

Moving In and Moving On

by Scott Stanley | @DecideOrSlide | July 23, 2014 8:40 am

In a new paper^[1], Bowling Green State University sociologist Karen Guzzo analyzes how the odds of cohabitation leading to either getting married or breaking up have changed over the years. Before getting to her findings, let's review some of the cohabitation trends she highlights in her report (based on prior studies).

- 1) The majority of people in their 30s have lived with someone outside of marriage.
- 2) Cohabitation, rather than marriage, is now the more common form of first union.
- 3) Fewer cohabiting unions than in the past start out with the couple having intentions to marry.ⁱ
- 4) People are more likely than ever to cohabit with multiple partners in succession—what I have called “CohabiDating.”ⁱⁱ
- 5) More children than ever before are born to cohabiting couples, and this explains most of the rise^[2] in the number of children being born out of wedlock.

Guzzo notes, as have others, that cohabiting has become a normative experience in the romantic and sexual lives of young adults. As young adults put off marriage until later in life, cohabitation has inhabited much of the space that used to be made up of married couples. I think this dramatic change in how relationships form matters for at least two reasons. First, many cohabiting couples have children, but they are less likely than married couples to have planned to have childrenⁱⁱⁱ and they are much less likely to remain together after having children.^{iv} That's not my subject today, but it should not be hard to see why it matters. Second, most people want lasting love in life, and most people still intend to accomplish that in marriage. However, the ways cohabitation has changed in the past three decades make it less likely that people who have that goal will succeed in it. That's closer to my focus here.

It is obvious that cohabitation has become de-linked from marriage. Guzzo addresses a complicated question related to this change. Is it because all types of cohabiting couples have become less likely to marry or are there subgroups of cohabiters who are driving the increasing disconnect between moving in and moving on in life together? For example, it used to be the case that a couple who moved in together was very likely to get married—and, engaged or not, had an awareness of this when moving in together. But most experts believe that has changed. Guzzo wondered if those who already planned marriage before moving in together are as likely as ever to marry while all the other groups in the growing and diverse universe of cohabiters might be less likely to marry. Similarly, she examined if demographic changes in who cohabits, when, and under what circumstances changed the way cohabitation relates to marriage (e.g., analyzing variables such as race, education, and the presence of children from a prior relationship).

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To simplify and summarize, what Guzzo found is that the increasing diversity in the types of cohabitation and cohabiters does not explain much about why things are so different from the past when it comes to increased odds that cohabiting couples will break up or not marry. Rather, on average, all types of cohabiting couples have become more likely than in the past to break up or not transition into marriage. Here's a quote from her

paper[3] (pg. 834):

Relative to cohabitations formed between 1990 and 1994, cohabitations formed from 1995–1999, 2000–2004, and 2005 and later were 13%, 49%, and 87%, respectively, more likely to dissolve than remain intact. The lower risk of marriage over remaining intact occurred only for the last two cohabitation cohorts (2000–2004 and 2005 and later), which were about 18% and 31% less likely to marry than remain intact, respectively.

Moving in together is becoming less and less likely to lead to having a future together. That's not to say that all cohabiters are in the same boat regarding their destination. Those who are engaged (or have clear plans to marry) before moving in together are far more likely to eventually marry—but as Guzzo shows, even they are becoming less likely to do so. Related to this, my colleagues and I have shown, in numerous studies, that couples with clear plans to marry before cohabiting, along with those who marry without cohabiting, tend to have happier marriages and lower odds of divorce than those who move in together before having a clearly settled commitment to the future in marriage.^v (We believe this is largely because, while cohabiting unions obviously break up often, they are harder to break off than dating relationships because it becomes harder to move out and move on. So some people get stuck in a relationship they would otherwise have not remained in.)

Based on both findings and theory, I have long argued that if a couple tells you they are cohabiting and you know nothing else, you know very little about their level of commitment. Cohabitation is fundamentally ambiguous.^{vi} In fact, that is part—but just part—of why I believe it has become so popular. Sure, there are many cohabiting couples for whom living together was understood as a step-up in commitment, but, on average, research shows it is not associated with an increase in dedication to one's partner.^{vii}

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If a couple tells you that they are married, you know a lot about their commitment. That does not mean that all is perfect, of course. Likewise, if a couple tells you that they have clear, mutual plans to marry, you can infer there is a lot of commitment. Even apart from marriage, I believe that a couple who says they have a lifetime commitment together is telling you something important about a strong level of intention and commitment. Those things all signal commitment. Cohabitation, per se, very often does not. (As a very complex but important aside, I do think the socioeconomic context of some couples makes marriage nearly impossible economically; for some of these couples, I believe cohabitation can be a marker of a higher level of commitment.)

Practically speaking, what do Guzzo's findings tell us? First, taken with the growing body of research in this area, I think we are seeing cohabitation headed toward becoming more ambiguous than ever regarding commitment. Actually, that's not quite right. Cohabitation seems to be moving toward being, unambiguously, a form of dating with no implications about the odds of marrying. Second, these societal changes make it more important than ever for people who do want to succeed in marriage to be careful about how their romantic relationships before marriage unfold.

If you want to marry, be careful about cohabitation. Sure, more and more people are cohabiting, but it's also less likely than ever to lead to marriage. In fact, people are increasingly cohabiting in ways that are associated with greater risks to the aspiration of marital success. If you are aiming for marriage, aim for a solid choice in

a partner and then look to form a public, mutual promise to marry. While all couples may be more likely to break up before marriage now than in the past, look toward something that really signals commitment to figure out whether you and a partner have what it takes to go the distance.

[i.](#) See study by Vespa (2014)[4].

[ii.](#) See study by Lichter, Turner, & Sassler (2010)[5]; see also a blog post I wrote about “Cohabidating.”[6]

[iii.](#) See this resource[7] from the National Center for Family & Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University; see also this document[8] from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

[iv.](#) For example: Sheela Kennedy and Larry Bumpass, “Cohabitation and Trends in the Structure and Stability of Children’s Family Lives” (paper presented at Population Association of America Meeting, Washington, DC, 2011).

[v.](#) For a detailed but non-technical summary, see here[9].

[vi.](#) For example, see Lindsay (2000)[10].

[vii.](#) For example, see study by Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman (2012)[11].

Endnotes:

1. In a new paper: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jomf.12123/abstract>
2. most of the rise: http://www.bgsu.edu/content/dam/BGSU/college-of-arts-and-sciences/NCFMR/documents/FP/FP-14-05_TrendsInBirths.pdf
3. her paper: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jomf.12123/abstract>
4. Vespa (2014): <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jomf.12083/abstract>
5. Lichter, Turner, & Sassler (2010):
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049089X09001227>
6. a blog post I wrote about “Cohabidating.”:
<http://slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com/2010/11/cohabidating.html>
7. this resource: http://www.bgsu.edu/content/dam/BGSU/college-of-arts-and-sciences/NCFMR/documents/FP/FP-14-05_TrendsInBirths.pdf
8. this document: https://thenationalcampaign.org/sites/default/files/resource-primary-download/dcr_sectiona.pdf
9. here: <https://app.box.com/shared/ugfa85i6lly8hp76qey7>
10. Lindsay (2000): <http://pubs.e-contentmanagement.com/doi/abs/10.5172/jfs.6.1.120>
11. Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman (2012): <http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/fam/26/3/348/>

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