



Mission: to strengthen marriages, support parents and families, and promote child well-being by raising public awareness, developing sound public policy and advocating for promising practices throughout Florida.

Learning From Jay Teachman's Premarital Sex, Cohabitation, and Divorce: The Broken Link

Premarital sex and cohabitation, *if limited to one's future husband*, may not increase the risk of divorce for women according to this research. Dr. Jay Teachman's research adds a new dimension to the long-held belief that premarital sex and cohabitation are strong predictors of divorce for women. Dr. Teachman's research shows that women who are committed to one relationship, who have either premarital sex and/or cohabit only with the man they eventually marry have no higher incidence of divorce than women who abstain from premarital sex and cohabitation. For women in this category, premarital sex and cohabitation with their eventual husband are just two more steps in developing a long-term relationship.

Background

Cohabitation between unmarried couples has become common in the United States. By the early 1990s, an estimated 60 percent of couples who wed cohabited prior to their marriage (Bumpass and Lu, 2000). Historically, premarital cohabitation has been viewed as a predictor of an increased risk of divorce when compared to couples who did not live together until they were married. Overall, marriages preceded by cohabitation are as much as 50 percent more likely to end in divorce when compared to marriages not preceded by cohabitation. Research also suggests that couples who have premarital, sexual intercourse have greater chances for marital disruption as well (Khan and London, 1991; Whyte, 1990). In this research Dr. Teachman analyzes premarital cohabitation and premarital sex combined as predictors of divorce. He finds that women who cohabit and have sexual intercourse with only the man they end up marrying do not get divorced at a rate any different than traditional couples who live together and have sexual intercourse only after marriage.

Dr. Teachman addresses two issues in this research. First, he considers the relationship between premarital cohabitation and premarital intercourse and the risk of marital dissolution. Second, he attempts to determine if differences in relationship histories, sexual interaction and cohabitation affect the likelihood that women will have a marital disruption later on. In particular, Dr. Teachman investigates how women who have had premarital cohabitation and premarital intercourse with one man, the man they marry, fare in marriage contrasted to women who did not cohabit or engage in premarital, sexual intercourse. Dr. Teachman reasons that women who have multiple sexual partners may weaken their future marital bonds. Dr. Teachman also investigates if women who have cohabited with multiple men prior to marriage have personal attitudes and beliefs that might undermine the stability of their marriages.

Methodology

Dr. Teachman uses data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) for 6,577 women aged 15 to 45 years. These women experienced their first marriage(s) between 1970 and 1995. The NSFG survey contains information on the life and relationship histories of women and provides detail on their premarital relationships – including whether they had premarital, sexual intercourse or lived with any men (including their future husbands) prior to marriage. The survey contains dates of when their marriages began and ended. The survey also includes beginning and ending dates for each nonmarital, cohabiting union experienced by a woman and whether this union ended in disruption or marriage. Lastly, the survey includes dates on when women initiate sex with their partners.

Dr. Teachman analyzes whether marriage disruptions occur for three different categories of women in the sample. These include:

- Women who did not cohabit prior to their first marriage;
- Women who cohabited only with their husbands prior to first marriage; and
- Women who cohabited two or three times before their first marriage.

Dr. Teachman also analyzes data on race, age, religion, socioeconomic factors, and family background. Family background includes the type of family arrangement these women had as children. The NSFG data also include data on husbands including whether a husband was married before, whether the husband is two or more years younger than the woman, or whether the husband is five or more years older.

Results

Descriptive statistics of the sample used by Dr. Teachman illustrate the following:

- Nearly 35 percent of the women report that their first marriages ended with 34 percent reporting their first marriages had ended within 10 years.
- Nearly 40 percent of women had cohabited prior to marriage and most of these (31 percent) cohabited only with their eventual husband.
- 82 percent of women engaged in premarital sex with 55 percent reporting they had their first sex with someone other than their husband.

Dr. Teachman uses three models to demonstrate the effects of premarital sex and premarital cohabitation on marital disruption. In his first model, Dr. Teachman examines data for all of the women in the sample without controlling for premarital cohabitation or premarital sex. Model 2 summarizes data between the different groups by controlling for premarital cohabitation. Model 3 controls for both premarital cohabitation and premarital sex.

Model 1 provides descriptive statistics for all women in the sample. In this model, the risk of divorce is greater for women who marry earlier, are black, have a premarital birth or conception, have fewer siblings, have less educated mothers, and have experience with other than a two-parent family. In addition, women who marry men with less education, men who were married before, men of a different race or religion, men who are at least 2 years younger, or men who believe that religion is important to very important are at a higher risk of marital disruption.

In Model 2, when a woman has cohabited only with her future husband, the difference in the risk of divorce is not statistically significant when compared to women who did not cohabit [with their eventual husband]. The effect of cohabiting twice raises the risk of marital disruption by 44 percent, which is statistically significant from cohabiting only with the future husband. Model 2 also illustrates those women who have their first sexual relationship with someone other than their husbands experienced an increased risk of marital disruption.

In Model 3, women who had premarital sex and premarital cohabitation have a higher risk of marital dissolution than women who were abstinent and did not cohabit. Women who cohabited twice faced a 28 percent higher risk of marital disruption and women who cohabit more than once and have their first sexual relationship with someone other than her husband have a 109 percent greater risk of marital disruption. If a woman cohabited and had sex only with her future husband, there was no statistically significant difference in divorce rates between these woman and the ones who did not cohabit or have premarital sex. This pattern results because women who cohabited with their husband only are more likely than women who did not cohabit before marriage to have had their first sexual relationships with someone other than their husband (73 versus 41 percent). That is, for these women, it is not the fact that they cohabited before marriage that is important for marital dissolution; it is the fact they had at least one other sexually intimate relationship prior to marrying.

Other Cohabitation Research

The number of cohabiting couples in the United States has risen dramatically in recent decades. By 2000, the number of unmarried, cohabiting couples in America was almost 4.75 million, up from less than half a million in 1960 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Further, many young adults see cohabitation as an acceptable step towards marriage. In the University of Michigan's annual *Measuring the Futures Survey* of high school seniors, 66 percent of high school senior boys and 61 percent of the girls indicated they "agreed" or "mostly agreed" with the statement "its is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along" (Bachman, Johnson and O'Malley, 2000). Using the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) researchers have now estimated that over 50 percent of the couples getting married in the U.S. were cohabiting prior to their marriages and that about a quarter of unmarried women between the ages of 25 and 39 are currently living with a partner and about half have lived at some time with an unmarried partner (Bumpass and Lu, 2000). In reporting research about cohabitation at the Smart Marriages Conference in Dallas in 2003, noted researcher David Popenoe stated there are no reasons to believe that trends in premarital cohabitation will be reversed in the near future.

Research on cohabitation has long associated marital instability for couples whose marriages were preceded by cohabitation. A 1992 study of 3,300 cases, for example, based on the 1987 NSFH, found that in their marriages prior cohabitators are estimated to have a hazard of dissolution that is about 46 percent higher than for non-cohabitators (DeMaris and Rao, 1992). Researchers do have questions regarding the statistical association between cohabitation and divorce. Some researchers believe that those willing to cohabit may be more unconventional than others and less committed to the institution of marriage. These are the same people, then, who more easily will leave a marriage if it becomes troublesome. By this explanation, cohabitation doesn't cause divorce but is merely associated with it because similar types of people are involved in both phenomena. This can be referred to as a "selection effect" which is supported by many researchers (Popenoe, 2000). There remains much to be learned about cohabitation, which is an emerging area of research.

Conclusions

Overall, Dr. Teachman finds that an intimate premarital relationship limited to one's future husband does not significantly affect the risk of marital disruption for women. However, having a sexually intimate relationship with at least one other man (than one's future husband) prior to marriage is linked to an increase in divorce for women. There is also a substantially higher risk of marital dissolution if women had sex with another man – other than their future husband - and cohabited with him. Many of these results replicate prior research in that, women who cohabit prior to marriage or who have premarital sex have an increased likelihood of marital disruption. Dr. Teachman contends that considering joint effects of premarital cohabitation and premarital sex, as well as histories of premarital relationships, extends previous research.

One limiting factor in this study is the lack of information the NSFG gives on the prior relationship histories of men. This research does not address the nature or number of sexually intimate relationships men may have prior to marriage and/or if they have multiple cohabiting relationships. Nor does this research shed light on the nature or characteristics of men in these relationships and if the women drawn to them tend to have the same characteristics. Still, this research does present the finding that women with more than one intimate relationship prior to marriage have an elevated risk of marital disruption. This risk of divorce is particularly great for women who cohabited with both their husbands and another man.

Implications of this work for the Commission on Marriage and Family Support Initiatives

Cohabitation has become the primary gateway to marriage for many couples in the U.S. However, the commission does not advocate cohabitation because, in many instances, these arrangements do not end in marriage, and multiple cohabitations for women increase their risk of divorce. The commission should serve as an advocate for relationship education that assists individuals in learning what to look for in a potential partner prior to their cohabitation or planned marriage. The commission should also serve as a clearinghouse for describing different types of formats for marriage or relationship education that might assist couples in making more informed marital or relationship decisions.

This research shows that divorce rates for women who cohabit and engage in premarital sex with only their future husband is comparable the divorce rate for women who do not. This research still places an emphasis on being monogamous prior to marriage.

Meet Dr. Teachman

Dr. Jay Teachman is a Professor of Sociology and the Chair of the Department of Sociology at the Western Washington University. Dr. Teachman also serves on the Healthy Living Steering Committee and the Dean's Advisory Council in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Western Washington University. Dr. Teachman has published numerous research articles related to cohabitation, divorce and child support, child well-being, family stability, and other areas related to family sociology and family systems and theory. Dr. Teachman has published critical articles including, "The Financial Impact of Divorce on Children and Their Families" in 1994, and "Cohabitation and Marital Stability in the United States" in 1990.

Further Reading

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The Commission on Marriage and Family Support Initiatives

Created in 2003 (s. 383.0115, Florida Statutes), the **mission** of the Commission on Marriage and Family Support Initiatives is to strengthen marriages, support parents and families, and promote child well-being by raising public awareness, developing sound public policy and advocating for promising practices throughout Florida. For more information about the commission, visit its website at www.floridafamilies.org or contact:



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