment, are shown to be influential in the choice between the two relationship forms, there are also variations across social groups within the countries. In addition, the tendency to view cohabitation as a precursor to marriage is shown to be lessening, and cohabitation is increasingly viewed as an acceptable alternative form of family organization.

This volume of *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research* proposed a closer examination of cohabitation. It is undeniable that cohabitation, as a chosen form of relationship and household structure, is increasing in prominence, around the globe. As noted by the exceptional work of the researchers included in this volume, the growing appeal of cohabitation is a clear sign that it is no longer merely a temporary or transitory form. Instead, cohabitation is increasingly viewed as the final form for both couples and families. The studies included in this volume also demonstrate the complicated nature of cohabitation, as prevailing legal codes and traditional cultural norms often make life decidedly more challenging for those who do cohabit. No matter these challenges, it is readily apparent that cohabitation will continue to increase, and researchers across all disciplines should continue to examine its growth and evolution.

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