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Justice and the Fate of Married and Cohabiting Couples

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Abstract

Are cohabiting couples more likely than married couples to break up in response to perceptions that their relationship is not fair? Based on social psychological perspectives on intimate relationship stability, in addition to empirical research contrasting cohabitation with marriage, I hypothesize that cohabiting couples will be more likely than married couples to separate in response to perceived breaches of justice. To test this hypothesis and others, I examine the influence of both male and female partners' perceptions of fairness on the stability of married and cohabiting couples using two waves of couple-level data from the National Survey of Families and Households. The results of Cox proportional hazards models suggest that cohabiting couples, but not married couples, are increasingly likely to separate as levels of male or female underbenefiting increase. The conclusion discusses the implications of these findings for social psychological perspectives and future studies on the role of distributive justice in the stability of intimate relationships.

Scholars have long argued that individuals are more satisfied with intimate relationships, more committed to them, and more likely to continue them, when they perceive them to be just or fair (e.g., Blau 1964; Homans 1961; Sprecher 1992; Walster, Walster, and Berscheid 1978). Offering support for this argument, a number of studies find that perceptions of fairness are associated with the quality of intimate relationships, and to a lesser extent, their stability. Researchers have only recently begun to identify factors that moderate the association between fairness perceptions and indicators of relationship quality and stability. Their findings suggest that perceptions of fairness are more salient for couples in which both partners are in good physical health (e.g., Kuijer, Buunk, and Ybema 2001); couples who have recently transitioned to parenthood (Grote and Clark 2001); and women (e.g., DeMaris 2007; Sprecher 2001), especially women who have an egalitarian gender ideology (e.g., Greenstein 1996).

Research concerning the influence of perceptions of fairness in intimate relationships has proliferated since the 1970s. During this same period, the proportion of coresidential sexual unions (or "unions") that begin with cohabitation rather than marriage has increased dramatically (e.g., Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991). In fact, the majority of first unions now begin with cohabitation (Bumpass and Lu 2000). One of the most noted features of cohabitation is its brevity in comparison to marriage. The majority of cohabiting couples either marry or separate within two years (Bumpass and Sweet 1989), and their chances of separating have increased in recent decades (Bumpass and Lu 2000). Scholars considering issues of distributive justice beyond the realm of intimate relationships argue that differences between groups in their propensity to dissolve can be attributed to differences in the way they evaluate justice (Jasso 1980). Yet, few studies have explicitly considered the role that distributive justice plays in the elevated instability of cohabiting relationships (i.e., Brines and Joyner 1999; Sanchez, Manning, and Smock 1998).

Cohabiting individuals are just slightly more likely than married individuals to report that their relationships are not fair, at least in the area of housework (e.g., Glass and Fujimoto 1994; Nock 1995; Sanchez 1994; Sanchez and Kane 1996). Consequently, differences in how married and cohabiting couples evaluate justice in their relationships may explain only a small part of the greater instability of cohabiting unions. The greater instability of cohabiting unions could, however, reflect the fact that cohabiting individuals are more likely to separate in response to perceived breaches of justice. Because research concerning the influence of perceptions of fairness on the quality and stability of intimate relationships usually focuses on one type of couple (i.e., dating, cohabiting, or married), it is not clear whether cohabiting couples differ from married couples in their responsiveness to evaluations of fairness. To my knowledge, the closest studies have come to comparing marriage and cohabitation in terms of responses to justice is to focus on partners' relative contributions to paid work; these studies find that cohabiting partners, but not spouses, have a greater risk of separating the more their earnings and hours of employment depart (Brines and Joyner 1999; Kalmijn, Loeve, and Manting 2007).

This is the first study to directly compare the influence of perceptions of fairness on the stability of married and cohabiting couples. Based on a review of the literature on distributive justice, I argue that cohabiting couples, particularly those without plans to marry, monitor exchanges more closely and react more strongly than married couples to perceived unfairness. On the basis of this argument, I predict that cohabiting couples will be more likely than married couples to end a relationship they view as unfair, especially if they lack marriage plans. I test this prediction using two waves of data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH).

BACKGROUND

Distributive Justice and Intimate Relationship Stability

Social psychological perspectives explain the stability of a variety of relationships in terms of individual satisfaction with them (e.g., Thibaut and Kelley 1959). Distributive justice perspectives, in particular, suggest that individuals base their satisfaction with relationships partly on how fairly contributions and outcomes are distributed within them (Blau 1964; Homans 1961; Molm 1991).

According to some distributive justice perspectives, individuals evaluate the fairness of intimate relationships based on a particular justice principle of equity (Hatfield, Utne, and Traupmann 1979; Jasso 1988; Walster et al. 1978). Using the equity principle, individuals compare each partner's ratio of contributions and outcomes in the relationship. They are expected to become distressed if they are *underbenefited* (contributing more than their partner to the relationship but receiving less) or *overbenefited* (advantaged by the inequity). Underbenefited and overbenefited individuals are thought to respond to distress in several ways: they may do nothing; they may restore actual equity by changing their own contributions or convincing their partners to do so; they may restore psychological equity by changing how they evaluate fairness; or they may end the relationship (Hatfield et al. 1979; Hochschild and Machung 1989; Sprecher 1992; Walster et al. 1978).

A large number of studies have examined the influence of perceived fairness on thought, feeling, and behavior within intimate relationships. As a whole, these studies find that individuals who consider their relationships to be fair experience the least distress and individuals who consider themselves underbenefited experience the most distress; individuals who consider themselves overbenefited fall between their two counterparts (see Hatfield et al. 1979; Sprecher 1986). While these studies offer evidence that perceived underbenefiting is a unique predictor of satisfaction with a relationship, they also reveal that

it is less influential than other social-exchange variables, such as perceived alternatives to the relationship (Sprecher 2001).

Most of the studies examining the association between perceptions of fairness and relationship satisfaction rely on cross-sectional data, making it difficult to determine whether perceived underbenefiting is a cause or a consequence of dissatisfaction in relationships. Distributive justice perspectives have long assumed that perceptions of fairness influence relationship satisfaction. However, more recently researchers have found evidence that relationship dissatisfaction leads individuals to reevaluate the fairness of the relationship, and with a bias towards finding unfairness (Grote and Clark 2001; Smith, Gager, and Morgan 1998).

This evidence has changed the way researchers interpret associations between fairness perceptions, relationship satisfaction, and subsequent relationship stability. The conventional approach has been to view satisfaction as an outcome mediating the influence of fairness perceptions on relationship stability. The more recent and conservative approach is to view the association between fairness perceptions and relationship stability as spurious, reflecting the fact they are both influenced by relationship satisfaction. Studies adopting this more conservative approach attempt to isolate the causal influence of fairness perceptions on relationship stability by including a measure of relationship satisfaction in models of relationship dissolution. Why would perceptions of fairness influence subsequent relationship outcomes net of their effects on a contemporaneous measure of relationship satisfaction? Researchers argue that respondents may acknowledge in an interview that the relationship is unfair, but it may not be a source of distress in the relationship. If the imbalance persists over time, however, they may begin to dwell on it and become distressed (Frisco and Williams 2003; Grote and Clark 2001).

Findings that have been able to exploit longitudinal data in examining the influence of fairness perceptions on the stability of intimate relationships are mixed. While some research finds that perceptions of being underbenefited significantly increase chances of relationship dissolution, independently of relationship satisfaction (Felmlee, Sprecher, and Bassin 1990; Sprecher 2001), other studies fail to find an independent effect of fairness perceptions (Cate and Lloyd 1992). Differences between these studies could be tied to the fact that they are based on convenience samples.

Only a handful of studies have used nationally representative data to examine whether perceptions of fairness lead couples to separate (DeMaris 2007; Frisco and Williams 2003; Gager and Sanchez 2003; Sanchez et al. 1998). All four of these studies have focused exclusively on married or cohabiting relationships, and three of them have relied on data from the National Survey of Families and Households. One NSFH study, which does not control for relationship satisfaction, finds that cohabiting couples are more likely to separate if the male partner perceives himself to be underbenefited in the area of housework (Sanchez et al. 1998). Another NSFH study fails to find any evidence among married couples that underbenefiting in the area of housework is destabilizing (Gager and Sanchez 2003). A more recent study of marital dissolution based on the NSFH takes into account fairness across several areas, and distinguishes between overbenefiting and underbenefiting (DeMaris 2007). This study finds that greater female underbenefiting is significantly associated with a greater hazard of separation until measures of marital satisfaction are entered into the model. It is difficult to generalize about differences in the dynamics of married and cohabiting couples based on these studies, because they measure perceptions of fairness differently and include different sets of control variables in their models.

Taken together, the results of studies that have examined the influence of perceived fairness on the actual stability of intimate relationships lead me to make the following prediction:

Hypothesis 1: Male and female partners' perceptions of being underbenefited will increase the chances that couples separate.

Distributive Justice in Cohabitation versus Marriage

Some scholars argue that individuals' pre-occupation with the balance of contributions and outcomes depends on the type of relationship and the extent to which individuals value reciprocity in their relationships (Mills and Clark 1994). They suggest that in communal relationships, such as romantic relationships and friendships, individuals are more concerned about the welfare of their partner than the balance of contributions and outcomes. Offering support for this notion, studies find that individuals higher in exchange orientation monitor exchanges more closely and react more strongly to perceived unfairness (Murstein, Cerreto, and MacDonald 1977; Sprecher 1998). Specifically, perceived underbenefiting matters more to individuals who feel that reciprocity is integral to their relationship (for a review of these studies see Buunk and Schaufeli 1999).

In spite of this emphasis on factors that moderate reactions to fairness perceptions, researchers have yet to examine whether concerns of distributive justice are more consequential to the fate of cohabiting or married couples (for an exception see Brines and Joyner 1999). After conducting in-depth interviews of both married and cohabiting couples in the 1980s, Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz (1983) found that while married couples viewed their relationship as a joint enterprise and felt that keeping track of contributions and outcomes undermined trust, cohabiting couples displayed a cautious approach to their relationship. This research suggests that cohabiting individuals have less of a communal orientation and more of an exchange orientation than their married counterparts.

Differences in the orientation of cohabiting couples could be due to selection (i.e., the types of individuals who cohabit) or causation (i.e., the effects of cohabitation on individuals). Offering evidence for selection, studies find that individuals who cohabit are less traditional in their gender roles than their counterparts who marry (e.g., Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Sassler and Goldscheider 2004). Emphasizing causation, researchers argue that cohabiting men and women are more preoccupied than their married counterparts with the balance of contributions and outcomes in the relationship because of the uncertainty and narrow time horizon signaled by the decision to cohabit rather than marry. Because the institution of marriage emphasizes interdependence and permanence, individuals who marry are encouraged to have a communal orientation (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Brines and Joyner 1999). Few studies have examined whether the experience of cohabitation actually changes individual attitudes (for an exception, see Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992). In sum, cohabitation is thought to attract individuals who are more concerned about fairness, and to foster this orientation in them. This leads me to predict:

Hypothesis 2a: Male and female partners' perceptions of being underbenefited will have a greater influence on separation among cohabiting couples than among married couples.

While some scholars starkly contrast marriage and cohabitation, others emphasize the heterogeneity within cohabiting couples. One of these studies, based on the National Survey of Families and Households, finds that while cohabiting individuals without plans to marry differ markedly from married individuals with respect to several indicators of relationship quality, including perceptions of fairness, cohabiting individuals with plans to marry are not any different from married individuals on the indicators (Brown and Booth 1996). These

findings lead some researchers to argue that cohabiting couples with plans to marry are qualitatively similar to married couples (e.g., Ciabattari 2004). This suggests the following competing hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2b: Male and female partners' perceptions of being underbenefited will have a greater influence on separation among cohabiting couples without plans to marry than among married couples and cohabiting couples with marriage plans.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

I use data from the National Survey of Families and Households, a study that interviewed 13,008 individuals from a national probability sample between March 1987 and May 1988. The NSFH interviewed the majority of these individuals again between 1992 and 1994. At the first wave, the NSFH over-sampled cohabiting individuals, making it more feasible for researchers to analyze this group separately (see Sweet, Bumpass, and Call 1988).

The National Survey of Families and Households is well suited for comparing how married and cohabiting couples respond to their perceptions of fairness. At the first interview, it asked primary respondents and their partners how they perceived the fairness of several areas in their relationship. (Roughly four-fifths of primary respondents had a partner participate in an interview.) It also asked them about their satisfaction with the relationship. The NSFH is ideal for examining the influence of these factors on the fate of relationships, since a second interview asked partners whether they had separated since the first interview.¹

This study includes married and cohabiting couples in which both partners conducted a first interview (N = 6,164). It further restricts the sample to couples in which both partners answered at least one question concerning the fairness of their relationship (resulting in an N of 5,804), and that had at least one partner report on the status of the relationship at the second interview and key dates (i.e., marriage and separation) if applicable (N = 5,054).² Next, it drops one same-sex couple since the dynamics of same-sex cohabiting couples are found to be distinct (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983). These successive restrictions result in a sample comprised of 4,676 married couples and 377 cohabiting couples. Of the 377 cohabiting couples, 137 couples have plans to marry and 240 couples do not.

Analytic Strategy

The hypotheses require that I stratify the sample into three groups: married couples, cohabiting couples with plans to marry, and cohabiting couples without plans to marry. For each type of couple, I examine the influence of both male and female partners' perceptions of fairness at the first interview on whether couples dissolve between interviews. Furthermore, I examine the influence of perceptions of fairness in models before and after controlling for male and female partners' relationship satisfaction at the first interview. As mentioned earlier, this approach allows the more conventional examination of how relationship satisfaction mediates the influence of perceptions of fairness on the stability of relationships, but it also allows for a more conservative test of the influence of fairness perceptions on relationship stability.

¹The NSFH used a Self-Administered Questionnaire (or SAQ) to ask partners about their perceptions of the relationship. In contrast to face-to-face interviews, SAQs are thought to elicit more honest responses to questions on more sensitive issues. In addition, SAQs enable partners to see the scale itself, which allows them to better situate their responses (Sweet et al. 1988).

²Missing values for the independent variables are imputed using sample means.

Variables

Marriage plans—I identify cohabiting couples in which both partners in the couple express at the first interview that they have definite plans to marry each other, and differentiate these couples from all other cohabiting couples (e.g., Brown 2000; Brown and Booth 1996). For the ease of describing the results, I refer to cohabiting couples with plans to marry as “engaged,” and their counterparts without plans as “unengaged.”

Relationship dissolution—The variable measuring relationship dissolution is based on whether either partner in the relationship reported at the second interview that the relationship ended with separation.³ Cohabiting couples who marry are classified as intact.

Fairness perceptions—Variables measuring perceptions of fairness are based on the question from the first interview: “How do you feel about the fairness in your relationship in each of the following areas?” For areas of “working for pay,” “housework,” and “spending money,” primary respondents and their partners could answer “very unfair to me,” “somewhat unfair to me,” “fair to both,” “somewhat unfair to her/him,” or “very unfair to her/him.”⁴

While previous studies examining the effects of perceptions of fairness on the stability of couples with data from the National Survey of Families and Households focus on the area of housework (with the exception of DeMaris 2007), it is unusual for partners in a relationship to make exactly the same contribution to any single area (DeMaris and Longmore 1996). Rather, one partner will contribute more to one area of the relationship and the other partner will contribute more to another area of it. If imbalances in one area are offset by imbalances in another area, then partners may consider the relationship fair. For instance, individuals who report they are underbenefited in the area of housework may also report that their partners are underbenefited in the area of paid work. This suggests that it is important to take into account perceptions of fairness across several areas.

Consistent with previous studies based on the National Survey of Families and Households that measure perceptions of fairness across several domains, I create indexes of underbenefiting and overbenefiting (DeMaris 2007; Longmore and DeMaris 1997). For the underbenefit index, I assign each partner two points for every area that was reported to be “very unfair to me,” one point for every area that was “somewhat unfair to me,” and zero points for every area that was “fair to both” or “unfair to her/him” ($\alpha = .57$ for both female and male partners). For the overbenefit index, I give each partner two points for every area reported to be “very unfair to her/him,” one point for every area that was “somewhat unfair to her/him,” and zero points for every area that was “fair to both” or “unfair to me” ($\alpha = .53$ for female partners and $.49$ for male partners). Values on both indexes can range from 0 to 6; partners who reported all three areas as being “fair to both”

³For primary respondents who did not participate in a second interview, I obtain information on separation from their Wave I partners if they participated in a second interview. The bulk of information on separation comes from primary respondents rather than their partners. Results based only on information from primary respondents are similar to ones that exploit this information from their partners (results not shown).

⁴Because married and cohabiting couples differ in the number of children that they have, I do not consider perceptions of fairness in the area of child care.

receive a 0 on both indexes.⁵ Because I do not have information on all of the areas of a relationship, these measures may not adequately capture overall fairness in the relationship.

Some analyses divide male and female partners (separately) into three categories on the basis of their average values across measures of fairness in specific areas; the original values for each area ranged from 1 (“very unfair to me”) to 5 (“very unfair to her/him”). Partners with an average value of 3 (“fair to both”) are classified as fairly treated; partners with a value less than 3 are classified as underbenefited; and partners with a value more than 3 are classified as overbenefited. While these three categories fail to capture the degree of overbenefiting and underbenefiting, as do the indexes, they offer a more intuitive understanding of perceptions of fairness and their influence relationship stability.

Relationship satisfaction—To measure satisfaction with the relationship at the first interview, I consider male and female partners’ responses to the question: “Taking things all together, how would you describe your [relationship]?” This question offers seven possible responses that range from “very unhappy” to “very happy.” Appendix A, which can be found on the *SPQ* website (www.asanet.org/spq), displays correlations between relationship satisfaction and the fairness indexes.

Control variables—As control variables, I include measures of primary respondents’ characteristics (i.e., age when the coresidential relationship began); measures that pertain to the couple (i.e., duration at first interview), and measures that correspond to both the male and female partner (i.e., grew up with two biological parents, previously married, and level of education). Descriptive statistics for these variables appear in Appendix B on the *SPQ* website. Several variables included by previous National Survey of Families and Households studies in couple-level models of separation (Smock and Manning 1997) are not included as controls because they failed to reach statistical significance in preliminary models.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for key variables broken down by the type of relationship. The first column shows the statistics for married couples, and the second and third columns show them for unengaged and engaged cohabiting couples, respectively. I also present the results from two-tailed significance tests for differences between married and cohabiting couples in the mean values of the different variables. Recall that the variables presented here are based on information collected during the first interview, with an exception being the variable for the dissolution of relationships. Higher values on these measures indicate less positive evaluations of the relationship.

The results in Table 1 reveal that unengaged cohabiting couples have the least stable relationships, and that the married couples have the most stable relationships; cohabiting couples with marriage plans fall between these two groups but are closer to the married couples. Twelve percent of marriages dissolved between interviews. In contrast, 43% of the unengaged couples and 23% of the engaged cohabiting couples dissolved between

⁵Ideally, I would like to examine how male and female partners’ perceptions interact to influence perceptions of fairness, as previous studies using NSFH couple-level data have done (Gager and Sanchez 2003; Sanchez et al. 1998). In an attempt to do this, I cross-classified male and female partners’ reports of being underbenefited, fairly treated, and overbenefited. In over half (i.e., 56.8%) of all couples, partners’ responses about fairness are concordant. In 2.7% of couples both partners view themselves as overbenefited, and in 3.3% of couples both partners view themselves as underbenefited. Therefore, extreme disagreement between the partners is unusual. Because there are so few couples in many of the cells, I simply consider the additive effects of males’ and females’ perceptions of fairness.

interviews. These differences in dissolution between married and cohabiting couples are significant.

Unengaged cohabiting couples have the highest level of female underbenefiting (.78 on the index), engaged couples have the lowest level of female underbenefiting (.47), and married couples occupy the middle position (.57). Both unengaged and engaged cohabiting couples display higher levels of male underbenefiting than do married couples (.35 and .33 versus .21). Levels of male and female underbenefiting among unengaged cohabiting couples, but not engaged cohabiting couples, are significantly different than respective levels among married couples. Within all three types of relationships, levels of underbenefiting are considerably lower for the male partner than for the female partner.

Paralleling the patterns for female underbenefiting, engaged cohabiting couples have the most satisfying relationships, while unengaged cohabiting couples have the least satisfying relationships. This pattern is indicated by both females' and males' reports of relationship satisfaction; however, engaged men are the only group among the cohabiting who do not significantly differ from their married counterparts in their levels of relationship satisfaction. In sum, the results for both relationship satisfaction and perceptions of fairness suggest that unengaged cohabiting couples are consistently the least positive in the way they evaluate their relationships.

Addressing the influence of the female partners' perceptions of fairness on the stability of all three types of relationships, Figure 1 divides the unengaged, engaged, and married couples into three categories: underbenefited, fair to both, and overbenefited. As mentioned earlier, these categories are based on average values across all three areas: spending money, working for pay, and housework. The results in this figure suggest that female underbenefiting is destabilizing only to married and engaged cohabiting couples, and that it is especially destabilizing to engaged couples. Among the engaged cohabiting couples, relationships in which the female partner considers herself underbenefited are much more likely to break up than relationships in which the females views herself as fairly treated. Specifically, 40% of engaged couples with underbenefited females broke up between interviews, while 17% of engaged couples with fairly treated females separated between interviews. Among both marriages and engaged cohabiting couples, underbenefited females differ significantly from fairly treated females in their likelihood of separation at a $p < .05$ level.

The results in Figure 2 suggest that male underbenefiting is destabilizing only to marriages and unengaged cohabiting couples; however, differences between underbenefited males and fairly treated males are significant only among married couples ($p < .05$). While these figures suggest that male and female underbenefiting increases the chances of separation for some couples, they do not take into account other factors such as relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, they do not capture the degree of underbenefiting.

Multivariate results

The results in Table 2 show the effects of male and female underbenefiting and overbenefiting indexes on dissolution based on Cox proportional hazards models that adjust for left truncation and include the control variables listed in Appendix B (on the *SPQ* website).⁶ Model 1 includes variables listed in Appendix B, while Model 2 additionally takes into account both partners' relationship satisfaction. These models are estimated separately for the three different types of couples. I additionally estimate models (not shown) that pool these three groups and include interaction terms between each variable and indicator variables for the two types of cohabiting couples. Based on the results of these

models, I indicate in this table whether the effects of variables for engaged and unengaged couples differ significantly at a $p < .05$ level from the effects for marriages.

Hypothesis 1 states that male and female partners' perceptions of being underbenefited will increase couples' chances of separation. The results from Model 1 suggest that male underbenefiting significantly increases the hazard of separation only among married and unengaged couples, and that female underbenefiting significantly increases the hazard of separation only among married and engaged couples. The effects of male and female underbenefiting among the married couples decline considerably in magnitude and fall out of significance once measures of relationship satisfaction are added in Model 2. From a conservative standpoint, male underbenefiting increases the hazard of separation only among unengaged couples, and female underbenefiting increases the hazard only among engaged couples. Therefore, I find only limited support for the first hypothesis using a conservative test of causal influence.

Hypothesis 2a states that male and female partners' perceptions of being underbenefited will have a greater influence among cohabiting couples than among married couples, whereas Hypothesis 2b states that their perceptions of being underbenefited will have a greater influence only among cohabiting couples without plans to marry. While the effect of male underbenefiting is significant among cohabiting couples without plans to marry, it fails to differ significantly from the effect for married couples. The results for male underbenefiting, then, offer weak support for Hypothesis 2b. Similarly, the effect of female underbenefiting is not significantly greater for engaged cohabiting couples than for married couples. The fact that the female underbenefiting effect is weakest among unengaged cohabiting couples is at odds with both of these competing hypotheses. The lack of statistically significant differences for these effects could reflect a lack of statistical power due to small numbers of cohabiting couples.

CONCLUSION

Scholars have yet to fully examine the conditions under which perceptions of fairness are more salient to the quality and stability of intimate relationships. Assuming that cohabitation is associated with uncertainty and a narrow time horizon, I argued that cohabiting couples, particularly those without plans to marry, would be more exchange-oriented and less communal than married couples. I predicted that concerns about distributive justice would factor into decisions to separate for married and cohabiting couples alike, but that these concerns would play a more prominent role in the stability of cohabiting couples, especially those couples without plans to marry.

Using two waves of couple-level data from the National Survey of Families and Households, I examined the influence of both the male and female partners' perceptions of fairness at the first interview on their hazard of separation before the second interview. I paid close attention to how the influence of perceptions of fairness differed for unengaged cohabiting couples, engaged cohabiting couples, and marriages. I examined the effects of perceptions of fairness before and after taking into account both partners' satisfaction with the relationship. This modeling strategy is consistent with the more conventional approach which considers how the influence of perceptions of fairness on the stability of relationships is mediated by relationship satisfaction. Such an approach assumes that fairness perceptions

⁶Couples contribute exposure to the risk of dissolution until the time of the second interview, or until they marry (if cohabiting). I use this type of event history model because the time during which couples are at risk of dissolution is continuous (i.e., in months), and I am not concerned with the baseline hazard rate. These models adjust for left truncation since couples began their relationship before the first interview; this adjustment conditions the partial likelihood on having survived until the beginning of observation, specifically the date of the first interview (Allison 1995:162).

influence relationship stability through their effects on relationship satisfaction. In contrast, the more recent approach to analyzing the influence of fairness perceptions on relationship stability is to evaluate their “effects” only in models that control for relationship satisfaction. This latter approach allows for the possibility that relationship dissatisfaction leads couples to reevaluate partners’ relative contributions and outcomes in a biased manner and to dissolve their relationships, producing a spurious association between fairness perceptions and relationship stability. I followed this more conservative approach in evaluating the influence of fairness perceptions on the stability of relationships.

Among married couples, the effects of both male and female underbenefiting on separation were significant until relationship satisfaction was taken into account. A study based on a more restricted sample of married couples from the National Survey of Families and Households found a similar pattern for the effects of female underbenefiting (DeMaris 2007). From a conservative standpoint, the decline in underbenefiting effects with the inclusion of information on relationship satisfaction may reflect the fact that some spouses focus on partners’ relative contributions and outcomes after they become disenchanted with the relationship. Although I predicted that married couples would be less responsive than cohabiting couples to perceived underbenefiting, I did not anticipate the possibility that perceptions of fairness would play only an intervening role in spouses’ decision to separate. These patterns may reflect not only the cognitive prescription for married couples, especially wives, to adopt a communal orientation, but also the structural barriers to terminating a marriage, such as children, joint monetary investments, shared friends, and the stigma of divorcing. These cognitive and structural barriers may discourage married couples from separating on the basis of distributive justice concerns. At the same time, these barriers may require dissatisfied spouses to develop a compelling justification for ending a marriage (Vaughan 1986). They may find it more acceptable to explain divorce in terms of justice issues than some other reasons (e.g., attraction to another partner).

Among cohabiting couples, female partners’ perceptions of underbenefiting had a significant effect on separation only among engaged cohabiting couples, and male partners’ perceptions of underbenefiting had a significant effect on separation only among unengaged cohabiting couples; levels of significance for these effects did not decline when measures of relationship satisfaction were added to the models. A previous study combining unengaged and engaged couples from the National Survey of Families and Households finds that male underbenefiting, but not female underbenefiting, increases the likelihood of separation (Sanchez et al. 1998). It is important to note that a large majority of cohabiting couples are comprised of unengaged couples. Consequently, analyses that fail to differentiate cohabiting couples according to engagement status are likely to overrepresent processes unique to unengaged couples.

Recent research on cohabiting couples, in addition to post-hoc analyses, offers clues to why male underbenefiting, and not female underbenefiting, is destabilizing to unengaged cohabiting couples. A qualitative study of cohabiting couples finds that traditional gender role norms dictate that formal marriage proposals be initiated by the male partner rather than the female partner (Sassler and Miller 2007). Furthermore, a study based on the NSFH finds that male partners’ attitudes towards the relationship have a greater influence than female partners’ attitudes on whether cohabiting couples subsequently marry (Brown 2000). To the extent that cohabiting men have greater latitude than cohabiting women in proposing marriage, plans to marry may be a stronger marker of relationship orientation for cohabiting men than for cohabiting women.

I conducted additional analyses (results not shown) to examine whether unengaged and engaged cohabiting men in this sample differ markedly in terms of their commitment.

Addressing commitment, the National Survey of Families and Households asked primary respondents about the importance of different reasons for their decision to cohabit. The supplemental analyses revealed that unengaged cohabiting men in this study's sample attached a significantly greater level of importance than engaged cohabiting men to the statement that they were motivated to cohabit because it required less personal commitment than marriage; unengaged and engaged cohabiting women failed to differ significantly in this respect.

Still, these results do not explain why female underbenefiting was consequential to engaged cohabiting couples, but not to unengaged cohabiting couples. Research based on focus groups of young adults and in-depth interviews of cohabiting youth suggests that many women are wary of cohabitation because they view it as an arrangement in which men can receive the benefits of marriage (i.e., sexual access and domestic services) without having to offer a long-term commitment (Smock et al. 2007). These concerns suggest that female underbenefiting will be more destabilizing when marriage is not on the horizon.

Once again, previous research and posthoc analyses focused on cohabiting couples may help explain the counterintuitive findings. Theory and research in recent decades suggests that a subset of individuals who cohabit view their relationships as a "trial marriage" (e.g., Casper and Bianchi 2002). Some scholars specifically argue that some women cohabit in order to observe their partner's willingness to share employment and domestic responsibilities, and ultimately determine their suitability for marriage (Cherlin 2000; Sanchez et al. 1998). Engaged women may be more likely than unengaged women to cohabit for this purpose, or they may be more likely to interpret their experiences with cohabitation as indicative of what their marriage would be like. Upon acknowledging the fact that their relationship falls short of their expectations, engaged women may be more likely than their unengaged counterparts to terminate the relationship. Supplemental analyses (results not shown) conducted for cohabiting women reveal that engaged women do attach a greater level of importance than their unengaged counterparts to the statement that they cohabited to ensure their compatibility with a partner before marriage; however, the difference was not large nor statistically significant. Since this question was limited to cohabiting partners who were primary respondents, small sample sizes reduce the precision of these estimates and the ability to detect a significant difference.

Alternatively, underbenefiting women without plans to marry may have some unmeasured characteristic which makes them unresponsive to perceptions of fairness. For instance, they may have low levels of entitlement (Sanchez et al. 1998) or few alternatives to the relationship (e.g., Udry 1981); these factors may be only weakly correlated with the basic demographic variables included in the models. Had the National Survey of Families and Households included items measuring these factors (e.g., perceptions of the availability of alternative mates), I could have directly examined the role of these factors in moderating the responses of unengaged women to perceptions of fairness. In the absence of these items, an indirect strategy to examining their role is to examine how the influence of perceptions of fairness on separation among unengaged women differs according to relationship duration. To the extent that underbenefiting women with a greater sense of entitlement or more promising alternatives dissolve their relationships at a faster rate than their counterparts, the pools of underbenefiting women in relationships of longer duration will be disproportionately comprised of those with a weaker sense of entitlement or less desirable alternatives. Reflecting their changing composition, underbenefiting women will be decreasingly likely to terminate a relationship as the duration of their relationship increases.

To determine whether cohabiting women are decreasingly likely to end an unfair relationship the longer their time in it, I ran an additional model that allowed the effect of

female underbenefiting to differ by duration for unengaged cohabiting women (results not shown). This model was similar to the second set of models presented in Table 2. However, for greater ease of testing the interaction between female underbenefiting and duration, this model included the dichotomous measure of female underbenefiting rather than the continuous measure. The plot of relative hazards based on this model, shown in Figure 3, reveals that in the initial year of risk, unengaged cohabiting couples are much more likely to dissolve if they include an underbenefiting female partner rather than a fairly treated female partner. This plot also demonstrates that female underbenefiting becomes relatively less destabilizing with greater time spent in the relationship. In fact, female underbenefiting slightly decreases relative hazards of separation for unengaged cohabiting relationships at later years of risk. Because a large fraction of unengaged women are in relationships of longer duration during the risk period, as suggested in Appendix B (on the *SPQ* website), they are generally unresponsive to underbenefiting in the analyses presented earlier. While these results are suggestive, they need to be corroborated with larger samples of cohabiting couples.⁷ Nevertheless, they are consistent with evidence based on data from the first wave of the National Survey of Households and Families that the composition of cohabiting couples changes with duration, at least in terms of engagement status and other measured characteristics (Brown 2003).

It should be noted that this study's measures of perceptions of fairness are limited (for a discussion of these limitations see Smith et al. 1998). For instance, the questions about fairness in the National Survey of Households and Families pertain to only a few areas. Furthermore, the small sizes of engaged and unengaged cohabiting couples decrease the precision of the results and diminish the power to detect statistical significance. Still, the strengths of this study overshadow its weaknesses. This is one of very few studies to examine the influence of perceptions of fairness on relationship stability using longitudinal data. It is also one of a handful of studies that takes into account the influence of both partners' perceptions of fairness on relationship stability. Finally, this is the first study to consider how the influence of perceptions of fairness on relationship stability differs by type of intimate relationship.

Assuming that the meaning of cohabitation differs across couples and across different periods (Smock 2000), the results in this study need to be corroborated with more recent samples of couples. It would also be informative to examine other ways couples respond to perceived underbenefiting, such as changing their perceptions of fairness. The study results suggest it is also important to measure factors that moderate perceptions of fairness, such as desirability in the broader mating market. Finally, it is important to include more global measures of perceptions of fairness.

This study has important implications for social psychological perspectives on the role of distributive justice in the stability of intimate relationships. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that perceptions of underbenefiting independently influence decisions to separate among some groups of cohabiting couples. Albeit indirectly, the results for cohabiting couples also suggest that attributes of individuals, such as their commitment and market position, may condition responses to perceptions of fairness in intimate relationships. The results for married couples, on the other hand, suggest that fairness perceptions play an important intervening role in the process of separating, offering partners a justification for ending the relationship. Finally, the results suggest cohabiting relationships may be more

⁷These results suggest that researchers need to pay close attention to whether the effects of perceived underbenefiting on the hazard rate of dissolution change over time. In more technical language, researchers need to test for proportional hazards when examining the influence of fairness perceptions on relationship stability.

fragile than marriages in part because cohabiting individuals are, on average, more responsive than spouses to perceived underbenefiting.

The findings of this study also have implications for individual responses to perceptions of fairness in dyads and collectivities more generally (Cook and Parcel 1977; Walster et al. 1978). While scholars have argued that individuals base their decisions to remain in groups on how fairly outcomes are distributed within them (Jasso 1980), they have also emphasized that evaluations of fairness are antithetical to the very nature of intimate relationships; close friends and lovers are thought to focus not on their exchange outcomes but the welfare of a partner (Walster et al. 1978). If justice processes are indeed less central to dynamics of groups and relationships that are more intimate, then this study's emphasis on married and cohabiting couples offers a stringent consideration of how justice concerns influence group turnover and stability.

Studies concerning dyads and collectivities rarely examine exit as a strategy of resolving inequity in natural (as opposed to experimental) settings (Cook and Hegtvædt 1983). Given the paucity of this research, it is critical to consider how these results inform our understanding of exit in contexts other than the intimate dyad. Consider the example of how justice perceptions influence employee turnover in the workplace. Studies that have explored this topic using longitudinal data typically include a small number of employees from a single company. With very few sample members leaving their jobs, these studies lack the statistical power to detect significant influences of perceptions of fairness on employee turnover (Jones and Skarlicki 2003; Randall and Mueller 1995). However, the much larger body of studies considering the association between workplace justice and outcomes such as organizational satisfaction have findings that parallel those based on intimate relationships, with the exception that perceptions of overbenefiting increase satisfaction in the workplace (e.g., Clay-Warner, Hegtvædt, and Roman 2005). The parallel findings for the workplace and the intimate dyad suggest that this study's central finding (i.e., the association between perceived underbenefiting and exiting a relationship among some groups of individuals) would be replicated in studies of employees were researchers able to obtain larger and more representative samples and track them over time.

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Biography

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Figure 1.
Percent of Different Types of Couples that Dissolve, by the Female Partner's Perceptions of Fairness

Figure 2.
Percent of Different Types of Couples that Dissolve, by the Male Partner's Perceptions of Fairness

Figure 3.
Predicted Hazard Ratio of Dissolution by Duration and Female Partner's Perceptions of Fairness: Unengaged Cohabiting Couples

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations (in Parentheses) for Key Variables, by Type of Couple

Variable	Marriages		Unengaged Cohabiting Couples		Engaged Cohabiting Couples	
	Mean	(S.D.)	Mean	(S.D.)	Mean	(S.D.)
<i>Relationship Dissolution</i>						
Separation between Waves I and II	.12	(.32)	.43	(.50)***	.23	(.42)**
<i>Fairness Perceptions at Wave I</i>						
Female underbenefit index (0 to 6)	.57	(.98)	.78	(1.13)**	.47	(.77)
Female overbenefit index (0 to 6)	.22	(.64)	.29	(.66)	.27	(.78)
Female underbenefit (0 or 1)	.31	(.46)	.35	(.48)	.31	(.46)
Female overbenefit (0 or 1)	.10	(.30)	.12	(.33)	.13	(.34)
Male underbenefit index (0 to 6)	.21	(.66)	.35	(.77)**	.33	(.97)
Male overbenefit index (0 to 6)	.43	(.79)	.48	(.87)	.45	(.80)
Male underbenefit (0 or 1)	.10	(.29)	.14	(.35)	.15	(.35)
Male overbenefit (0 or 1)	.26	(.44)	.25	(.44)	.30	(.46)
<i>Relationship Satisfaction at Wave I</i>						
Female unhappiness (1 to 7)	1.93	(1.25)	2.33	(1.41)***	1.61	(.90)**
Male unhappiness (1 to 7)	1.87	(1.18)	2.30	(1.20)***	1.74	(1.08)
N	4,676		240		137	

* $p < .05$;

** $p < .01$;

*** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests with marriages as the comparison group)

Table 2
Coefficients and Standard Errors (in Parentheses) for Cox Models of Dissolution

Variable	Marriages (n = 4,676)		Unengaged (n = 240)		Engaged (n = 137)	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
<i>Fairness Perceptions</i>						
Female underbenefit	.219 *** (.035)	.055 (.039)	-.041 # (.098)	-.156 # (.103)	.454 * (.199)	.593 *** (.219)
Female overbenefit	.056 (.043)	.058 (.062)	.255 (.147)	.275 # (.149)	-.269 (.421)	-.254 (.411)
Male underbenefit	.149 ** (.046)	.091 (.052)	.416 ** (.129)	.354 ** (.129)	-.039 (.226)	-.247 (.269)
Male overbenefit	-.062 (.055)	-.083 (.055)	.086 (.117)	.116 (.116)	.251 (.197)	.158 (.225)
<i>Relationship Satisfaction</i>						
Female unhappiness	-	.302 *** (.030)	-	.297 *** (.082)	-	.058 (.208)
Male unhappiness	-	.175 *** (.032)	-	.029 (.090)	-	.483 * (.214)
Negative 2 LL	7159.2	7014.7	796.3	781.9	188.6	182.3

Note: Results based on left-truncated models with control variables (listed in Appendix B on SPQ website).

* $p < .05$;

** $p < .01$;

*** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests);

$p < .05$ (tests of whether effect differs from marriages)