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The Role of Romantic Partners, Family and Peer Networks in Dating Couples' Views about Cohabitation

Wendy D. Manning, Jessica A. Cohen, and Pamela J. Smock*

Wendy D. Manning: wmannin@bgsu.edu

Department of Sociology and Center for Family and Demographic Research, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403, 419-372-2850

*Department of Sociology and Population Studies Center, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48106

Abstract

Emerging adults are increasingly cohabiting, but few studies have considered the role of social context in the formation of their views of cohabitation. Drawing on 40 semi-structured interviews with dating couples, we explored the role of romantic partners, family, and peers on evaluations of cohabitation. In couples where each member had a differing view about cohabitation, one romantic partner's desire to *not* cohabit trumped their partner's more ambivalent feelings about cohabitation. The influence of family in the formation of cohabitation views was evident through a variety of mechanisms, including parental advice, social modeling, religious values, and economic control. Peers also played a key role, with couples using the *vicarious trials* of their peer networks to judge how cohabitation would affect their own relationship. By using a couple perspective, assessing reports from both members of each couple, this study showcases how beliefs about cohabitation are formed within an intimate dyad.

Keywords

Cohabitation; Emerging Adulthood; Dating; Peers; Parents; Family

The age at marriage in the United States is at a historic highpoint, 27.6 years for men and 25.9 years for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). As a result, emerging adults have more time to experience a range of premarital relationships. Indeed, the courtship process now includes cohabitation as the modal pathway to marriage, a process that often begins with dating, transitions into cohabitation, and culminates with marriage (Cherlin, 2009). Three-fifths of women, entering their first marriage between 1997 and 2001, cohabited prior to marriage (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008) and the majority of emerging adults have cohabited at some point throughout the life course (Chandra, Martinez, Mosher, Abma, & Jones, 2005). Furthermore, most emerging adults have had some type of sexual relationship (Chandra et al., 2005). As a result, the premarital courtship process has become more complex and includes a broad range of options available to young couples (Cohen & Manning, 2009; Lichter & Qian, 2008).

The rapid increase in cohabitation continues to occur without adequate scholarly attention to the social factors that support such growing levels. While prior research has documented several structural (e.g., marriage markets, employment prospects, neighborhood

disadvantage) and individual factors (expectation/desire to marry, education, race/ethnicity) affecting emerging adults' decisions to cohabit and/or to marry (Teachman & Polonko, 1990; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Thornton, Axinn, & Teachman, 1995; Manning, 1993; Xie, Raymo, Goyette, & Thornton, 2003; South & Lloyd, 1992), there has been little attention to how social context may shape couples' cohabitation attitudes. Evidence from other countries has indicated that peer influence contributed to the growth of cohabitation among emerging adults (Rindfuss, Choe, Bumpass, & Tsuya, 2004). However, no recent research in the United States has considered the role of peers – or families or romantic partners, for that matter – in forming emerging adult daters' self-reported attitudes and beliefs, and explanations of those beliefs, regarding cohabitation. In light of prior research on peer networks, we expected emerging adults' views to be especially associated with social context (e.g., romantic partners, family, as well as peers), throughout emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Additionally, prior research on union formation and transitions has often failed to examine the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of both members of a couple. Since relationship decisions most likely require the involvement of both members, we adopted a couple perspective when examining emerging adult dating couples' attitudes toward cohabitation.

Informed by social learning theory and a developmental perspective, we examined data from in-depth interviews with emerging adult dating couples to assess the connection between social context and their views of cohabitation. We examined how attitudes toward cohabitation were associated with emerging adult daters' romantic partners, as well as their family and peer networks. Scholars have mostly examined single (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991), cohabiting, or married individuals (Smock, Huang, Manning, & Bergstrom, 2006; Sassler, 2004), thus we focused on dating couples because they were closest to making decisions about cohabitation, and their thoughts and perceptions were critical to our understanding of the courtship process.

BACKGROUND

Given the delays in timing of marriage and parenthood, there is more life course space for cohabitation and other non-marital relationship options (Arnett, 2004). Increasing societal acceptance of cohabitation is evidenced by the behavior of emerging adults and the more general rise of cohabitation in the U.S. (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Seltzer, 2004; Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Clues about future trends in cohabitation can be gleaned from attitudinal survey responses from teenagers, indicating that they are entering emerging adulthood with relatively positive views of cohabitation. The majority of high school seniors agree that it is a good idea for a couple to live together before marriage (Thornton & Young-Demarco, 2001). Data from the National Survey of Family Growth confirmed this endorsement of cohabitation with two-thirds of both teenage males and females agreeing that it was "alright" to live together without being married (Flanigan, Huffman, & Smith, 2005).

Previous research has typically asked cohabitators, not daters, their reasons or motives for cohabitation. This is problematic because the views of those who have not cohabited, dating couples, and who are most proximal to making the decision to cohabit are not considered. Past research has also adopted a largely individual orientation, meaning that scholars have rarely incorporated each partner's perspective in their examination of relationship decisions and transition. Past qualitative work has indicated that emerging adult cohabitators endorse cohabitation as a way to test compatibility with one's partner, spend more time together, and reduce housing costs (Arnett, 2004; Sassler, 2004; Smock et al., 2006). Some emerging adult cohabitators began their unions with the solid intention of marrying their partner; however, this was not universal among all cohabitators (Arnett, 2004; Guzzo, 2009; Manning & Smock, 2002). While such studies have provided scholars with a more complete

understanding of emerging adult cohabitators' motivations or reasons for cohabiting (Sassler, 2004; Smock et al., 2006), they have also characterized these beliefs as individually oriented, largely ignoring the importance of romantic partners, family and peers in the development of cohabitation views. Our study did not revisit cohabiting emerging adults' motivations for cohabitation, but instead, took prior research a step further by focusing on couples who were not yet cohabiting and explored whether and how a couple's social context was linked to why couples might choose to live together.

Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework combined social learning theory with a developmental perspective. Social learning theory has posited that individuals model their behavior on the behaviors of others in their social environments (Bandura, 1976). Further, individuals do not simply absorb their social environment, but are more likely to replicate behaviors they view positively and avoid behaviors they view negatively. According to social learning theory, the initial and most fundamental socialization environment is the family. Social learning operates through the process of parental socialization and observing parental relationships. Children learn how to form and maintain relationships based on their parents' experiences. Thus, childhood family experiences were expected to shape emerging adult's relationship orientations. Yet, emerging adults do not simply transport the beliefs of their parents and, as a result, may not simply act in accordance with parental views or parental behaviors from childhood. Instead, emerging adults also integrate the beliefs of their romantic partner and peers into their own attitudes toward cohabitation. These attitudes are also shaped by the broader growth in acceptance of cohabitation and the increase in rates of cohabitation. Thus, this work allowed us to extend the notion of socialization beyond the family to include interactions with romantic partners and with their peers (Heinz, 2002).

The social learning perspective typically has been applied to the analysis of child or adolescent behavior, but not emerging adult behavior. Emerging adulthood, as formulated by Arnett (2004), is a life course stage characterized by identity exploration, instability, feeling "in-between," self focus, and possibilities. Given emerging adulthood represents a state of flux, emerging adults are expected to rely on the experiences of their romantic partner, family, and peers to help make decisions. In fact, 18 to 22 year olds still seek their parent's general approval and rank parents higher than romantic partners or peers in how important it is to gain their general approval (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2008). Similarly, from an attachment theory perspective, Ainsworth (1989) argues that relationships with romantic partners, family, and peers all play key roles in emerging adult decision making, and do not supplant one another. Such relationships with romantic partners, family and peers are developing and changing throughout emerging adulthood and are unique from adolescent relationships, suggesting that the social context may play a more central role in emerging adulthood when compared to adolescence (Arnett, 2007; Collins & Van Dulmen, 2006). Thus, relationship decisions during emerging adulthood as opposed to other life course stages may be especially influenced by social others (Arnett, 2004; Arnett, 2007).

A critical feature of emerging adulthood is to search and sort through romantic partners and eventually find and come to value a committed relationship (Arnett, 2004). As emerging adults eventually determine their own identity, they can move forward and forge such committed relationships (Arnett, 2004). Dating, like cohabitation, is a stage in the marriage process, which allows some initial assessments of compatibility with one's romantic partner. Our study focused on dating couples during emerging adulthood, as they made decisions about the future nature of their romantic relationships.

Romantic Partners

Romantic partners' interactions and influence increase sharply as teenagers make the transition into adulthood (Giordano et al., 2008). Romantic partners play a pivotal role in the formation, stability, and quality of dating relationships (e.g., Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997; Sprecher, Schmeekle, & Felmlee, 2006). However, past research has not focused on the role that romantic partners play in the formation of views of cohabitation, a now common stage in relationship progression. One's views about cohabitation are most likely linked to the beliefs and experiences of romantic partners. Some couples may be discussing the topic of cohabitation as they decide on the next step in their relationship. Several quantitative studies of cohabitators, not dating couples, have suggested that taking into account both partners' perspectives is important and influences the transition to marriage (Brines & Joyner, 1999; Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Manning & Smock, 2002; Sassler & Schoen 1999; Smock & Manning, 1997). In particular, Brown's (2000) work on cohabiting couples' relationship assessments and transitions to marriage provided substantive and empirical support for adopting a couple perspective. The author found that about one-quarter of cohabiting couples reported different marital intentions and that couples who were not unanimous in their intention to marry had significantly lower odds of transitioning into to marriage than couples where both members reported high marital intentions. Thus, this current study has extended prior research by showcasing the value of the couple perspective when examining men and women who are in a dating relationship.

Family Networks

A few studies have examined the association between family support and daters' relationship stability and quality (Felmlee, 2001; Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). Dating college students indicate that perceived approval from family increases relationship stability (Felmlee, 2001). Family approval of emerging adult dating couple's relationship over time is consistently and strongly correlated with reported levels of couples' love, satisfaction, and commitment to one another (Sprecher, 1992). Overall, research has suggested that the emotional and financial support of family members is beneficial to dating couples' relationships.

One role that families play in forming adult behavior is through socialization that supports specific types of families, such as cohabiting, married, or divorced households. While direct evidence of this type of socialization is generally lacking, empirical findings were consistent with this notion. Children raised in two biological parent families were more likely to marry and stay married than children from single-mother or divorced families (Amato, 1996; Cherlin, Kiernan, & Chase-Lansdale, 1995; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Wolfinger, 2003). Findings such as these held, even when scholars took economic circumstances into account, circumstances which were also known to play a large role in union formation and dissolution (e.g., Amato, 1996; Axinn & Thornton, 1992; South, 2001; Webster, Orbach, & House, 1995; Wolfinger, 2003). Evidence about cohabitation is less common; adolescents in cohabiting-parent families were more likely to expect to cohabit than their counterparts who never experienced parental cohabitation (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2007). Emerging adults whose parents cohabited have also been shown to have higher odds of cohabiting in adulthood than those whose parents did not cohabit (Lonardo, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2009; Sassler, Cunningham, & Lichter, 2009).

There is some empirical support for the idea that families socialize their children by communicating approval or disapproval of cohabitation. Arnett (2004) noted that generational differences in acceptance of cohabitation may result in parents or grandparents hampering emerging adults' cohabitation. Analyses of survey data indicated that emerging adults were more likely to marry if their mothers had negative attitudes toward cohabitation

compared to those whose mothers held positive attitudes toward cohabitation (Axinn & Thornton, 1993). Moreover, the effects of mothers' attitudes appear to operate independently of children's own views (Axinn & Thornton, 1993). In settings where adult children were dependent on (coreside with) parents into their late twenties (i.e., Italy), parental attitudes had a significant influence on adult children's union formation decisions (Billari & Rosina, 2005; Rosina & Fraboni, 2004).

Families may also play a role in cohabitation and marriage by providing or removing emotional and instrumental support for couples. A dating couple may make decisions about the progress of their relationship based on actual or expected responses of their parents. However, there are relatively few empirical studies on the topic. Even when controlling for parent's income, cohabiting couples did not appear to enjoy the same *safety net* (e.g., social and instrumental support from parents) as married couples (Eggebeen, 2005; Hao, 1996; Marks & McLanahan, 1993). One reason for the discrepancy may be that parents were less approving of the cohabiting relationships, and may have indirectly influenced views of cohabitation by threatening or actually withdrawing support (Arnett, 2004).

Religious doctrine is often passed down from parent to child and thus, is a form of family socialization that establishes appropriate behavioral conduct for the child later in life. For example, studies have found that religious affiliation was significantly correlated with cohabitation and marriage entry. Adolescents' religiosity (e.g., frequency of attendance at religious services) was negatively associated with expectations to cohabit, and parental religiosity influenced children's odds of cohabitation in adulthood (Lehrer, 2000; Manning et al., 2007; Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992). Even though cohabitation is a private arrangement (Cherlin, 2004), it also signifies a sexual relationship outside the context of marriage, countering many religious doctrines about premarital sexual behavior. Consequently, a dating couple, or one partner, with a desire to uphold religious teachings (drawn from their parents) may have felt internalized pressure to refrain from cohabitation, negatively assessing cohabitation because it goes against his or her own beliefs. Alternatively, one or both partners may have refrained from cohabitation because of a fear of disappointing or alienating members of their established familial social networks.

Peers Networks

While past research has recognized the importance of peer socialization in forming attitudes about and behaviors toward the opposite sex in adolescence (e.g., Brown, 1999; Cavanaugh, 2007; Collins, Hennighausen, Schmit, & Sroufe, 1997; Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000; Hartup, French, Laursen, Johnson, & Ogawa, 1993), research on the peer influence among emerging adults is limited. Expected changes in relationships with peers deter men's desire to marry (South, 1993), and among some subgroups (young African American males) peer groups may influence decisions regarding relationships (Anderson, 1990). As discussed above, perceived approval from social networks (peers and families) is tied to heightened relationship stability and quality (Felmlee, 2001; Felmlee et al., 1990; Sprecher, 1992). In addition, peer socialization is a component of research focusing on how neighborhoods influence family behavior, often via mechanisms such as contagion (peer influence) (Crane, 1991; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Wilson, 1987). Past theoretical and substantive findings have suggested that peers should have some influence on the nature and course of romantic relationships in early adulthood.

Given that cohabitation is an informal living arrangement and does not share the same strong societal supports as marriage, dating couples' attitudes toward cohabitation may be especially influenced by their peer networks. For example, empirical evidence on cohabitation suggests that peers do matter in Japan. A positive and direct link between knowing individuals who have cohabited with a respondent's positive attitudes toward

cohabitation existed in Japan (Rindfuss et al., 2004). The authors asserted that the high proportion of emerging adults who knew cohabitators puts Japan on the cusp of major demographic change in union formation.

A more indirect way through which peers may influence cohabitation is through perceptions of peer experiences in cohabitation. Such perceptions may become “vicarious trials” for dating couples that are considering cohabitation (Nazio & Blossfeld, 2003). Nazio and Blossfeld (2003) found that young German men and women rely on the experiences of peers (i.e., their same-age reference group) more so than they did on their parents’ attitudes and behaviors. Emerging adults reflect on the marriage experiences of their peers when discussing marriage plans (Arnett, 2004) and it is expected they will similarly consider the cohabitation experiences of their peers. However, to date, little is known about the role of peers in shaping dating couples’ views about living together.

CURRENT INVESTIGATION

Framed by social learning and a developmental perspective, we examined the role that social context played in forming non-cohabiting, daters’ views about cohabitation. Our primary focus was to understand the self-reported role that romantic partners, family, and peers played in shaping dating couples’ views about living together. Our contributions to the extant literature were three-fold. First, while a few quantitative studies in other countries suggested that social networks play a pivotal role in the formation of attitudes toward cohabitation (Rindfuss et al., 2004; Nazzio & Blossfield, 2003); our study investigated the association between social networks and daters’ perceptions of cohabitation in the United States. Second, researchers are beginning to make a concerted effort to examine couple-level data, not just one individual within a union. Our study extended this line of research by focusing on dating couples’ attitudes, providing the perspective of both members within a dating union. Third, few studies have focused on emerging adult dating couples, with relatively more attention being paid to adolescent dating experiences (or older adult cohabiting or married couples). Our work drew on the experiences of emerging adults who were in the midst of a series of consequential decisions regarding their own identity, relationships, work, education (Arnett, 2004). This study’s focus on the attitudes of emerging adult dating couples, those who were closest to making decisions about cohabitation, may deepen scholars’ understanding of the sources of the rise in cohabitation and help us predict future trends in this living arrangement.

DATA AND METHODS

These data were drawn from the couple interviews of the Cohabitation and Marriage in America Project. Each member of a heterosexual couple was interviewed; for clarity, the pseudonyms we used for each member of a particular couple begin with the same letter (e.g. Mark and Mandy). Our sample consisted of 20 dating couples or 40 individuals interviewed in 2005 and 2006. Participants were interviewed at a location of their choice, including a public location, such as a restaurant or library, or a more private venue, such as their home. Respondents and their partners were asked a variety of questions aimed to uncover attitudes regarding their acceptance of cohabitation (described below).

To qualify for the study, couples had to be dating for more than two months and less than three years, and they could not be cohabiting with their partner at the time of the interview. One of the original goals of the project was to compare three different union types: dating, cohabiting, and marital unions. Although we did not compare daters to their cohabiting or married counterparts in this study, the length of relationship criterion was used to ensure that all couples had been together long enough for their relationship to be somewhat solidified,

but would still be able to answer questions concerning the beginning of their union. Our flyers and advertisements called for dating couples, and since both members of the couple were required to participate, the sample was selective of those who mutually defined themselves as in a dating relationship. Sexual exclusivity, only having sex with one's dating partner, was not a requirement for the study and was not stated in the advertisements. Furthermore, none of the couples in the sample maintained "casual" or purely sexual relationships. All of the respondents who were interviewed also had a partner interview.

The respondents lived in the general area of Toledo, Ohio. The population of Toledo is statistically similar to the distribution of the U.S. population in regards to race, marital status, education, and income. We recruited our sample through personal contacts, referrals, advertising in local newspapers, and by distributing flyers to local stores (i.e., laundry mats, grocery stores, discount stores, etc.). These recruitment techniques did not result in a random sample and are not representative of the population. As a result, our findings were not generalizable; however, the recruitment techniques did allow us to reach a broad range of participants and adult daters who are often absent in union formation studies. The respondent and their partner also received a total of \$80.00 (\$40.00 each) for their participation in the study.

As shown in Table 1, the demographic characteristics of the 40 emerging adult dating individuals ranged in age from 19–35 years. We presented the descriptives for men and women separately. Three-fifths (60%) of the women interviewed (12 out of 20 female respondents) and 50% of the men (10 out of 20 of their male partners) were 19–22 years old at time of interview. The average age for both male and females was 24 years old. Twenty percent of the sample identified as black, 62.5 percent identified as white, 15 percent identified as Hispanic, and 2.5 percent identified as Native American. These percentages approximate the population of the city of Toledo where 23.41 percent of the population is black, 70.16 percent is white, 5.5 percent is Hispanic, and .36 percent is Native American. The majority of individuals earned less than \$20,000 per year. While the same is true for the majority of female respondents, the majority of male partners earned \$20–\$40,000 per year. In terms of education, female respondents were more highly educated than their male counterparts. Interestingly, on average females reported having been in their current relationship for two months longer than their male partners.

On average, the interviews lasted roughly an hour and the average length of the interviews was about 54 single-spaced transcribed pages. On average, the interviews lasted roughly an hour and the average length of the interviews was about 60 single-spaced transcribed pages (the interviews ranged from 20 to 136 pages with a 25 page standard deviation). We interviewed each member of a couple separately to ensure that each member's answers accurately represented their view of the relationship, without the respondents having to be concerned about how their partner might react to their responses. The semi-structured interview techniques used in the in-depth interviews provided the same basic questions to each respondent, but allowed the interviewer to pursue varied lines of inquiry and probe for more information. The in-depth interviewing was an excellent method for dating couples' exploring perceptions, behavior, and cognitive justifications while providing a greater level of detail than closed-ended survey questions. In short, semi-structured interviews attempt to understand complex social behaviors, without imposing restrictive categories that may prematurely limit not only the inquiry, but also the answers (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

We used a computer program, Atlas/ti, to aid in our data management and analyses. The program assists with coding and analyses of qualitative data, as well as provides tools to manage, store, extract, compare, explore, and reassemble meaningful pieces of data flexibly and systematically (Weitzman, 1999). A key part of our analyses was the development of

our coding scheme, which was both intensive and interactive. A coding scheme categorizes segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data (Charmaz, 2006). Thus, our coding scheme was the central basis of our analysis of the qualitative interviews. Depending on the interview, an entire paragraph or just one sentence could have one or several codes, thus codes could overlap with one another. The *initial coding* phase (Charmaz, 2006) started by referring to the questions in our dating couples' interview guide, as well as utilizing codes derived from responses from past qualitative interviews and focus groups on cohabitation from an earlier stage of the project. Each author read a subset of transcripts and coded them independently with this pre-established list of categories. We then assessed how well the coding scheme captured the questions of interest and revised the coding scheme based on responses from the in-depth interviews. Charmaz (2006) defines this phase in the coding process as *focused coding* and it was the second phase in our coding process where we refined our list to only include codes that were more directed and selective of dating couples than our first attempt at a code list. After re-reading the interviews with this focused coding scheme in mind, we then examined *intercoder reliability* by discussing and comparing the interviews we coded individually. Although we had few interpretive disagreements, we explored and discussed the meaning of minor discrepancies in our interpretations, eventually generating a coding scheme capturing our consensus on the issues.

Our analyses involved searching for responses to queries about how couples felt family and peers influenced their dating relationship, as well as their views of cohabitation. For example, couples were asked what family and peers thought of their relationship, whether and in what ways their family pressured them to marry, and the types of emotional or financial support from family or peers. We conceptualized peers as same-age others who are friends, co-workers, or family members, such as cousins or siblings, because many respondents claimed that their family members were their friends. Family was contextualized as older family members such as grandparents, mothers, fathers, aunts, and uncles. To explore how couples' viewed cohabitation, they were also asked whether they knew anyone who cohabited and how those relationships worked out? They were then asked why they did or did not think cohabitation was a "generally a good idea for couples?" We documented the connections couples made between their views of cohabitation and the beliefs or behaviors of their romantic partner, family, and peer networks. We organized our results around several emergent themes regarding the role that family and peers played in the formation of dating couples' evaluations of cohabitation. We provided representative quotations to illustrate each theme. The reported role of the romantic partner was included in each section as the views of both members of the couple were presented.

RESULTS

Family Networks

Family, particularly one's parents during childhood, played a profound role in forming emerging adult daters' views of cohabitation. Although only slightly less than half of the sample, approximately 43% of respondents, reported an association between their older family members and their attitudes toward cohabitation (8 men and 9 women), those who did report the association of the familial social context on the views of cohabitation, described their family as having a significant influence on their attitudes toward cohabitation. Respondents were influenced by their family through the following four ways: direct communication, social modeling, familial religious beliefs, and parental economic support.

Some respondents reported that their parents communicated to them the "right" way of maintaining relationships. For example, Sylvia, a 20-year-old woman, who had been dating

Sebastian, her 22-year-old boyfriend for about a year and a half, believed that cohabitation was not an adequate substitution for marriage and has discussed how she feels about cohabiting with Sebastian. She states, “[We talked about] umm, umm, how we can really get to know each other, wake up in the morning with each other, go to sleep with the person.” For Sylvia, cohabitation was not only a way to learn about her partner, but a step closer to the “highest level,” which is marriage. She reported, “By you getting married, you giving your life to the other person. And you can live with a person all you want to without ever making a big commitment like that—like, to vow to love each other forever and just doing it the right way.” Sylvia said that she learned the “right way of doing things” from her “mama.” She explained that her mother did not marry Sylvia’s father, and as her mother got older, she instilled in Sylvia her own religious belief that “it [marriage] is the right way.” Sylvia’s mother taught her that cohabitation was not a substitute for marriage; therefore, she would only cohabit with an expectation of eventually marrying her partner. When asked why her mother felt this way about cohabitation, Sylvia stated, “‘Cause she’s a Christian, and she believes it’s fornicating if you’re not married. So, the best way to do it is to get married.” Sylvia’s interview indicated that she was aware of her mother’s beliefs and may try to comply with her wishes in the future.

Sylvia’s boyfriend Sebastian also felt that cohabitation was a good way to learn about one’s partner and to see if a couple is compatible. He wanted to marry one day. Sebastian stated, “I mean, you can see what it’s like to live with somebody, and maybe you might not want to live with nobody no more. You probably just want to live with yourself.” When asked if he knew anyone who had cohabited, Sebastian continued, “See they [Sebastian’s friends] will move in with ‘em [their girlfriends], but they will have an argument and be told to get out, but they come back. So it’s like they argue, but they make up. And then they argue, but then they make up.” Although Sylvia and Sebastian had similar opinions regarding cohabitation, they cited different sources of influence. While Sylvia relied on her mother’s advice, Sebastian relied on his peers’ experiences (discussed in more detail below).

Allan was 27 years old and had been dating his girlfriend Anne, who was 30, for almost a year. When asked whether he thought cohabitation was a good idea, he stated, “Oh yeah, definitely.” Allan explained that something his great-grandmother said always “stuck” with him throughout his life:

“My great grandma said you got to test drive the car before you buy it. So, cohabitation is a good way to really get to know someone. You know? ‘Cause you’re not just seeing ‘em a few times a week. You’re seeing ‘em on a daily basis and all the little, all the little things come out.”

Anne had cohabited with three men prior to dating Allan and was worried that her negative experiences may affect her future cohabitation plans. She explained that she was “afraid” to cohabit with Allan because “what if he turns out to be completely different once you live with him? I’m afraid that maybe all my other relationships have t[a]inted me, you know, made me too cautious. Maybe I read into it too much. You know? It’s like that one time he’ll leave something on the floor. I’ll be like, I’m not picking up after you all the time.” Even though Anne did have reservations about cohabiting again, she did not refer to family as a source of influence on her views. She agreed with Allan that cohabitation was the best way to learn about one’s partner and stated, “How are you going to find a life mate if you don’t live with that person?” Her beliefs were based on her past personal experience with prior romantic partners.

Tammy was 19 years old and had been dating 20-year-old Tyler for about nine months. The couple lived together temporarily during the summer before the interview. Although Tammy had no qualms about cohabiting with Tyler for a short time (until he could move into his

other apartment), both families' influences had made her somewhat leery about cohabiting for the long-term. Tammy stated, "If I were to permanently move in with him [Tyler], we would have to definitely know each other for a couple years... I don't think my parents would [have approved]... I don't think his parents would have approved. I don't think his mother would have [approved]. Tyler confirmed that his mother is disapproving about cohabitation. When asked how his mother reacted to him living with Tammy for a summer, Tyler replied, "Well, actually my mom really didn't know... I know if my mom probably knew if we were living together, I'd have to hear something from her." He asserted that his mother's religious beliefs prompted him to keep his short-term cohabitation from her. Tyler continues, "my mom's like religious... I'd have to go through that. And I really didn't want to hear it this summer." Tyler reported that his mother's beliefs influenced what he tells her about Tammy and their relationship. Both Tammy and Tyler felt that cohabitation was a big commitment that may happen for them sometime in their distant future, but for now, they prefer to only cohabit for a short while and out of necessity.

Patricia, who was 29, had been dating 35-year-old Peter for almost a year and has reservations about cohabitation. Her reservations stemmed, in part, from both her family's religious beliefs and the lack of success she had seen in cohabiting relationships of extended same-age family members and friends. Patricia was raised in a Christian family who taught her that cohabitation and sex before marriage was wrong. When asked about her evaluations of cohabitation, Patricia stated, "I really don't know, because on the one hand I've been told for my whole life that it's not [a good idea]. On the other hand, it doesn't seem to be like it's a bad thing." Patricia reported that cohabitation was "the benefit of marriage without being married" and that most of the cohabiting couples she knew "maintain separate checking accounts, separate everything," but still "live together and just enjoy sex." Patricia said that she was just "not that way" and would not cohabit with a man without the promise of marriage. Patricia acknowledged that she knew family and friends who have cohabited ... mostly... I mean eighty percent of the time it doesn't work out for them." Patricia was an excellent example of an adult exerting her own independence by not following the religious guidelines set forth by her family. Patricia knew that her father would never accept her cohabiting with Peter because of the family's religion, but Patricia still wanted to live with him as a step toward marriage. She stated, "I mean, we'd have to know exactly somewhere down the line why we're doing this [cohabit] for. You know? 'Cause if it's just for the convenience that it'll be cheaper to live, no. I'm not gonna do that. It's for something, you know, that possibility of we're gonna be together forever and, you know, get married and yada, yada." She reported that cohabitation was the next step in her relationship with Peter, and it would bring them closer to marriage. When asked if he would consider cohabiting with Patricia, Peter replied, "It probably wouldn't happen because I think her perception would be, okay we've moved in together and now we're gonna get married. So, it probably wouldn't be the best option at this point." While religion played an important part in Patricia's views about cohabitation, Peter was not religious and said nothing about religion affecting his desire (or lack of desire) to cohabit with Patricia. Thus, the influence of religion may be complex and even though parents hold strong religious beliefs that do not support cohabitation, emerging adults sometimes decide to make their own decisions.

Parental divorce seems to be related to respondents concerns about divorce. Out of the 20 dating couples, only two couples were both raised by their biological parents. Respondents who experienced a parental divorce often articulated deeper anxieties regarding their future marriages and concerns that they might follow in their parents' footsteps. Some daters were so negatively affected by their parents' divorce they reported never wanting to marry, one respondent stating, "...without marriage, you don't have divorce."

Kevin and Kelly were an example of a couple whose partner's fear of divorce and marriage has seriously influenced their future together. Kevin was 29 years old and had been dating 25-year-old Kelly for over three years. Kevin admitted that his severe fear of divorce had lead to major problems in the couple's relationship. We interviewed the couple shortly after Kevin asked Kelly to move out of their apartment; however, the couple did not break up, and continued to date. Kevin stated, "That [my parent's divorce] has really left quite a lasting effect on me. It's really affected how I feel about relationships. I'm pretty crazy about her [Kelly], and I love her. But on the other hand, the institution of marriage leaves a very, very sour taste in my mouth." Kevin clearly connected his parent's divorce to his anxieties about marriage within his current relationship,

"I guess my reservations still come from the fact that I came from a family that was just very, very dysfunctional... when you constantly have negative reinforcement after negative reinforcement after negative reinforcement of the idea of marriage - and especially family... that's another big issue. Marriage and children are the two issues that I have got very negative associations with."

He also cited the influence of his peer networks on why part of him does not want to marry. He stated, "Also just because of the fact that I know very few happily married people."

While Kelly's parents are still together, they are unhappy and fight constantly. Yet according to Kelly, neither parent feels divorce is an option in their relationship. Kelly has taken her parent's negative marital experience and refusal to divorce and has applied it to her relationships with men. She stated,

"They're [Kelly's parents] always arguing or they're not talking to each other. Well if you're not happy, leave. What kind of quality of life do you have if you're with somebody that you can't stand and you feel like you're just stuck with this person? That's not living to me. That's not being happy, when you feel like you're stuck with somebody. You should want to be with the person that you're married to. I truly think that. I don't see divorce as a bad thing at all. You know? It's just, it didn't work out."

Since Kelly did not see divorce as implicitly negative and is sure about her feelings for Kevin, she viewed her cohabitation with him as a step toward eventual marriage. Kelly states, "I'm not...living with, like, I didn't just live with Kevin to test it out. I lived with him because I knew he was gonna move away, and if we didn't make some kind of a decision like that that we would lose each other." Obviously the influence of this couple's family and concerns about divorce have had a serious effect on their lives, attitudes, decisions, behaviors, and perhaps their future together.

A more common response to parental divorce was the notion that one can learn from their parents' mistakes. Indeed, most daters who experienced a childhood divorce wanted to marry and do everything in their power to create happy and long-lasting marriages. For example, Natasha, a 22-year-old woman, who had been dating Nick, her 24-year-old boyfriend, for slightly over a year, said that her parent's divorce taught her an important life "lesson" about marriage and how to make her future marital relationship successful. She stated,

"...I think that the whole divorce, the whole separation of my parents taught me how and what to do and what not to do in my relationship. I see it as a kind of lesson... I'm not saying they ruined my childhood or anything. Like, that's their life. That was their decision. But, I know what I'm not gonna do in my marriage, you know. Like, I think that helped me a lot. Like, actually their failure of marriage is probably gonna help me to maintain my marriage."

Natasha reported that cohabitation “should be something that every couple should do before they get married” and explained that cohabitation is “kinda practice being married.” She continued, “You’re not married yet. You don’t have that big commitment yet, like the thing on the paper and all. But, we [Nick and I] pretty much live like a married couple, you know. Like, we have, we share everything.”

Nick’s parents never divorced, but his close friend and ex-girlfriend’s parents did divorce. Nick said that knowing these people’s experiences make him “more careful about stuff and about situations, [but] it’s not like I walk on egg shells. Nick’s friend used to “give him speeches all the time” about how “marriage doesn’t work and everything” and how “marriage is such a disposable thing now anyways.” But Nick refuted his friend’s opinion by stating that “if people care about [their partner] as much as I care about her [Natasha], I guess they should [marry]. There’s not too much to worry about... It’s just, it’s not a big worry. I don’t worry that I’m ever gonna get divorced if we get married.” When asked about cohabitation, Nick responded,

“I don’t think there’s any sense in really getting married if you’ve never even lived together. It’s like signing a lifelong lease and never having checked out the place.... It’s [cohabitation] a step towards marriage. It’s a step that I think people should take.”

Only four respondents mentioned that their parents had cohabited, thus parental cohabitation was a relatively uncommon occurrence for this dating sample. However, for those who had cohabiting parents, they usually had positive relationships with their parents’ cohabiting spouse. Wynona was a 19-year-old woman whose parents divorced when she was a child. During her childhood, Wynona’s father remarried, while her mother lived with her boyfriend and had a child with him. Wynona stated, “She [Wynona’s mother] had, a boyfriend who lived here—which is my little sister’s father. And he moved out not too long ago—about eight years. Well, I guess it is a while ago, about eight years ago. And, umm, I mean I loved him too. He’s still like family, even though we’re not together.” Similarly, Olivia was 20 years old and had been dating 23-year-old Oliver for four months. Olivia reports that when she was 16, her mother cohabited with her stepfather for a short time before the couple married. She stated,

“I wasn’t happy about that. Because she [Olivia’s mother] kind of, she’s always been kind of strict mom. And I always thought she would look down upon something like that [cohabitation]. And so when she did that, it really pissed me off. ‘Cause, you know, she was always so strict with me about how, you know, you go to school, you pay attention, you get good grades, you go to college, then you get a good job, then you get married, and stuff like that.”

Olivia asserted that she did not realize cohabitation was an option in her own life until her mother lived with her stepfather before marriage. Olivia stated, “I guess I grew up thinking that there was only one way. Until I’ve gotten older, and I’ve realized that not everybody grew up like I did {LAUGH}.” Although, it is obvious that Olivia’s views of cohabitation were affected by her mother’s cohabitation, overall, parental cohabitation experiences were not often mentioned when respondents discussed their own cohabitation plans. Parental divorce, not cohabitation, seems to be the poignant family transition.

Some respondents were raised in religious households, thus their religious beliefs have been passed down to them from their parents. These respondents had internalized these religious beliefs and as a result, did not feel cohabitation would have a positive affect on their dating relationships. For example, Bella, a 23-year-old woman who had been dating 33-year-old Bobby for over three years, stated that she would not cohabit before marriage because “... it’s just Bible principles. I believe in marriage as being an institution, as what you should

do.” Bella’s partner Bobby acknowledges Bella’s religious beliefs and said, “I think it would really impart on her beliefs. You know what I mean, on how people should live and stay and get along before they’re married, you know. She believes you shouldn’t live together. I support that. I’m kinda believing her too.” Thus, Bobby’s religious justification for not cohabiting is weaker than Bella’s; however, her views appear to carry more weight, consequently influencing his views of cohabitation.

Even though respondents are adults, their parents’ religious views matter and are cited as a reason for not cohabiting, despite their own religious beliefs. For example, 22-year-old Jenna and 23-year-old James have been dating for approximately three years, and neither will cohabit because of their parents’ religious values. Jenna stated that she and her boyfriend did not consider cohabiting with one another because “we both feel that it’s a family belief thing, you know, get married and then live together. I know his parents are Baptists and so are mine, so it’s the belief that mixes in too.” Similarly, James said, “I’m not a religious person, but I certainly respect that idea. Umm, and I know her parents are religious. My parents are somewhat religious. So, umm, just to keep things kosher is seems like a good idea just with our parents. Umm, so yeah.” Religion can be the reason that families do not support cohabitation, and even if a couple does not embrace the family norm, they may respect their family’s views and avoid cohabitation. Jenna respected her parent’s beliefs, and James referred to their beliefs in his own responses about cohabiting with Jenna.

Although it was not commonly stated, parental instrumental support can effect whether or not cohabitation is a viable option for a couple and their evaluation of cohabitation. One way that parents can influence their children’s decisions to cohabit is through economic control. Lukas and Linda were both 20 years old and had dated for over three years. During his interview, Lukas expressed apprehension regarding what Linda’s parents thought about the couple cohabiting and worried that they would pull their daughter’s financial support. Lukas stated, “Her parents don’t really agree on it [cohabitation], and they’re paying for her schooling. So, if she goes against them, they might say, well we’re not paying for schooling. And then she’s stuck paying for it.” Linda corroborated Lukas’s interpretation of the situation, “we really don’t stay together that much for that reason.”

In sum, respondents reported that their familial networks influenced their attitudes toward cohabitation. We found that familial influence occurred through direct communication, social modeling, family religious beliefs, and parental economic support. Not all emerging adult daters’ followed the advice and behavior laid down by older family members, some respondents asserted their own independence, and developed attitudes in response or even in opposition to their family. The experience of a parental divorce appears to be quite consequential in relationship decisions in emerging adulthood. Thus, family socialization extends into emerging adulthood but is quite complex.

Peer Networks

As cohabitation increases, the existence and increasing visibility of this group has an effect on daters’ perceptions of cohabitation. Three-fourths (17 men and 13 women) of dating couples referred to their peer networks’ cohabiting experiences influencing their own opinion of cohabitation. Dating couples often described a connection between the cohabitation experiences of friends and same-age family members and their own assessments of cohabitation. For example, Randy was 22 years old and had been dating 26-year-old Robin for almost seven months. Randy reported that his cousin and his cousin’s girlfriend “got their own place” and “so far they’re doing good and everything.” Randy wanted to cohabit in part because of the example his cousin had set for him. Randy stated, “I want to be where they’re at. You know what I mean? I want to have my own place and all my own stuff.” Although Randy was an example of a respondent who reported an

association between the positive cohabitation experience of one of his peers and his own desire to cohabit, this is not a typical response. Dating couples were more apt to remember and describe the negative experiences their peers had with cohabitation, such as relationships that ended in divorce, break-up, or were plagued by constant conflict. It was these experiences that they often cited as a reason to not cohabit. Indeed, out of the 40 percent of respondents (ten men and six women) who knew friends or same-age family members who were currently or previously in cohabiting relationships that they described positively (i.e., high quality, low conflict, stable, or currently married), none of these emerging adult dating couples referenced such positive cohabiting relationships when describing their views of cohabitation.

A more common narrative was for respondents to focus on and apply their peers' negative experiences with cohabitation when considering cohabitation in their current dating relationships. We characterized dating couples' responses to their friends' relationships in two ways: observed the negative consequences of cohabitation in their friends' and same-age family members' relationships and decided not to cohabit, or observed these negative relationships and learned from their peers' mistakes. While some couples shared similar views of cohabitation, there was not always concordance in their assessments of cohabitation.

For example, Fiona (19 years old) and Frank (22 years old) witnessed their friends enter cohabiting relationships and generally agreed that there are negative consequences connected to cohabitation. Fiona and Frank had been dating for roughly two years. Both Fiona and Frank knew people in bad cohabiting relationships and drew from those experiences to illuminate their current cohabitation decisions. When asked whether cohabitation had worked out for the people she knew, Fiona stated, "Not really that good. I think I'm like the only one that's with my boyfriend, like my daughter's dad. The other ones, they'd fight and argue and not get along anymore." The interviewer probed by asking Fiona if such experiences influence her relationship with Frank. Fiona responded, "I think about it. I think that I don't want to go through that. I try and make the best out of it so we stay together." Fiona reported that such negative cohabitation experiences even influenced how she interacted with her boyfriend. "I try not to argue so much. I try to get along with him, stuff like that. Basically, I just try to stay together by not arguing as much, 'cause that makes most people split up out of the relationship..." Frank reported a similar outlook on cohabitation in his interview. He said that he knew "a lot of people" who cohabited, "mostly friends," and all of those relationships have worked out "for the worst." When asked how these experiences influenced his relationship with his girlfriend, Frank stated, "It makes me not want to run right out and do the same thing [cohabit]. 'Cause I'm looking to better my life, not to argue and fight and nitpick all day long."

While Fiona and Frank agreed that cohabitation had rarely produced happy couples within their peer networks, Mandy and Mark had differing experiences and opinions regarding the people they knew who had cohabited. Mandy was 20 years old and had been dating 22-year-old Mark for almost four months. She attributed her negative view of cohabitation to the negative experiences of the cohabitators she has known. Mandy asserted that she would only cohabit once she was married. "Everyone that I've seen that is divorced, like most of them lived together before they were married. It just seemed like it hurt their relationship and I would never do it." Mandy further explained her view by stating,

"Yeah, I think in the interest of the relationship, I do think that it [cohabitation] is not [a good idea]. It just seems like, from what I've seen, to usually be a bad idea. Because I just, I've never seen anyone come out of it better than they went in."

Mandy's boyfriend Mark reported knowing two couples who had both had positive experiences with cohabitation, in that both couples are still "in love." In addition, Mark felt that cohabitation can act as a testing ground for one's marriage. However, Mark's personal experience with cohabitation was very negative and seemed to be a factor in his consideration of cohabitation in the future. Like Mandy, who would only cohabit once she was married, Mark expressed a desire for commitment from his partner before cohabiting again. When Mark was asked if he would cohabit with Mandy, he replied,

"I just couldn't do it [cohabitation] without, again anyway... I would have to know that there's a chance that this could be forever before I did something like that... it was so hard to get away from it the last time. If I ever had to do it again... I don't want to go through that [my prior cohabitation] again."

Mark's statements suggested that he viewed cohabitation as both a way to test his relationship and as a union he would avoid if he did not consider it as the first step toward marriage. Without this "chance of forever," Mark would not consider cohabiting with Mandy. Both members of the couple were quite wary about cohabitation; Mark's views stem from his own personal experiences, while Mandy's views seemed to be based on her observations of how cohabitation has influenced relationships.

Some respondents, especially those who have not experienced cohabitation themselves, feared what cohabitation will be like and how their partner will react to such a living situation. These respondents were especially reliant on the experiences of the people in their peer networks who help them form opinions about cohabitation. For example, Wynona and William were 19 years old and had dated "off and on" for almost four years. Wynona recalled the experience of her best friend who was living with her boyfriend. Wynona described her friend's cohabiting relationship,

"They were all in love at first. But they got tired of each other. She would go to work and go to school, and then just come back to seeing him. They'd be there all day together, and they got tired of each other and annoyed with each other and frustrated. And they fight all the time now. I mean, but they love each other. But I guess, I don't know. It's just that they need their space in a way."

Wynona described her friend's decision to cohabit with her boyfriend as "so early" in their relationship and credited the couple's relationship difficulties to them not knowing "how to really do that [cohabit]." Wynona was pessimistic about the eventual outcome of her friend's relationship, "It's like its getting old. So I think they're gonna break up too." Furthermore, Wynona indicated that her friend's experience scared her. She stated, "I don't want to live with William and then, I don't know, he gets tired of me because he's like, oh this isn't what I signed up for." While Wynona reported strong misgivings regarding cohabitation with William due to her friend's experience, William did not know anyone who had cohabited, thus reporting no negative cohabitation experiences within his peer network. William very much wanted to live with Wynona and his only prerequisite to doing so was his desire to find a job before renting an apartment.

Some daters responded to negative peer influences with more optimism and form opinions about the conditions under which cohabitation will work. Helen (22 years old) and Harry (20 years old), who had been dating for almost nine months, both agree that the duration of their current relationship was a major factor in their eventual cohabitation plans. Helen reported that she had a friend who was cohabiting and pregnant. Helen felt that if her friend had waited and not rushed the relationship, perhaps things could have been different in her life. Helen stated,

“I think if they [a couple] take it slow. Like if they first meet and they move in together, I don’t think that’s gonna work out. I mean, it could. But it’s not likely. If they take time to get to know each other and when they move in together they just take it gradually, then I think it’s good that they do that.”

When asked to define “slow” in the context of a dating relationship, Helen responded, “Slow to me is like waiting like six months to move in together... [six months] from the moment you start dating.” Harry, a 20-year-old man, only knew one friend who cohabited and that cohabitation “worked out.” He echoed many of the thoughts and feelings that Helen had in regards to the duration of a dating relationship and cohabitation. Harry stated, “It depends on how far they [a couple] are in the relationship. They shouldn’t like, like as soon as they start dating, a week later just move in. ‘Cause that’s like way too fast.” Harry continued by describing his own relationship as the ideal context for cohabitation. Harry stated, “...like I said, for us as an example, it’s pretty good ‘cause nine months is definitely long enough to know if you know the person well enough. That’s okay to move in. But if it’s like the next day or the week, then it’s a little too crazy and it’s not gonna last.” Although Helen and Harry saw the benefits of cohabitation (when done in a proper time frame) and wished to cohabit, they chose not to because the costs of the cohabitation surpassed the perceived benefits.

Another way dating couples learned from their friends’ relationships was through their friends’ divorce experiences. Knowing friends who had divorced had influenced some daters’ perceptions of cohabitation. Nineteen-year-old Wynona was an example of a dater who looked at the people in her peer networks, saw her friends divorcing, and wanted to take steps to ensure that her relationship with William would not end with a similar outcome. To Wynona, cohabitation, if done in the proper context (as a precursor for marriage), can be an effective step in preventing divorce. Wynona’s parents divorced, but since she was so young at the time, she reported that it never really affected her. However, when she was asked if knowing divorced couples had affected her, she responded,

“Yeah. I want to live with him [William] before I even get there [marriage]. I want to live with him and be together for a while—which we have. Live together, see how each other are, you know what I’m saying, on a day-to-day basis. And, what to expect in the future and get used to...I mean, we’ve been together for a long time now. I have known him for a long time or whatever. But when you live with somebody it’s a whole different ballgame. I’m afraid of what could happen. When I get married I want it to happen one time, once. That’s it. I just want to do it one time. I don’t want to be divorced and looking for another one and going through all that. No. I don’t want to do that. I just want to do it the one time, the perfect guy, and that’s it.”

William, who was 19 years old, was aware of the risk of divorce, “I seen what divorce do to people. And that ain’t a cute sight.” William believed cohabitation with Wynona would strengthen their relationship and reduce conflict surrounding their trust and infidelity issues. Cohabitation will not be a test of their relationship but build their relationship because “we’ll always be together.”

Similarly, 29-year-old Kevin would never marry someone without cohabiting first. However, it was very important for him to test his compatibility with his partner before marriage. In an attempt to illustrate his point, he cited the marital relationship of a friend:

“I had a friend who got married right out of high school... They were this nice Christian couple and everything, so they did what other Christian horny teenagers do and they got married. That was the only way they could consummate, you know, get the rocks off. So they did; they moved in, but they didn’t live together prior.

And within three years, sure enough, it blew up in their face... I'm just saying you have to know what you're getting into and if you're compatible before you actually marry somebody."

As discussed above, Kevin knew few happily married couples and his views of cohabitation were based in part on the negative experiences of his peer and family networks.

In sum, emerging adult daters reported using the vicarious trial of their peer networks to gauge whether cohabitation would be a good idea for their relationship. However, observing negative peer experiences with cohabitation did not always result in negative attitudes toward cohabitation. Instead some respondents who classified their peer's cohabiting experience in a negative light still decided cohabitation may be right for them. In other words, it was not cohabitation itself, but their friends' relationships which lead to negative relationship outcomes. Just as experiencing a parental divorce weighed in on views about cohabitation, peers' divorces also influenced daters' attitudes toward cohabitation. The response to peer divorce was not uniform, a number of respondents saw cohabitation as a way to divorce-proof their marriage while others became more wary of cohabitation because of divorce.

DISCUSSION

Emerging adult dating relationships did not exist in a social vacuum and respondents' romantic partners, family, and peers played a non-negligible role in couples' day-to-day interactions. Consequently, romantic partners, family, and peers were found to be connected to the formation of daters' attitudes toward cohabitation. This study elaborated on how support for cohabitation emerges and suggests how attitudes may spread.

This association between social context and one's views of cohabitation is complex. While some respondents adopted the attitudes of their social networks wholesale, others exerted agency and formed attitudes in opposition to those of their romantic partners, family and peers. This investigation cannot determine which response is most common in emerging adulthood, but instead attempted to identify the specific social networks that played the largest roles in emerging adult daters' views of cohabitation: romantic partners, family and peers. More importantly, this work introduced the complexity of responses by showcasing how emerging adults responded and interpreted the experiences of their social networks.

This study illustrated the importance of the couple perspective by examining reports of both members of a dating relationship. Romantic partners did appear to influence one another's perceptions of cohabitation; however, there were not numerous specific or direct reports of this influence. The small number of reports suggested there were selection processes operating where similarly minded respondents and partners chose one another as a boyfriend or girlfriend. We found that one romantic partner's desire to *not* cohabit seemed to trump the other's more ambivalent feelings about cohabitation. Respondents' views and plans for cohabitation could be conditioned by their romantic partner or were relationship-specific. In other words, respondents reported that they may not cohabit with this partner, although they would cohabit with someone else. Even when couples shared similar views, the reasons and sources of their views varied (i.e., stemmed from negative peer associations or from negative personal experiences with past romantic partners). Finally, our findings show that partner influence stemmed, not only from their role in the current relationship, but also from partners bringing their own biographies and experiences into the relationship. Thus, simply knowing the views of one member of a couple may not be sufficient to fully understand couple's relationship decisions. These findings support further couple-based data collections to build our understanding of cohabitation and marriage in the United States.

Even though our sample consisted of emerging adults, the interviews revealed the powerful role that family can play in forming adult daters' views of cohabitation. We found that family socialization can occur through a variety of mechanisms, which include parental advice to a child, communicated parental values, parental financial control, or simply through a child's concern that their marital union will end in dissolution, like their parents before them. Religious socialization was closely linked to family influence in two ways. First, some emerging adults adopted the religious beliefs of their family and had a negative perception of cohabitation. Second, some emerging adults did not always follow their parents' views and formed their own opinions regarding cohabitation outside their familial network. Thus, they avoided cohabitation merely out of respect for their parents' religious beliefs, but felt that cohabitation may be a positive life choice. Because cohabitation meant that the couple was having premarital sex, it was difficult to discern from the interviews whether parents were concerned with their adult children's abstinence or had a specific concern with the act of cohabitation itself. Research on dating in emerging adult warrants further attention as these are the relationships in which current and past family experiences are framed and may potentially progress to cohabitation.

A widely stated source of social network influence was peers. Respondents appeared to use the *vicarious trials* of their peer networks to judge whether cohabitation would help or hurt their own relationship. The failings of other peer relationships were sometimes reported as a reason to not cohabit, but typically, couples seem optimistic about their relationship prospects and were inclined to create an exception for their own "unique" situation. Couples felt that their dating relationships or situation differed from that of their peers because they planned to enter cohabitation after a long period of courtship or because they planned to marry. Thus, these dating couples thought that their cohabitations would result in a happy and stable marital union. By not repeating the perceived mistakes of their peer networks (i.e., cohabiting too soon or living together for reasons other than mutual affection or eventual matrimony), emerging adult daters felt that their relationship outcomes would differ as well. Thus, the influence of peers is not direct and peer's experiences are viewed as cautionary tales rather than reasons to not cohabit.

A pervasive theme throughout the study was a concern about divorce, and we observed it operating specifically through both family and peer socialization. We found parental divorce can create awareness about the vulnerability of marriage and generate powerful anxieties within a child that followed him/her into emerging adulthood. These anxieties prevented some emerging adult daters from seeing marriage and family in a positive light. Instead of viewing marital commitment as stable and secure happiness, some respondents viewed it as being trapped in an unhappy union, or worse, being happily married for a short time before an inevitable divorce. These respondents entered the courtship process filled with trepidation. Cohabitation can be a way to assuage these fears, at least for a short time. On the other hand, some children of divorce saw their parents' mistakes as lessons-learned on how "not to act" in a marital union and look optimistically upon their future marriages. They were positively disposed toward cohabitation as a way to practice or prepare for marriage.

While the influence of the parental divorce was linked to some deep-seeded fears, the influence of peer divorce simply reinforced the negative views some daters already had about divorce. Peer divorce seemed to lead daters to ask themselves, what can I do differently from my peers? Some daters saw a positive correlation between cohabitation and divorce in their peer networks, while others maintained that cohabitation was a practical way to protect against divorce. Thus, emerging adult daters looked at the world around them for guidance on how to conduct their own relationships, but did not always draw the same conclusions based on their peers' experiences.

It is important to recognize the limitations of this study. First, while we ask how respondents view cohabitation, we did not ask direct questions about how respondents' romantic partners, family, and friends felt about cohabitation. Despite this limitation, reports of the influence of social networks rose organically from the in-depth interviews themselves. In other words, it was the respondents who brought up the connection between their romantic partners, family and peers and their views of cohabitation. Second, although in-depth interviewing techniques provided insight into the role that social networks play in shaping couples' attitudes toward cohabitation; these results cannot be generalized to the entire U.S. population because they were based on a sample of 40 individuals. Even though our findings were limited to couples' experiences in one metropolitan area, we expect that the importance of social influence may be similar in other cities and among a broader spectrum of couples. Third, the sample may be biased because couples with extremely negative relationship dynamics could have been reluctant to participate. However, a number of dating couples discussed very distressing aspects of their union, including infidelity concerns and doubts regarding the future of their relationship, so it is unlikely that this limitation seriously biased the results. In addition, since all the respondents were dating at the time of the interview, the sample may have been selective toward emerging adults with less relationship experience or more conservative attitudes about romantic involvement. Nevertheless, respondents reported a wide spectrum of sexual and relationship experiences, so this limitation most likely did not seriously bias our findings. Fourth, respondents and their partners were interviewed separately, thus it was not uncommon for respondents and their partners to contradict each other. Although interviewing couples together may have ensured fewer inconsistencies, it most likely would have inhibited respondents and their partners from fully revealing their perspective in the relationship.

Our work addressed the need to extend social learning theory by recognizing that emerging adults were not totally passive when embedded within their social networks. Consistent with Arnett (2004) our findings revealed that emerging adult daters were trying to work out their childhood family experiences and appeared to remain wary about their own relationship futures. These dating couples interpreted and formed meaning through their interactions with their romantic partners, family, and peers. Thus, we found that individual-based theories and methods may be limited when examining relationship decision-making and transitions.

Prior work has theorized how social context fits into attitude formation, but empirical work in the United States seldom includes social context. Our findings, along with quantitative studies on social context in other countries (Rindfuss et al., 2004; Nazio & Blossfeld, 2003; Rosina & Fraboni, 2004; Billari & Rosina, 2005) suggested that large-scale surveys should incorporate new measures aimed to capture the potential role of social context on attitude formation. This qualitative analysis identifies and describes the role that social context plays in attitude formation about cohabitation, but we hope this paper leads to future quantitative work on emerging adults dating relationships, those closest to forming cohabiting unions, to help move our understanding of union formation forward.

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Table 1

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Male and Female Daters

Age	Female Percent	Male Percent
19–22	60	50
23–26	20	20
27–30	15	10
31–35	5	20
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	15	25
White	70	55
Hispanic	15	15
Native American	0	5
Education		
Less than High School	0	25
High School or G.E.D	25	35
Technical or Some College	60	25
College Graduate	15	15
School Status		
Attending school and working full-time	30	5
Attending school and working part-time	15	5
Not attending school, but working full-time	15	40
Not attending school, but working part-time	10	35
Attending school and unemployed/not in labor force	15	5
Not Attending school and unemployed/not in labor force	15	10
Personal Income		
Unemployed/Not in Labor Force	30	10
Less than \$20,000	55	35
\$20,000–\$40,000	10	40
More than \$40,000	5	10
N/A	0	5
Average Reported Monthly Duration of Relationship	18	15
Proportion with Prior Cohabitation Experience	30	35
N	20	20