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## Working with Cohabitation in Relationship Education and Therapy

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### Abstract

Cohabitation is increasingly common in the United States, with the majority of couples now living together before marriage. This paper briefly reviews research on cohabitation, its association with marital distress and divorce for those who marry (the cohabitation effect), gender differences, and theories underlying this association. Suggestions are made for future areas of exploration in this field, and the implications of the existing research for relationship education efforts and clinical intervention with couples are discussed. In relationship education, it seems important to help individuals explore their own expectations about cohabitation as well as how cohabitation may or may not change their relationships and influence future relationship goals. With regard to cohabiting couples presenting for therapy, clinicians may need to help them consider how cohabitation may have affected their commitment levels, plans for the future, and power dynamics. For married couples in therapy, it may be useful for some to look at the process by which they married and to recommit or clarify commitments made together. Across all of these forms of clinical practice, we recommend a focus on building communication skills so that individuals and couples have the skills necessary to talk about issues, particularly issues related to commitment.

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In recent decades, living together before marriage has become increasingly common in the United States. At least 50 – 70% of couples married during the 1990s cohabited premaritally (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Historically, cohabitation has been studied mainly by researchers in sociology and demography, professions typically not occupied with intervention. Perhaps because of this, little of the empirical knowledge about the risks of cohabitation for some couples has made it into the hands of practitioners of either couples therapy or couples education. The purposes of this paper are to briefly review what is known about premarital heterosexual cohabitation and to translate these findings into tangible ideas for clinical practice, including individual and couple-oriented relationship education strategies, therapy with cohabiting couples, and marital therapy. We limit our review to the United States because, as Kiernan (2002) demonstrates, the rates of cohabitation as well as its meaning in society differs dramatically by country.

### Basic Research Findings

#### What We Know

**Why do couples cohabit?**—The rise in the rate of cohabitation is linked with other important shifts in family patterns. In particular, the increase in the age of first marriage is likely not a coincidence (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). The average age at first marriage has risen to 25.3 for women and 27.1 for men, according to the U.S. Census

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Bureau (Fields, 2004). It is widely understood that couples have been delaying marriage but not delaying living together (Galston, 2008). In part, this means that people have replaced a more stable relationship union type (marriage) with a less stable union (cohabitation) in the early to mid-twenties (Bumpass et al., 1991). This not only has implications for risks to couples and marriages, but also implications for additional risks to children who are born to unstable, less committed unions (Raley & Bumpass, 2003).

Although many have speculated that couples cohabit as a way to test their relationships, couples' own reports suggest that many do not give the transition from dating to cohabiting quite so much thought. Instead, they report that living together just sort of happened (Lindsay, 2000) or that they slid into it (Manning & Smock, 2005). In one of the first quantitative studies of reasons for cohabitation, Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2009) found that cohabiting couples most often report that they started living together so that they could spend more time together. In fact, only about 15% ranked testing the relationship as the top reason for their own cohabitations. Nevertheless, the majority of young adults in general believe that cohabitation provides a good test for compatibility (Glenn, 2005) and that it lowers the likelihood of marital distress and divorce, once married (Johnson et al., 2002).

Economic factors may also play an important role in reasons for cohabitation and the outcomes of cohabiting unions. Partners of all income levels may move in together partly to save money, but those with the lowest income and education levels are the least likely to see their cohabitation result in marriage (Lichter & Qian, 2008). Additionally, cohabiting with multiple partners, which seems to be a risk factor for subsequent divorce (Teachman, 2003), is more common among those with the lowest income and educational levels (Lichter & Qian, 2008).

**The cohabitation effect**—Premarital cohabitation has been shown to be associated with higher rates of divorce in several U. S. samples (e.g., DeMaris & Rao, 1992; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003). Many studies demonstrate links between premarital cohabitation and lower marital quality. Compared to those who did not cohabit premaritally, those who did cohabit have lower marital satisfaction (Stanley et al., 2004), more negative observed communication (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002), more conflict (Thomson & Colella, 1992), more physical violence (Brownridge & Halli, 2000; Stanley et al., 2004), and higher rates of infidelity for wives (Forste & Tanfer, 1996). This association between premarital cohabitation and marital distress and divorce has been termed the cohabitation effect.

**Selection vs. experience**—Although the linkages for risk are well documented across many studies, there exists a debate in the cohabitation literature as to whether it's the type of people who cohabit (i.e., the selectivity perspective) or the experience of cohabitation itself that accounts for the cohabitation effect (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996). There is evidence for both positions. As we shall make clear, both selection and experience explanations support the importance of having interventions take cohabitation dynamics into account. Selectivity can account for at least part of the association between premarital cohabitation and divorce. Woods and Emery (2002) found that the association between premarital cohabitation and divorce was negligible after controlling for variables that were connected to both premarital cohabitation and divorce (i.e., ethnicity, religiousness, and a history of delinquency). Such findings suggest that selection factors can account for the risks associated with premarital cohabitation. On the other hand, as it has been traditionally conceptualized, selectivity does not account for all of the cohabitation effect. For example, Cohan and Kleinbaum (2002) and Kamp Dush et al. (2003) carefully controlled for a number of possible selection variables and continued to find that those who had cohabited premaritally were at higher risk for distress and divorce (also see Amato & Rogers, 1999; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, &

Markman, 2006). Thus, while there are known differences between couples who live together before marriage and those who do not (e.g., religiousness; Stanley et al., 2004), the differences do not fully explain the cohabitation effect. There is more to the story. Next, we describe a new perspective on how the experience of cohabitation may increase risk for divorce in some couples.

**Inertia**—Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) suggest that cohabitation may lead some couples to slide into marriages they otherwise would not have chosen. This “inertia theory” rests on both prior findings as well as commitment theories that distinguish between constraint forces and more intrinsic elements of commitment (see Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Constraints reflect forces that can serve to raise the costs of leaving a relationship. They can come from many sources, such as financial limitations, the difficulty of dividing possessions and moving, legal considerations such as a lease or division of assets, fears of being alone, and moral dimensions. Theoretically, constraints can keep couples together, even when times are tough and when dedication may be low. Dedication, on the other hand, reflects the intrinsic desire to maintain the relationship into the future (Stanley & Markman, 1992).

There is likely great variability among couples in terms of commitment levels during cohabitation, but on average, cohabitation is a relationship form that, at least in the U.S., is associated with lower dedication than marriage (Stanley et al., 2004); yet, many of the constraints associated with marriage also apply to cohabitation. The key issue identified by Stanley et al. (2006) is that the average couple would likely find it harder to break up if they were cohabiting than if they were dating and not cohabiting, all other things being equal, because cohabitation involves a higher level of constraints. For example, cohabitation may involve increased financial commitments (e.g., a lease), increased difficulty to move on (e.g., moving out and finding another place to live), and increased social pressure to stay together (e.g., friends and family beginning to expect more of the relationship, including, in many cases, marriage). Thus, cohabitation could increase the likelihood of marriage, even among couples who are at higher risk for divorce or marital distress. Stanley et al. (2004) speculated that some of the risk of cohabiting prior to marriage could be attributable to a process wherein some people marry a person whom they would not have married had they not cohabited, and thereby, increased the difficulty of leaving. If this reasoning holds, inertia (the increased energy needed to end the relationship due to cohabitation) could be part of the explanation for the cohabitation effect. Relatively higher levels of inertia would favor relationship continuance when levels of dedication and satisfaction were otherwise equivalent (Stanley, Rhoades et al., 2006). That is to say, inertia suggests that cohabitation makes some riskier relationships more likely to continue.

**The timing of the decision to marry**—When considering the cohabitation effect, there is evidence that it is important to distinguish between couples who had made mutual decisions to marry before starting to cohabit and those who develop plans for marriage during cohabitation. Brown and Booth (1996) found that the relationship quality of cohabiting couples with plans for marriage was similar to married couples' relationship quality. More directly, Kline et al. (2004) found that married couples who lived together before engagement had more negative interactions, lower relationship quality, and lower relationship confidence than those who did not cohabit until after engagement or marriage. In the same study, there were no significant differences between couples who lived together only after engagement and those who did not cohabit premaritally. This finding has now been replicated in a more representative, national sample (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, in press). Such findings suggest that living together may be a risky choice primarily for those who do not already have plans to marry. This is, in fact, what the concept of inertia predicts; the group of couples who cohabited before engagement should be inclusive of those who are

most at risk for marrying someone they otherwise would have broken up with had they not been cohabiting. This reasoning does not suggest that all couples who cohabit prior to clarity about their future in marriage are at greater risk, only that this group contains the subset of those who may remain together longer because of the relatively greater constraints associated with cohabitation.

**Gender differences in commitment**—There is also evidence for differences between married men and women in commitment based on cohabitation history. These differences have potentially important implications for clinical work with couples and for preventive efforts. In an aforementioned national survey, married men who cohabited with their partners before marriage reported lower levels of dedication than men who did not cohabit premaritally (Stanley et al., 2004). There was no significant difference for women in that study. Other research with a smaller sample of couples showed that among married couples who had cohabited before engagement, husbands were significantly less dedicated than their wives (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006). Surprisingly little other research on cohabitation has considered either commitment or gender, though both seem important, given that they may relate to power dynamics in relationships.

### What We Need to Know

Before considering practice implications, it's important to note limitations to the cohabitation literature and gaps in the existing knowledge base. First, many studies published on cohabitation have been based on a single data set, the National Survey of Families and Households. Although it comprises a random sample of the United States population, it is now somewhat outdated, for the first wave occurred in the late 1980s. Given the quickly changing nature of cohabitation in terms of both its popularity and its meaning in the United States (Smock, 2000), replication studies are very important, though not widely published.

Second, it is difficult to isolate the relative contributions of variables to the cohabitation effect. For example, it is impossible to know from the current literature how religiousness (Stanley et al., 2004), number previous of cohabitation and sexual partners (Teachman, 2003), delinquent behavior history (Woods & Emery, 2002), and living together before engagement (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades et al., in press) may interact in explaining the cohabitation effect because not all of these constructs have been measured in a single study. Longitudinal studies that follow participants from very early in relationship development through cohabitation to break-up or marriage and that include comprehensive measurement of a multitude of variables are needed to fully understand the relative risks related to cohabitation.

Third, good estimates of the strength of the association between premarital cohabitation and divorce are not available. For example, studies have shown that those who cohabited premaritally experienced a divorce rate that was somewhere between 1.29 and 1.86 times greater than the rate for those who did not cohabit premaritally (DeMaris & Rao, 1992; Kamp Dush et al., 2003; Teachman, 2003). However, these estimates are based on couples who married as early as the 1960s and none of these studies included participants who married later than the 1990s. Updated samples will be necessary before steadfast conclusions can be drawn about the degree of risk for divorce.

Aside from these specific criticisms of the available data, there are several advances that would help researchers and clinicians better understand the cohabitation effect and better direct us toward effective interventions. As noted already, little research has incorporated existing theory about couples and relationship processes into research on cohabitation. Broadening this field to incorporate more literature on topics such as commitment, feminist

theory, attachment theory, and power in relationships would likely aid our understanding of this dynamic new stage in American romantic relationships. International research comparing the meaning and institutionalization of cohabitation in different countries and cultures could also illuminate the circumstances under which cohabitation is most associated with risk (see Kiernan, 2002).

## Practice Implications

It is clear from our review of its limitations that the literature does not contain all the answers regarding the association between premarital cohabitation and marital risk. As the field moves forward, research will further elucidate the circumstances under which cohabitation is a risk factor for distress and divorce and more precisely characterize the mechanisms that explain the cohabitation effect. In the meantime, we believe that enough knowledge exists to begin incorporating research on cohabitation and the cohabitation effect into both couple therapy and relationship education efforts. Perhaps the greatest implication of the existing research is that it highlights the need to pay close attention to couples' commitment dynamics and how and why they transition from one relationship or commitment stage to another (Stanley & Rhoades, in press).

The broad framework we use to describe the importance of how relationship transitions are made is summed up by the shorthand phrase, "sliding vs. deciding" (Stanley et al., 2006). Essentially, we believe that it matters whether one slides into cohabitation without much deliberation or decides to cohabit, based on deliberation and mutual understanding. Two factors are essential in considering these implications. First, most people apparently cannot point to a process of deliberation in cohabiting, describing instead a dynamic of sliding into that status of their living arrangements (Manning & Smock, 2005). Second, deciding is a process fundamental to making a commitment, since commitment can be viewed as making a choice to give up other choices (Stanley, 2005). Hence, couples who slide into cohabitation may not only be risking the increase of constraints prior to the full development of dedication, they may be building a relationship on a shakier foundation to begin with merely by the absence of a clear, focused commitment at a critical phase of relationship development. A stronger commitment, based on dedication, may more fully support motivation to follow-through during the inevitable tougher times that many, if not most, relationships will experience (Stanley et al., 2006; Stanley & Rhoades, in press). This line of reasoning is fundamental to a number of the most important recommendations we make about practice.

Before addressing specific ideas for relationship education and couple therapy, we would like to address an important question that is often raised: Does the research on the cohabitation effect mean that practitioners delivering relationship education programs should dissuade individuals from cohabiting? This question is difficult to answer in any definitive sense because people differ in how they would answer, both based on scientific grounds and because of differences in values. We recognize that questions about the advisability of cohabitation are fundamentally linked to other beliefs and practices, especially those that are religious. Therefore, some might say that the question about dissuading couples is really more about religion than practice based on social science. Others would say that, even when it comes to social science, blanket proscriptive advice is not indicated or, at best, is premature. Not even the three authors of this paper completely agree on what would be the best practice under differing circumstances.

These considerations lead us to believe that whether or not practitioners choose to dissuade most couples from cohabiting depends, pragmatically, on the nature of the setting, the provider, and the recipient. As cohabiting prior to marriage has become normative (Smock,



2000), one of the strongest predictors of which couples will not live together prior to marriage is religious faith (e.g., Stanley et al., 2004). In settings with a focus on traditional religious beliefs and values, practitioners may feel strongly about giving messages that include theological and moral teaching about why cohabiting is viewed as unwise. If that is the path taken, we suspect that it will also be good practice for religious leaders to include social science facts in what they teach; this is because many of the people they work with will hear such information in various channels of media. Contextualizing research findings with the theological teachings of a faith may provide the strongest basis for helping religious individuals to make decisions about their relationships. That is not to suggest that religious leaders should or would adopt social science as their standard of truth, merely that they could anticipate what messages people will receive in addition to the teachings of the faith system.

When working in secular settings or with people without strong religious beliefs about cohabitation, we do not expect that most practitioners will find it desirable to simply discourage cohabitation. Rather, we believe that practitioners will be most effective with an approach that is informative but not proscriptive. That will take the form of helping individuals consider their own expectations about cohabitation, their partners' expectations about the relationship, their beliefs and values, their own circumstances, and the available research evidence so they can make good decisions for themselves. In other words, the current research evidence provides many insights for how individuals and couples can be more careful and thoughtful in their relationship behavior in ways that are protective of themselves and their future aspirations.

We believe that the existing set of findings strongly suggests that people should be more aware of what they are doing and why, and of the implications of various behaviors for their chances of achieving their own goals. To those matters we now turn. We first discuss implications of research on cohabitation for relationship education, then discuss implications of this research for couple therapy. Questions that practitioners could use with individuals and/or couples across these settings are presented in Table 1. These questions could be used as part of discussions the practitioner has directly with clients (as in therapy) or could be used as part of an exercise (as in relationship education) to help partners consider and discuss views of commitment, the ways decisions have been made in the relationship, and the future of the relationship. Practitioners may also find measures of commitment (e.g., the Commitment Inventory; Stanley & Markman, 1992) and reasons for cohabitation (e.g., the Reasons for Cohabitation Scale; Rhoades et al., 2009) useful.

### Relationship Education with Individuals

Relationship education is typically aimed at couples who are already in fairly committed, viable relationships, but new curricula have recently been developed that target individuals who may or may not be in relationships, and if in relationships, may or may not have high levels of commitment (e.g., *Within My Reach*; Pearson, Stanley, & Kline, 2005). The cohabitation literature demonstrates that early relationship development, and the steps that come before marriage, influence a marriage outcomes and suggest a need for early, individual-oriented relationship education. Individuals can learn about relationships even before they enter them (Rhoades & Stanley, in press). For example, relationship education with individuals could discuss research on cohabitation and the cohabitation effect, which may be particularly important to do because the research findings can seem counter-intuitive. The majority of young adults believes cohabiting will improve one's chances in marriage (e.g., Glenn, 2005; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), yet we know of no study showing advantages to premarital cohabitation as a strategy to reduce the risk for divorce. At the very least, providing basic information in relationship education programs on what is

known about cohabitation from research may help some individuals approach relationship transitions such as cohabitation more thoughtfully.

Individual-oriented relationship education programs could review research on cohabitation and encourage individuals to think critically about it. Specifically, relationship education could help individuals carefully consider their own views and values about cohabitation, their reasons for wanting to live together (e.g., becoming closer, doubts about the relationship, pressure from partner, finances, convenience), and the potential costs of cohabiting, such as giving up other options. Based on our interpretations of the existing literature, we believe that one of the things most lacking in many people's consideration of cohabitation is an understanding of the ways in which living together could make it harder to break up (Stanley et al., 2006). That may be no particular risk for partners who are clear about their future together, but it is an important, potential risk for those who have not clarified their commitment intentions, marital and otherwise. Similarly, those who are thinking of cohabiting to “test” the relationship could be informed that this reason, of all those studied so far, is the one most associated with relationship problems (Rhoades et al., 2009). The simple message would be that if one feels the need to cohabit to test the relationship, he or she may already be picking up ways in which the relationship is a poor fit. Helping individuals fully utilize information they already possess could be a very effective intervention.

Although the empirical evidence shows cohabitation (prior to marital commitment) to be associated with risk, it is possible that some people learn information about a partner from cohabiting that they would not learn otherwise. That is, cohabiting could lead some people to break up instead of marrying someone with whom they would later be unhappy. Most studies have not been designed to address this issue. At the very least, individuals can learn in relationship education that no research, to date, shows that cohabiting prior to marriage improves the odds for the average couple. Taking the relationship more slowly and finding other ways to test it out, such as through couple relationship education, may be wiser than moving in together.

Information about gender and cohabitation may also be important in relationship education with individuals. More research on this topic is needed, but there is some evidence that men, but not women, who cohabit before engagement tend to have lower, average levels of commitment than those who do not cohabit beforehand (Rhoades et al., 2006; Stanley et al., 2004). There have also been some reported gender differences in reasons for cohabitation (Rhoades et al., 2009) suggesting that partners may not always share expectations about what cohabitation means or where the relationship is headed. Given that women tend to be more committed in pre-engagement cohabitations, and may have the most to lose financially or because of an unplanned pregnancy, relationship education about these possible differences between men and women in the meaning of cohabitation may be especially valuable to women.

More generally, individuals in relationship education would likely benefit from learning basic communication skills, along with messages about the value of using these skills to clarify expectations and commitment levels. These skills will facilitate clear conversations with their partners about their relationships. More specific ideas for how to ask partners about the future, commitment levels, and the meaning of cohabitation could also be discussed in relationship education with individuals (see Table 1 for possible questions to address).

Historically, reaching individuals before they are committed to marriage has not been a focus of the relationship education field. Couple-oriented relationship education, especially

premarital education, is now integrated into larger systems in the United States (e.g., religious communities), but individual-oriented relationship is not (Rhoades & Stanley, in press). To reach individuals earlier and before they slide into cohabitation, relationship educators will need to pursue new avenues for delivering relationship education such as high schools and colleges, other existing services and systems that are available to at-risk populations (e.g., Head Start programs, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families programs), and new technology, especially the Internet (e.g., websites, blogs, and social networking sites (see [www.TwoOfUs.org](http://www.TwoOfUs.org) for an example)). By using novel arenas for intervention, practitioners may achieve the greatest impact on relationships and marriages through this type of early relationship education to individuals (Rhoades & Stanley, in press).

### Relationship Education with Couples

With regard to relationship education, calls have been made to begin identifying and serving couples most at-risk for marital distress and divorce (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003; Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008; Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001). Cohabitation appears to be a clear marker for increased risk for marital distress and divorce and some cohabiting couples may need specific help in relationship education. At the same time, their lower average levels of religiousness mean that cohabiting couples likely have less access to relationship education than other couples because relationship education is most often delivered through religious organizations (see Stanley, Amato et al., 2006). Thus, better access to basic relationship education, especially programs with a focus on communication skills training and commitment, would be beneficial. Those who advertise their relationship education programs could direct some of their messages specifically to couples who are living together but not yet married. Targeted recruiting seems to us to be more effective than more general efforts.

We also know that those who cohabit premaritally are more prone to negative marital communication (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Stanley et al., 2004), especially if they lived together before becoming engaged (Kline et al., 2004). Communication skills training is typically included in premarital training programs and could be particularly beneficial for those who are cohabiting. More specifically, the commitment differences between men and women based on cohabitation history (e.g., Rhoades et al., 2006) suggest that communication training to help partners talk about commitment is an obvious priority. Programs could encourage and provide guidelines for conversations between partners about their perspectives on the future of their relationships and what their expectations are regarding marriage. Specific educational material regarding what commitment means and how it is beneficial in long-term relationships may also be useful. We should recognize that commitment may be a particularly difficult topic for some couples, not only because partners may disagree about where the relationship is headed, but also because commitment issues are often tied to core beliefs and attitudes about attachment. Thus, talking about commitment likely requires not only basic communication skills (e.g., active listening), but also an ability to be vulnerable and open with one another.

United States Census Bureau data show that at least 40% of cohabiting couples have children (Fields & Casper, 2001), adding an extra layer of complication that traditional relationship education typically has not addressed. In many cases, the children are not the biological children of both partners, but rather children by previous partners. Especially in the context of unmarried relationships, having children by previous partners can cause feelings of jealousy and distrust if parents continue to have parenting relationships with their previous partners (see Hill, 2007; Monte, 2007). Relationship education curricula could target such issues directly and help couples discuss their expectations about contact with previous partners. More generally, having children (either together or by previous partners)



also means that cohabiting partners must parent together. Parenting and co-parenting skills should therefore be incorporated into relationship education materials for cohabiting couples. Finally, from a prevention standpoint, cohabiting couples who have not clarified questions about their own future together and who have not yet had a child together, could be helped to see how unadvisable it may be to become pregnant when there is a lack of clarity about their own future together—and about their commitment to being parents together.

Our discussion thus far of relationship education for couples raises two other important questions about working with cohabitation in education or enrichment settings. First, is information from the cohabitation literature relevant to relationship education or marriage enrichment programs delivered to married couples? As we discuss below in section on therapy with married couples, married couples who cohabited premaritally may be more prone to problems with commitment than those who didn't cohabit premaritally. Thus, education about the importance of commitment in marriage may be particularly important to those who lived together before marriage. Further, as information about the link between premarital cohabitation and divorce becomes more prevalent in popular media, it may become important for marriage educators to include information about it for married couples so that they can understand why the link exists and whether it might apply to them. Essentially, marriage educators could help married couples avoid a self-fulfilling prophecy. Lastly, Stanley et al.'s (2006) idea of sliding vs. deciding may be relevant not only to transitions into cohabitation and marriage but also to other key relationship transitions. For example, marriage enrichment or education could help couples consider their expectations and plans for having children using this general idea that it is better to make decisions together, rather than sliding through them. Details on how to make decisions together might be especially important for those who lived together.

The second question is whether cohabiting and married couples should attend relationship education together. More and more, practitioners are facing the question of whether to make the most sense to offer the same programs to cohabiting and married couples or to offer separate, more individualized programs. It has been our experience that those attending relationship education don't mind and often don't even notice if some couples are married and some are cohabiting. However, the existing literature suggests that there may often be core commitment issues affecting cohabiting couples that do not affect married couples who either did not cohabit or cohabited only after engagement (Rhoades et al., 2006). On a more basic level, if both cohabiting and married couples are attending the same program, practitioners should use their own judgment in considering what terminology to use (e.g., “partner” vs. “spouse”) and how to address differences in relationship types. It may be worth having brief, individual meetings with cohabiting couples before the program begins to provide an overview of the program and the typical audience, and to discuss whether it is the best fit for their relationship at that time. Many traditional relationship education programs are based strongly on the notion that the relationship has a future and if a cohabiting couple is strongly questioning the future of their relationship, individual-oriented programs might be a better fit. Cohabitation is an ambiguous relationship status in the United States today, with some living together as an alternative to marriage and some living together more as roommates, making it difficult to make assumptions about what types of services will be appropriate for different couples. Practitioners will best serve both cohabiting and married couples if they carefully consider the content of their programs, the assumptions about commitment that may be inherent in their services, and the needs and desires of specific couples and individuals.

### **Couple Therapy with Cohabiting Couples**

Therapeutic interventions could also benefit from greater consideration of cohabitation dynamics and patterns. Couple therapists are likely seeing more and more cohabiting couples in their practices. Cohabiting couples are different from married couples in a number of ways and the most significant difference may be in terms of the salience of commitment issues. In the United States, cohabitation represents an ambiguous commitment between partners and to their communities (see Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004). Cohabiting partners may have unidentified or unspoken differences about the meaning of cohabitation and future goals for the relationship. Hence, couple therapists who are used to working with married couples need to realize that cohabiting couples may have special needs with regard to commitment. Few cohabiting couples who enter a therapy office will have decided what their futures will look like, and assuming (as is typical with married clients) that a desire for a future has been decided would be inadvisable. Or, one partner may have decided while the other is ambivalent. In our experience, it is sometimes difficult for a couple to directly acknowledge this core relationship issue; the less dedicated partner may not wish to upset the status quo and the more dedicated partner may wish to retain some level of denial about the reality of the situation. Of course, the therapy issues will depend on the specific needs of the couple, but therapists seeing cohabiting couples may need to make space for conversations about commitment, differences in partners' commitment levels, and plans for the future of the relationship. Otherwise, therapists may assume too much about commitment when trying to work on other aspects of the relationship. For example, does it make sense to help a couple resolve issues about household chores when there may be a lack of clarity and mutuality in commitment to a shared household in the future?

### **Couple Therapy with Married Couples**

A colleague recently asked us whether we would do anything differently in marital therapy based on a couple's premarital cohabitation history. On the surface, it seems as though what we know from research about cohabitation would be irrelevant to couples who are already married. Yet, couples who cohabited before making a decision to marry may have special needs around commitment dynamics and the ways in which they make decisions in their relationships, as well as higher levels of risk. Those who may have been strongly influenced by constraints in their transition to marriage could encounter problems related to more intrinsic forms of commitment later on in their marriages. Attributions for why one is in a relationship that are based more on inertia (e.g., we got married because we were already living together) may translate into difficulty following through on commitments made later on (Stanley, Lobitz, & Dickson, 1999; Stanley, Rhoades et al., 2006). Further, given that cohabitations that began before strong, mutually clear commitment to marriage had developed are more prone to asymmetries in marital dedication (Rhoades et al., 2006), such couples may experience ongoing power struggles, as it is generally believed that he or she who is least committed has the most power (Stanley, 2005; an extension of Waller's principle of least interest (Waller & Hill, 1951)).

Given the prevalence of premarital cohabitation, more couples than ever before will enter marital therapy with historical, developmental problems in the level and nature of their commitments. If one does not have a particularly strong sense of "I chose you", the couple may need help identifying and addressing their level of commitment in the relationship. For example, if a particular couple had made most of their major relationship transitions in a manner more consistent with sliding than deciding, they may benefit from therapeutic processes designed to help them more fully, clearly, and mutually declare their commitment to their future together. Based on this reasoning, we have wondered whether a couple who experienced a significant number of constraints around the transition to marriage might benefit from making a recommitment to their decision to be married. Making a new, mutual

commitment, even if it comes late in the relationship, may help a couple follow through on commitment to marriage when times are tough. Such efforts could help some couples find a stronger motivational basis for other changes that are likely needed at this time in their marriages, supporting the development, or re-emergence, of cooperative and longer-term motivations as they struggle with the current difficulties that have emerged (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007).

Given that cohabitation has become common, it is unwise to assume that couples entering marital therapy do so with comparable pathways in the development of commitment. While this has always been the case, and commitment is generally ignored in marital therapy (Stanley et al., 1999), we believe it has become more important than ever before to consider commitment dynamics in marital therapy. Cohabitation has changed the way couples and marriages form.

## Conclusion

This paper has reviewed recent research on cohabitation (and specially the premarital cohabitation effect) and provides recommendations for using this research in relationship education programs for individuals and couples as well as couple therapy. The rise in rates of cohabitation has widespread implications for practitioners who work with couples or with individuals about relationship issues. The meaning of marriage has historically been much clearer than the meaning of cohabitation is today. In the United States, cohabitation is an ambiguous relationship stage in many ways. For some couples cohabitation means a long-term commitment to a future together, for others it may symbolize little more than being roommates. The ambiguity complicates clinical practice because practitioners cannot be sure that even partners share the same sense of what a cohabiting relationship means. As we have tried to show here, the ability of the average individual or couple to understand these complex ambiguities needs to be strengthened so that they can make better, more informed choices in their relationships.

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**Table 1**

## Questions for Practitioners to Use with Individuals and/or Couples Regarding Commitment and Cohabitation

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1	What does/did living together mean to you and mean for the future of your relationship?
2	How did the two of you begin living together? Was it planned, talked about, or something that just sort of happened?
3	Where do you see this relationship going in the future? What sort of timeline do you expect?
4	How do you each show you are committed to the other?
5	Do you believe that one of you is more committed than the other? What indicates to you that there is a difference? How will this affect how your future together plays out?
6	How have the two of you made important decisions together in the past?

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