



# Moving from cohabitation to marriage: effects on relationship quality<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Data from both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households are used to test whether marriage is associated with an improvement in the relationship quality of cohabitators. Cohabitators who marry report higher levels of relationship happiness as well as lower levels of relationship instability, disagreements, and violent conflict resolution than those who remain cohabiting, net of time one relationship quality and sociodemographic controls. Relationship fairness and interaction are not significantly associated with marriage. However, the one-third of long-term cohabitators who report marriage plans at reinterview enjoy levels of relationship quality that do not significantly differ from those of cohabitators who marry. Thus, marriage per se does not spur increases in relationship quality.

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## 1. Introduction

American families have undergone considerable change in recent decades (e.g., Casper and Bianchi, 2002; Cherlin, 1992). The growth in nonmarital cohabitation

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has significantly altered family formation patterns, contributing to the delay in marriage as well as continued high rates of unmarried childbearing. In fact, cohabitation is now a normative event in the life course (Smock, 2000). A majority of people in their 20s and 30s have cohabited and cohabitation is the modal path of entry into marriage (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989). In 1970, there were 500,000 cohabiting couples in the US. Recent estimates from the 2000 Census indicate that there are over 5 million cohabiting couples in America today (US Bureau of the Census, 2001).

The dramatic increase in cohabitation over the past few decades suggests the importance of understanding the nature of cohabitation, that is, the meanings and implications of these relationships, particularly for the well-being of the individuals involved (e.g., Ross, 1995; Smock, 2000). Nearly 75% of cohabitators report plans to marry their partner although slightly fewer than one-half of cohabitators actually tie the knot (Bumpass and Lu, 2000). The purpose of this study is to determine whether moving from cohabitation to marriage is associated with a positive change in relationship quality, or if relationship quality is primarily a function of relationship-specific variables. These findings will contribute to the broader literature on marital status and well-being (e.g., Gove et al., 1983; Ross, 1995; Ross et al., 1991), which documents that marital quality is more central to individual well-being than is marriage per se (Gove et al., 1983). Gains in relationship quality among cohabitators following marriage would thus have larger implications for their well-being more generally. I use data from waves one (1987–1988) and two (1992–1994) of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to examine changes in relationship quality among cohabitators over a five year interval and test whether marriage at some point during this interval alters relationship quality.

Research on cohabitation has emphasized its role in marital success and stability (Axinn and Thornton, 1992; Bennet et al., 1988; Booth and Johnson, 1988; DeMaris and MacDonald, 1993; DeMaris and Rao, 1992; Lillard et al., 1995; Schoen, 1992; Teachman and Polonko, 1990). Cohabitation contributes to marital instability, poor marital quality, and divorce (Booth and Johnson, 1988; Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Thomson and Colella, 1992), although the higher incidence of divorce among people who cohabited premaritally appears to be largely a function of selection (Lillard et al., 1995). The present study begins one step earlier in this process by investigating the dynamics of unions which began as cohabitations. Rather than analyzing the effect of premarital cohabitation on *marital* stability, I evaluate whether marriage is associated with an improvement in the quality of *cohabiting* relationships. This strategy permits a focus on the cohabiting population. Given the dramatic rise in cohabitation over the past few decades coupled with the declining proportion of cohabitators formalizing their unions through marriage (Bumpass and Lu, 2000), it is imperative that researchers move beyond studies that evaluate the impact of premarital cohabitation on other outcomes to investigations that focus on the relationship dynamics experienced by cohabitators (Smock, 2000). This paper examines the implications of these trends by comparing the relationship quality dynamics of cohabitators who marry with those who remain cohabiting.

In Section 2, I briefly review the literature comparing the relationship quality of cohabitators and marrieds, which offers a starting point for the present analysis. Then,

I outline cohabitators' possible motivations to marry, which are likely to enhance relationship quality. Next, I turn to recent work on union transitions among cohabitators, emphasizing the significant determinants of marriage as well as their associations with relationship quality. Finally, I present evidence concerning potential moderators of the linkage between marriage and relationship quality.

## **2. Background**

In an effort to understand the meaning of cohabitation relative to marriage, a few researchers (Brown and Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995) have used cross-sectional data from the NSFH to examine the relationship quality of cohabitators versus marrieds. On average, cohabitators report poorer relationship quality than marrieds. Cohabitators disagree more frequently, perceive less fairness in their relationship, and are also less happy with their relationship than their married counterparts. Yet, there appear to be two distinct groups of cohabitators: cohabitators with plans to marry their partner and cohabitators with no plans to marry their partner (Brown and Booth, 1996). Approximately 75% of cohabitators are in the former category, and these cohabitators are involved in relationships that do not significantly differ in quality from those of marrieds. Moreover, potential relationship stressors, including children and prior union experience, similarly impact the relationship quality of these cohabitators and marrieds. The 25% of cohabitators without marital intentions report poorer relationship quality than marrieds and cohabitators who plan to marry their partner. Cohabitators without marriage plans tend to have had prior marital and cohabiting relationships and are currently in unions of relatively long duration. Brown and Booth (1996) thus conclude that the majority of cohabitators are no different than marrieds with respect to relationship quality.

Nock (1995) compares the relationship quality of cohabitators to marrieds who never cohabited and marrieds who cohabited prior to marriage. He concludes that the two married groups are more similar to each other than either is to the cohabiting group, suggesting that "the structural and institutional aspects of marriage... define much of the differences between marriage and cohabitation" (74). On the basis of this finding, it seems that marriage does alter relationship quality, and that cohabitators who choose to marry are somehow different from their counterparts who remain cohabiting. The findings of Brown and Booth (1996) and Nock (1995) probably differ because whereas the former study only makes distinctions among cohabitators (by plans to marry), the latter only differentiates among marrieds (by premarital cohabitation experience). Nock's (1995) conclusions are supported by a recent study by Skinner et al. (2002) that shows respondents who cohabited prior to marriage report levels of relationship quality similar to their counterparts who did not cohabit before marriage and that cohabitators' relationship quality across time is lower than that of marrieds. Still, Skinner et al. (2002) did not consider the role of cohabitators' plans to marry.

The present study will attempt to adjudicate the seemingly contradictory findings of Brown and Booth (1996) and Nock (1995) by evaluating whether marriage among

cohabitators is associated with an increase in relationship quality taking into account possible additive and interactive effects of plans to marry. Testing these competing hypotheses will help to resolve whether higher relationship quality is enjoyed prior to marriage among most cohabitators (i.e., those planning to marry) and marriage per se affords few additional benefits, as suggested by Brown and Booth (1996), or if there is something about the structure or institution of marriage that results in higher relationship quality, as implied by Nock (1995). Improving on prior research, I consider changes in relationship quality *over time* taking into account changes in marriage plans.

### 2.1. Motivations for marriage

A majority of cohabitators plan to marry their partner (Brown and Booth, 1996; Bumpass et al., 1991) and nearly 50% of cohabitations “end” through marriage (Bumpass and Lu, 2000). Not surprisingly, many cohabitators believe that marriage would improve their emotional and economic security as well as their overall happiness. Additionally, cohabitators maintain that their sex lives and their relationships with their parents might also improve following marriage. Few cohabitators point to ways in which their lives would worsen after marriage (Bumpass et al., 1991). Researchers have identified several factors that might motivate cohabitators to formalize their union through marriage, including greater commitment and stability, a desire to be married, familial pressures, and normative expectations. After briefly discussing these factors and their likely influence on relationship quality, I consider the literature on cohabitators’ union transitions, namely, the determinants of marriage entry among cohabitators.

First, cohabitators might formalize their union because they feel especially committed to their partner. Marrieds (regardless of whether they cohabited with their spouse prior to marriage) report greater commitment to their relationships than do cohabitators (Nock, 1995). Moreover, marriages are much more stable than cohabiting unions (Bumpass and Sweet, 1995; Bumpass et al., 1991; Thornton, 1988). The higher levels of commitment and stability associated with marriage are likely to enhance relationship quality.

Second, cohabitators also might marry their partner because they view marriage as a desirable adult status. About 95% of young people express a desire to marry (Sweet and Bumpass, 1990; Thornton, 1989) and, for most groups (e.g., Black women, Mexican Americans, and Whites) marriage is preferable to cohabitation (Landale and Fennelly, 1992; Oropesa, 1996; South, 1993). Consequently, fulfillment of this aspiration might translate into reports of higher relationship quality. But, the effect of marriage on cohabitators’ relationship quality could be contingent on cohabitators’ marital intentions when the union began. Many individuals enter a cohabiting union intending to marry their partner. When marriage is the ultimate goal of these cohabitators, its realization might improve relationship quality. Nevertheless, cohabitators with plans to marry their partner are not involved in relationships of significantly different quality than their married counterparts (Brown and Booth, 1996) and hence formalization of the union may have little impact on its quality.

Third, marriage among cohabitators also might occur in response to familial pressures. Marrieds report better relations with their parents than do cohabitators (Nock, 1995). Cohabitators may also marry to legitimate the birth of a child (Manning, 1993; Manning and Landale, 1996) and establish paternity, facilitating father involvement. Others may marry in anticipation of conceiving a child, which implicitly demonstrates the additional benefits that accrue from legalizing one's union. Indeed, a majority of European cohabitators report that they married for [their future] children (cf. Manning, 1993).

Finally, the strong normative expectations surrounding marriage (Cherlin, 1978) might effectively enhance the relationship quality of cohabitators who marry by imposing clearly defined roles for husbands and wives. Indeed, Nock (1995) attributes the poorer relationship quality of cohabitators to the lack of institutionalization of cohabitation. Related to this clear demarcation of roles are the privileges afforded to those who are legally married, including family health insurance benefits. Tangible benefits more readily obtainable through marriage, such as resource pooling and joint investments, also could improve relationship quality by minimizing disagreements about money and the perceived fairness of the division of resources.

## *2.2. Union transitions among cohabitators*

Cohabiting unions are of relatively short duration, typically lasting about a year or two. Fewer than 10% persist for five or more years (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989). Cohabitators' transitions into separation or marriage are a function of both sociodemographic factors (Manning and Smock, 1995; Smock and Manning, 1997) and relationship assessments and expectations (Brown, 2000). For instance, black cohabitators are significantly less likely than are their white counterparts to marry, even net of demographic controls (Manning and Smock, 1995). Notably, black and white cohabitators are equally likely to report marriage plans, yet blacks are evidently less likely to realize their plans whether because they have poorer relationship quality or are in unions of longer duration, on average (Brown, 2000). In addition to race, a key determinant of marriage entry among cohabitators is economic well-being, particularly the earnings and education levels of the male partner (Smock and Manning, 1997). The socioeconomic characteristics of the female partner are largely unrelated to cohabitators' union transitions. Cohabitators' relationship assessments, including their appraisals of relationship disagreement, conflict resolution, happiness, and interaction, are associated with separation, but are not predictive of marriage (Brown, 2000). Poor relationship quality encourages separation, although high relationship quality does not spur entry into marriage. Relationship expectations are closely tied to outcomes. Cohabitators without marriage plans are significantly more likely to separate and less likely to marry. Similarly, couples who expect their unions will dissolve are significantly more likely to separate and less likely to marry than their counterparts who perceive a low chance of union dissolution (Brown, 2000).

The transition to marriage is often accompanied by important changes in the division of household and paid labor and, in turn, these shifts may influence

relationship quality. The most economically stable cohabitators are the most likely to formalize their unions through marriage (Smock and Manning, 1997). Marrieds tend to exhibit a more traditional division of household labor than do cohabitators (South and Spitze, 1994) and they also earn higher incomes, on average (Nock, 1995; Smock, 2000). It is possible that men's and women's work hours and earnings change following marriage entry, particularly since it appears that many cohabitators enter marriage to begin childbearing. Thus, rather than simply accounting for the couple's economic status at a single point in time, the present analysis incorporates measures of change between the two time points in family income, the proportion of income earned by the respondent, the proportion of housework performed by the respondent, and the proportion of hours in paid labor worked by the respondent. This strategy ensures that any shifts in family economic status—which often accompany the transition to marriage—are accounted for in the estimations of time two relationship quality.

### 3. The present study

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate whether marriage is associated with cohabitators' relationship quality. Both behavioral and evaluative measures of relationship quality are analyzed using the regressor variable method (Allison, 1990). The model posits a direct effect of time one relationship quality on time two relationship quality as well as a positive indirect effect through marriage. I examine competing hypotheses that arise from cross-sectional studies of cohabitation, marriage, and relationship quality. On the basis of Brown and Booth's (1996) research, I would expect no significant association between marriage and subsequent relationship quality as they find no differences in relationship quality between cohabitators with marriage plans and marrieds. Recall that most cohabitators report plans to marry, which are positively associated with marriage (Brown, 2000). However, Nock's (1995) study documents significant differences in relationship quality between cohabitators and marrieds who cohabited premaritally, suggesting that marriage will be positively associated with subsequent relationship quality. The effects of potential moderating variables, including gender and plans to marry, are examined in additional analyses. The justifications for their inclusion are outlined below.

#### 3.1. *The significance of gender*

Gender is an integral component of personal relationships, particularly marriage (Bernard, 1982; Thompson and Walker, 1989). Men's and women's experiences of emotional and sexual intimacy, communication, and conflict are often substantially different. Wives are typically responsible for managing the marriage and thus they tend to be especially sensitive to its dynamics. Wives are more expressive than their husbands, on average, and often raise issues of concern within the marriage. Simply put, wives are the caretakers of the marital union, charged with maintaining its emotional health.

Similar gendered relationship patterns apparently characterize cohabiting unions, too (Brown, 2000; Sanchez et al., 1998). Moreover, these unique gendered relationship assessments influence cohabitators' union outcomes. For example, Sanchez et al. (1998) found that mate selection among cohabitators is driven by a traditional, gender-specialized process. Men's earnings and women's time spent on housework were both positively associated with marriage. And, when women reported more egalitarian gender role attitudes than men, the odds of marriage decreased. Additionally, Brown (2000) found that women's negative appraisals of the quality of the cohabiting relationship encouraged separation, whereas men's simply deterred marriage. Men's expectations for the future of the relationship were closely tied to its outcome; men's expectations of separation (marriage) significantly increased the odds of separation (marriage). In contrast, women's expectations for marriage or separation had little impact on the union outcome unless their expectations mirrored those of their male partner.

Thus, women's and men's experiences of cohabitation have unique influences on union outcomes. In turn, gender shapes the experience of marriage, including perceptions of marital quality. Consequently, I pay close attention to the modifying effects of gender on the relationship between marriage and relationship quality. Given the greater sensitivity of women to marital dynamics, I expect the transition to marriage will have an especially large positive effect on the marital quality of women.

### *3.2. Plans to marry*

Planning to marry one's partner implies agreement between partners about the future of the relationship. Cohabitators without plans to marry either have no intentions of marrying, whether because they believe cohabitation is preferable or the relationship is not perceived as viable for marriage. Plans to marry is not equivalent to relationship quality (Brown, 2000). Cohabitators ideologically opposed to marriage may assess their relationships as positively as marrieds, despite an absence of marriage plans. Those without marriage plans may not be interested in getting married in the near future, but nevertheless positively evaluate their relationship. Realization of one's intentions to wed might result in improved relationship quality at time two. However, cohabitators who intend to marry their partner but do not might show no change in their relationship quality, or perhaps even a decline. The effects of plans to marry at time one on relationship quality at time two are examined in the analyses and whether these effects vary by union status at time two is tested, too.

In addition to a potential interaction between time one plans to marry and union type at time two, there may be differences in relationship quality among cohabitators according to the status of their marriage plans at time two. That is, certain groups of long-term cohabitators may be more (or less) similar in terms of relationship quality to those cohabitators who married. I classify cohabitators into four groups based on their reported marital intentions at times one and two: (1) plans to marry at both times one and two, (2) no plans to marry at both times one and two, (3) plans to marry at time one only (i.e., no plans to marry at time two), (4) no plans to marry at time one only (i.e., plans to marry at time two). Then, I compare the time two relationship

quality of these four groups of cohabitators to that of the cohabitators who had married by time two. Drawing from the arguments presented above regarding the potential interaction effect of union type and marriage plans, it is likely that cohabitators who reported plans to marry at time one but not at time two will have significantly lower levels of relationship quality than cohabitators who married. The effect of consistent marriage plans (or lack thereof) across time points on relationship quality is less clear. Plans to marry at both time points is indicative of continued commitment to the relationship but, at the same time, an inability to achieve the desired goal: marriage.

### 3.3. *Endogeneity and selection issues*

Two important caveats are in order here. The first concerns the endogeneity of marriage. Some cohabitators are especially (un)likely to marry, and the same characteristics influencing marriage entry also may be associated with relationship quality, meaning that the relationship between marriage and changes in relationship quality are largely spurious. To minimize this possibility, I include measures of those factors identified in studies on union transitions among cohabitators that are associated with marriage. The second caveat deals with selection. Cohabitators may experience an increase in relationship quality that prompts entry into marriage. That is, the apparent increase in relationship quality observed among cohabitators who marry may actually precede the marriage. This is a plausible argument, but is not entirely consistent with Brown's (2000) finding that high levels of relationship quality are *not* associated with marriage among cohabitators. Cohabitators' relationship assessments are not associated with the transition to marriage. Still, those cohabitators with the lowest levels of relationship quality are most likely to separate and thus be excluded from the present analysis, which requires a continuous partnership across two time points. Consequently, I investigate whether Heckman's (1979) correction for sample selection helps to minimize the bias associated with nonrandom sample attrition across waves.

## 4. Data and method

Data for these analyses come from both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), which is a national probability sample of 13,007 persons conducted in 1987–1988 and 1992–1994. These data are well-suited to answering the research question of interest because they contain an oversample of cohabitators and extensive information on relationship quality at both time points. In 1987–1988, the NSFH interviewed 678 cohabitators, of which 511 were successfully reinterviewed in 1992–1994. In addition to those who attrited between waves ( $N = 167$ ), cohabitators whose relationships had dissolved ( $N = 176$ ) or had been formalized through marriage but ended in divorce ( $N = 59$ ) were excluded from the analyses as there is no information about their time two relationship quality with their time one partner. These limitations result in 276 cohabiting respondents for analysis.



## 4.1. Measures

### 4.1.1. Dependent variables

Relationship quality is measured across six dimensions at both time points. Table 1 provides a summary of all of the variables used in the analyses. Each of these dimensions of relationship quality is measured by identical items at times one and two. *Happiness* with the relationship is measured by a global question: “Taking all things together, how would you describe your relationship?” Responses range from very unhappy (1) to very happy (7). *Interaction*, a six-point scale, measures the reported amount of time spent alone with the partner in the past month, with higher values indicating more frequent interaction. Relationship *instability* is ascertained by asking the respondent to assess the probability that the relationship will eventually dissolve, with responses ranging from very unlikely (1) to about even (3) to very likely (5). *Disagreement* is measured by four items: the respondent’s report of the frequency of disagreement about household tasks, money, spending time together, and sex (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .72$ ). Higher values on this dimension indicate more frequent disagreements. The *fairness* measure gauges the perceived level of fairness in three

Table 1  
Summary of variables (Weighted means and standard deviations)

Variable	Mean (SD)		Union status at time 2	
			Cohabiting	
			Married	
	T1	T2	T1	T2
Happiness	6.12 (1.20)	5.86 (1.38)	5.82 (1.38)	5.32 (1.52)
Interaction	5.42 (1.04)*	4.57 (1.49)	5.09 (1.49)	4.31 (1.57)
Instability	1.62 (.89)*	1.51 (.82)*	1.98 (.98)	2.29 (1.14)
Disagreement	8.91 (3.57)	8.84 (3.28)	9.03 (3.59)	9.08 (3.77)
Fairness	8.22 (1.31)	8.05 (1.14)*	8.26 (1.35)	7.66(1.83)
Conflict resolution	5.38 (1.91)	5.80 (1.91)*	5.84 (1.78)	6.88 (2.03)
Age		31.37 (9.36)*		35.00 (10.58)
Education		13.22 (2.94)*		11.93 (2.50)
Nonwhite		.12 (.31)*		.45 (.49)
Duration		25.96 (23.92)*		52.75 (44.99)
Female		.50 (.50)		.46 (.50)
Plans to marry—T1		.84 (.37)*		.66 (.49)
Biological children—T1		.21 (.43)*		.38 (.38)
Stepchildren—T1		.30 (.47)		.28 (.46)
New birth T1–T2		.38 (.49)*		.24 (.43)
Previously married		.48 (.50)		.50 (.50)
Previously cohabited		.17 (.37)		.14 (.38)
$\Delta$ Family income		6824.12 (38843.42)*		4398.58 (25742.19)
$\Delta R$ 's $\pi$ income		.03 (.29)		-.09 (.36)
$\Delta R$ 's $\pi$ housework		.46 (.15)		-.03 (.16)
$\Delta R$ 's $\pi$ work hours		.50 (.12)*		.03 (.13)
N		164		112

\* Cohabitators and marrieds significantly different,  $p < .05$ .

areas of the relationship: household chores, working for pay, and spending money (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .69$ ), with higher values representing greater relationship fairness. Finally, the *conflict resolution* measure pertains to the resolution of disagreements (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .57$ ). High values correspond with reports of high frequencies of shouting, hitting, or throwing things at one another and low frequencies of calm discussions. Each of these dimensions has been analyzed in previous research on cohabiting relationships (Brown, 2000; Brown and Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Skinner et al., 2002).

#### 4.1.2. Independent variables

Marriage between interview waves is captured by a *union status* variable coded one if the respondent married his/her time one partner and zero if the respondent continued to cohabit with that partner. At time two, 164 cohabitators had married their partners from time one; the remaining 112 were still cohabiting with their time one partner.

Explanatory variables include gender, plans to marry, the presence of children, and past union experience. *Gender* is coded 1 for woman and 0 for man. *Plans to marry* is measured at time one and is coded 1 if the respondent reports definite plans to marry or thinks eventually he/she will marry the cohabiting partner. At time one, 75% of cohabitators report plans to marry their partner. About 85% of cohabitators married at time two reported plans to marry their partner at time one, whereas 68% of cohabitators who are not married at time two reported intentions of marrying their partner at time one.

The presence of biological children and children from past unions are measured at time one as dummy variables. The birth of a child between interview waves is measured at time two. If at least one *biological child* of the couple is present at time one, then the biological children variable is coded 1 (0 otherwise). The *stepchildren* variable is coded 1 if at least one child from a previous union is present, and 0 otherwise. The occurrence of a *birth of a child* between interview waves is coded 1 (0 otherwise). At time one, nearly 30% of respondents report at least one biological child and approximately 30% have children from prior unions. About one-third of the sample experiences the birth of a child between interviews.

Union experience is measured at time one. *Prior marital experience* is coded 1 if the respondent has been married before, and *prior cohabitation experience* is coded 1 if the respondent has cohabited with someone other than his/her current partner. Prior union experience is essentially the same for both groups of cohabitators in this study. About 15% cohabited prior to the current union and nearly 50% were married prior to the current union.

#### 4.1.3. Control variables

Demographic variables associated with relationship quality or marriage are included in the analyses as control variables. Specifically, the respondent's race, age, education, and union duration, all measured at time one, are included as controls. Blacks and Latinos are more likely to cohabit and less likely to marry than whites (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Manning and Smock, 1995; Raley, 1996) and thus race,

coded one for *nonwhite* and zero for white, is included as a control variable. Unfortunately, there is such a small number of nonwhites in the sample that further breakdowns are not possible. *Age*, coded in years, is also included as it is associated with both cohabitation and relationship quality (Glenn, 1990; Nock, 1995). *Education*, measured as the number of years of schooling completed, is included in the analyses because those with lower educational levels are disproportionately likely to cohabit (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Clarkberg, 1999; Smock and Manning, 1997) and education is associated with relationship quality (Glenn, 1990; Nock, 1995). The *duration* of the cohabiting union, measured in months at the first interview, is negatively related to relationship quality (Glenn, 1990) and thus included as a control variable.

Controls are also included to account for possible changes in family economic status. *Change in family income* measures the difference between time two and time one couple income. The *change in the proportion of income contributed by the respondent* is the difference between the proportions of couple income contributed by the respondent at waves two and one. Similarly, the *change in the proportion of housework performed by the respondent* is the difference between the proportions she or he performed at waves two and one. And, *the change in the proportion of hours in paid labor that the respondent works* is the difference between the proportions of total couple hours worked that were performed by the respondent at waves two and one.

#### 4.2. Analytic strategy

Multiple dimensions of relationship quality are examined across the two waves of data using the regressor variable method (see Allison, 1990 for a description). This method is preferable to a latent variables approach as there are not multiple indicators of each dimension of relationship quality (which are necessary to estimate a latent variables model). Time two relationship quality is regressed on time one relationship quality, union type (i.e., cohabiting versus married) at wave two, and controls. These models effectively reveal whether union type results in a significant change in relationship quality at time two (relative to the time one value). Models using the change score method (Allison, 1990), in which the dependent variable is the difference between time two and time one relationship quality, yield analogous results.

The following section begins with a brief discussion of the mean differences between cohabitators who marry versus those who remain cohabiting. Then, results from the regressor variable models are presented, showing the effects of a transition to marriage on the multiple dimensions of relationship quality. Subsequent models examine the interactive effects of union type and gender as well as union type and plans to marry to help pinpoint whether marriage has differential effects for certain groups of cohabitators. Finally, the (in)stability of plans to marry across time points is considered to determine whether certain long-term cohabitators are more similar to cohabitators who marry in terms of relationship quality. Initially, all models incorporated lambda, the Heckman (1979) correction for sample selection, to account for nonrandom sample attrition across time points. However, none of the

lambda coefficients was statistically significant, and thus the models presented here do not include lambda.<sup>1</sup>

## 5. Results

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of all variables used in the analysis by union type at time two. Cohabitors who marry have higher levels of relationship quality than those who remain cohabiting. Comparing the mean levels of relationship quality reveals that cohabitators who marry report at time two significantly higher mean levels of fairness and significantly lower mean levels of instability and conflict in dispute resolution than cohabitators who remain cohabiting. Moreover, cohabitators who marry experience decreases in relationship instability and disagreements over time, whereas cohabitators who remain unmarried experience increases in these two dimensions. Nonetheless, both groups experience declines in some dimensions of relationship quality (i.e., happiness, interaction, fairness, and conflict management) between time points, suggesting perhaps that marriage (versus remaining cohabiting) slows the deterioration in relationship quality that occurs over time. Similar to marital quality, the relationship quality of cohabitators declines over time (Brown, forthcoming). Here, we have evidence indicating that marriage among cohabitators may provide a more effective buffer against the decrease in relationship quality that tends to occur as relationship duration increases. Cohabitators who marry are younger and more educated, on average. They are also more likely to be white and to experience the birth of a child. Cohabitators who marry spent fewer months cohabiting and were more likely to report marriage plans at time one than those who do not marry.

Multivariate models estimated using the regressor variable method reveal that union formalization is significantly related to four of the six dimensions of relationship quality, as shown in Table 2. Cohabitators who transition into marriage report greater relationship happiness as well as lower levels of instability, disagreements, and violence in conflict resolution than their counterparts who remain cohabiting. These benefits hold net of initial time one levels of relationship quality, sociodemographic factors, and changes in family economic status. In fact, there are notably few effects of these control factors on relationship quality; apart from time one relationship quality, marriage appears to be the most consistent predictor of time two relationship quality. The presence of a biological child is associated with lower levels of relationship interaction. Similarly, the birth of a child between time points is associated

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<sup>1</sup> For this particular analysis, correcting for sample selection is a challenging task. Covariates in the initial probit model should include factors that are related to remaining in a union, but not to relationship quality. Yet, relationship quality is associated with cohabitators' union transitions, namely, the likelihood of union dissolution (Brown, 2000), making it very difficult to estimate lambda accurately. Since the lambda coefficients were not significant in any of the models (results not shown), I present models from which lambda was omitted as its inclusion might imply that the effects of differential selection were adequately corrected.

Table 2

OLS regression coefficients predicting relationship quality at time 2, net of union type at time 2, relationship quality at time 1, and controls

	Relationship quality at time 2					
	Happiness	Interaction	Instability	Disagree	Fairness	Conflict resolution
<i>Union type at T2</i>						
Married (cohabiting)	.49*	.26	-.81***	-1.03*	.14	-1.04***
<i>Relationship quality at T1</i>						
<i>sociodemographic controls</i>	.27***	-.01	.32***	.27***	.45***	.31***
Age	-.02	.02	-.00	-.05	.01	-.01
Education	.03	.08	-.04	-.10	.01	-.08
Nonwhite	.04	-.11	-.07	.66	-.40	-.37
Union duration	-.00	-.00	-.00	-.00	-.00	-.00
Female	-.25	.09	-.03	-.87	-.05	-.16
Plans to marry—T1	-.09	-.11	.14	1.01	.33	-.22
Biological children—T1	-.40	-.57*	.26	-.55	-.30	.43
Stepchildren—T1	-.10	.31	-.24	1.56**	.26	-.26
New birth T1–T2	-.65**	-.64**	.27	1.15 <sup>+</sup>	-.08	.26
Previously married	.29	-.08	-.08	.13	.01	-.48
Previously cohabited	-.33	.03	-.03	-.29	-.02	-.18
<i>Family economic change</i>						
$\Delta$ Family income	-.00	-.00	.00	.00	-.00	-.00
$\Delta R$ 's $\pi$ income	-.62*	-.38	-.09	.23	-.09	-.21
$\Delta R$ 's $\pi$ housework	.69	1.44*	-.70	-.73	-.60	-.60
$\Delta R$ 's $\pi$ work hours	.32	1.07	-1.06**	-2.30	-.31	-.60
<i>F</i> (df)	3.32 (17)	3.17 (17)	5.19 (17)	4.61 (17)	3.36 (17)	4.22 (17)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.22	.20	.30	.29	.22	.26
<i>N</i>	222	231	219	212	220	223

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ .

with lower levels of happiness and interaction and higher frequencies of disagreements. These results are consistent with the literature showing that children, particularly young children requiring constant care, create stress among marrieds by reducing spousal interaction and support (White and Booth, 1985; White et al., 1986).

Overall, these findings provide support for the argument that gains in relationship quality are related to marriage.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the possibility that the increase in relationship quality preceded marriage cannot be ruled out. Moreover, there may be some groups of cohabitators for whom marriage is especially beneficial.

<sup>2</sup> Or, more precisely for some dimensions of relationship quality, smaller declines relative to those experienced by cohabitators who remain cohabiting.

Thus, additional models evaluated whether gender or plans to marry modify the effects of marriage on cohabitators' relationship quality. Gender and marriage do not significantly interact in their effects on time two relationship quality. Nor does plans to marry at time one interact with union status in its effects on time two relationship quality. The absence of any significant interaction effects indicates that marriage is associated with higher relationship quality, regardless of gender or time one marital intentions.

I also considered the status of marriage plans among cohabitators across time points to determine whether the (in)stability of marriage plans differentiates among long-term cohabitators versus cohabitators who marry. Notably, of those cohabitators who report marriage plans at time one and remain cohabiting at time two, a majority (55%) no longer report marriage plans at time two (result not shown). This shift in intentions may be associated with time two relationship quality. Overall, more than one-half of the cohabitators report consistent marriage plans across time points; about 27% report plans to marry at both times one and two and 32% report no plans to marry at both time points. An additional one-third of cohabitators report marriage plans at time one but not at time two. And, the remaining 8% do not report plans to marry at time one but do report intentions to wed at time two (results not shown). In terms of relationship quality, how do these four groups of cohabitators compare to those who married by time two?

Table 3 shows that the status of cohabitators' marriage plans are significantly associated with relationship quality.<sup>3</sup> Note that these models include all of the controls shown in Table 2 (because their effects are similar in these models, I do not show the coefficients). Cohabitators without plans to marry at time two are less happy than cohabitators who marry, net of relationship quality at time one, sociodemographic controls, and family economic change. Those cohabitators with stable plans to marry and those who reported plans at time two only report similar levels of happiness to cohabitators who marry. Given that union type at time two is not significantly associated with relationship interaction (as shown in Table 2), it is not surprising that even once we differentiate among cohabitators according to marriage plans, there are no significant associations. Similar to the pattern of findings for happiness, cohabitators without marriage plans at time two report significantly higher levels of relationship instability than do cohabitators who formalize their unions through marriage. In contrast, those cohabitators reporting marriage plans report levels of instability that are not significantly different from those of their counterparts who marry. Cohabitators who report marriage plans at time one but not at time two experience more disagreements in their relationships than do cohabitators who marry. Other groups of cohabitators report levels of disagreements that are similar to those of cohabitators who marry. Turning to relationship fairness, only cohabitators who report no marriage plans at both time points perceive their

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<sup>3</sup> Differentiating among cohabitators who marry by time one marriage plans produces no significant differences (results not shown) in time two relationship quality and thus the four cohabiting groups are examined relative to cohabitators who marry by reinterview.

Table 3

OLS regression coefficients predicting relationship quality at time 2, net of longitudinal measure of plans to marry among cohabitators, relationship quality at time 1, and controls<sup>a</sup>

	Relationship quality at time 2					
	Happiness	Interaction	Instability	Disagree	Fairness	Conflict resolution
<i>Union type at T2</i>						
Cohabiting						
Plans to marry, T1, T2	.42	.23	.10	-1.30	.12	-.18
No plans to marry, T1, T2	-.64*	-.20	.86***	-.14	-.61*	1.42***
Plans to marry, T1 only	-1.07***	-.47 <sup>+</sup>	1.40***	1.35*	-.09	1.50***
No plans to marry, T1 only	.42	.47	-.37	-2.35	-.25	-.20
(Married)						
<i>Relationship quality at T1</i>	.31***	.02	.28***	.29***	.45***	.36***
<i>F</i> (df)	4.46 (19)	3.01 (19)	8.04 (19)	4.37 (19)	3.02 (19)	4.69 (19)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.29	.21	.43	.30	.22	.30
<i>N</i>	222	231	219	212	220	223

<sup>a</sup> Controls, which include all of the sociodemographic and family economic change measures, are not shown in the table as their effects are not substantively different from those shown in Table 2.

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

relationships as more unfair than do cohabitators who formalize their unions. Finally, the absence of plans to marry at time two is associated with significantly more violence in conflict resolution. Cohabitators who report plans to marry at time two and cohabitators who are married at time two do not differ in their levels of violence in conflict resolution. Taken together, these findings indicate that the status of cohabitators' marriage plans at times one and two are closely tied to their time two relationship quality. Cohabitators who report marriage plans at time two do not significantly differ from those who marry in terms of relationship quality.

## 6. Discussion

In this paper, the impact of marriage on cohabitators' relationship quality was evaluated using data from both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households. The purpose of this study was to test whether formalization of a cohabiting union appreciably alters its quality. On balance, marriage is positively associated with the quality of the relationship. Cohabitators who marry report more happiness with and less instability in their relationships, fewer disagreements, and conflict resolution strategies characterized by more calm discussions, compared to their counterparts who remain cohabiting. The frequency of partner interaction as

well as the perceived level of fairness in the relationship remain unaltered by marriage. Additional analyses reveal a key distinction among long-term cohabitators though. It is cohabitators without marriage plans at time two whose relationship quality is lower than that of cohabitators who marry. Among the continuously cohabiting, those who report marriage plans at reinterview enjoy levels of relationship quality that do not significantly differ from those of cohabitators who marry. Thus, it seems that marriage per se does not spur increases in relationship quality among cohabitators.

This study provides a systematic examination of the influence of marriage on multiple dimensions of cohabitators' relationship quality. Other research comparing the relationship quality and stability of cohabiting and marital unions (e.g., Brown and Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Skinner et al., 2002) left unresolved whether marriage among cohabitators is associated with an improvement in relationship quality, as implied by Nock (1995), or if most cohabitators (i.e., cohabitators planning to marry their partners) enjoy relationship quality similar to marrieds, as suggested by Brown and Booth (1996). The present analysis adjudicates these competing expectations by investigating the relationship quality *dynamics* of cohabitators taking into account plans to marry. The positive association between marriage and relationship quality coupled with the absence of either additive or interactive effects of time one plans to marry on time two relationship quality (as shown in Table 2) is consistent with Nock's (1995) results. Yet, a consideration of changes in plans to marry across the two time points reveals a pattern similar to that documented by Brown and Booth (1996); cohabitators with plans to marry at time two do not significantly differ in relationship quality, on average, than their counterparts who married.

Consequently, it appears that a reported commitment to marriage is roughly equivalent to marriage in terms of relationship quality, undermining the notion that the structure or institution of marriage provides benefits that are not accessible by cohabitators. This conclusion is tempered by the fact that at reinterview, just one-third of unmarried cohabitators report marriage intentions, meaning that a minority of long-term cohabitators envision marriage to their partners.

The present study also enhances our understanding of cohabiting relationships in other ways. For instance, consistent with prior research that has documented greater stability in marriages than in cohabitations (Bumpass and Sweet, 1995; Bumpass et al., 1991; Thornton, 1988), the results presented here show that cohabitators who marry report a lower probability of union dissolution than those who remain cohabiting. The greater violence proneness of cohabitators relative to marrieds has been evidenced consistently in previous research, yet the explanation for this differential has been unclear (Stets, 1991; Stets and Straus, 1990; Yllo and Straus, 1981). The findings from this research suggest that marriage may negate the deficits suffered by cohabitators since all of the marrieds in this analysis initially cohabited (which essentially "controls" for any selection effect). Indeed, whereas cohabitators who marry their partners report similar conflict resolution strategies in their relationships at times one and two, cohabitators who do not marry experience an escalation of conflict in their relationships over time, including heated arguments and possibly hitting or



throwing things at each other. These benefits associated with marriage, including greater stability and happiness as well as fewer disagreements and arguments, appear to apply equally to all groups of cohabitators as the influence of marriage on the relationship quality of cohabitators is not modified by gender or plans to marry at time one.

Closer inspection reveals that some long-term cohabitators enjoy levels of relationship quality that are not unlike those of their counterparts who marry. Although marriage is associated with an increase in relationship quality, the relationship quality of cohabitators who marry does not significantly differ from that of cohabitators who report marriage plans at reinterview. These findings are analogous to those of Brown and Booth (1996), which show that although cohabitators report poorer relationship quality than marrieds, on average, a comparison of cohabitators with plans to marry and marrieds reveals no significant differences in relationship quality. The longitudinal analyses presented here indicate that relative to cohabitators who marry, only cohabitators without marriage plans at time two suffer from lower levels of relationship quality. The relationship quality of cohabitators intending to wed at time two versus cohabitators who marry by time two does not differ. Consequently, marriage per se is not associated with an improvement in relationship quality among cohabitators.

The results of this study must be interpreted with some caution in light of the relatively long period of time between the first and second interview dates. In some cases, time elapsed between interviews could be as long as seven years. Less than 10% of cohabiting unions survive more than five years (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989), meaning that the intact, nonmarital cohabiting unions in this analysis are likely a select group. Although it seems logical to assume that these cohabitators would have higher relationship quality since their unions have remained intact, in fact prior research (Brown and Booth, 1996; Thomson and Colella, 1992) indicates that longer cohabitations are associated with *poorer* relationship quality. A less select group of cohabitators may have higher relationship quality, on average, both before and after marriage. And, although controls were included for potential relationship changes that are likely to accompany marriage *and* influence relationship quality, namely changes in economic and fertility behaviors, there may be additional factors associated with the transition to marriage among cohabitators or with relationship quality that are not measured here.

Do cohabitators' relationships change once they enter marriage? The results from this study demonstrate that cohabitators who marry experience higher levels of relationship quality, on average, than do those who continue to cohabit. In fact, apart from time one levels of relationship quality, marriage appears to be the key correlate of relationship quality at reinterview. Cohabitators who marry report greater happiness, fewer disagreements, and less instability in their unions and are able to resolve their relationship conflicts through nonviolent means. Nevertheless, cohabitators' reports of marital intentions at reinterview are pivotal; the one-third of cohabitators who report marriage plans at reinterview enjoy levels of relationship quality similar to that of cohabitators who marry. Hence, union formalization does not necessarily prompt an increase in relationship quality.

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