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Understanding Romantic Relationships among Emerging Adults:
The Significant Roles of Cohabitation and Ambiguity

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Understanding Romantic Relationships among Emerging Adults:

The Significant Roles of Cohabitation and Ambiguity

Cohabitation has become a common part of the path that emerging adults travel as they navigate romantic relationships before settling down into marriage. There has been an explosion in the practice of cohabiting prior to marriage and many emerging adults now cohabit regardless of marriage intentions. Along with the wide availability of birth control and the increased likelihood of non-marital sex, cohabiting reflects fundamental changes in how men and women date and mate. This chapter describes this growing trend, including how individuals during the period of emerging adulthood view cohabitation and how they can be affected by it as they pursue their romantic relationship and family goals.

Living Together Outside of Marriage: A New National Trend

Many changes have occurred in family demography in the United States over the past several decades. One of the most significant changes is an increase in the number of couples who live together without being married. The U.S. Census now inquires about romantic partners sharing a household and the last report indicated that 4-6% of U.S. households involved unmarried couples living together. This upward trend in cohabitation is likely linked with many other changes in recent decades, including the diminishing number of U.S. households that involve married couples and, most significantly for the focus of this book, the trend toward delaying marriage until the late 20s. The average age of first marriage is now over 25 for women and over 27 for men (Fields, 2004) and emerging adulthood is defined in part as the period of time that comes before marriage (Arnett, 2000). One might wish to argue then that emerging adulthood is characterized by singlehood, but on the contrary, many emerging adults will experience significant romantic relationships¹ and relationship experiences that are likely to

shape their future marriages. For example, by age 24, 43% of women will have cohabited at least once (Chandra, Martinez, Mosher, Abma, & Jones, 2005).

One aspect of cohabitation that has garnered a great deal of attention in the research literature is premarital cohabitation. Today, sixty to seventy percent of couples cohabit before they become married (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009b). Across several studies and samples, living together premaritally has been shown to be associated with a higher risk for divorce and with lower marital quality (e.g., Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). This so-called “cohabitation effect” appears to be strongest for those who cohabit with multiple romantic partners before they marry (Teachman, 2003) and for those who live with their future spouses before they are engaged to be married (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades et al., 2009b; Stanley, Rhoades, Amato, Markman, & Johnson, in press). In fact, there is some evidence, at least for first marriages, that living together only after having made a formal commitment to marry is not associated with higher risk for marital distress (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades et al., 2009b).

With our colleague Howard Markman, we are currently conducting a large, longitudinal study on relationship development among emerging adults. Although full results will not be available for some time, descriptive data that were collected at the initial time point provide some insights into how trends in cohabitation are relevant to the period of emerging adulthood. The sample consists of 1294 unmarried individuals who are 18-34 years old ($M = 25.57$ $SD = 4.81$). The sample was recruited through a random, nationwide telephone survey and is therefore fairly representative of the United States population in terms of race and ethnicity. The only requirements for participation were that the individual be 1) between 18 and 34, 2) unmarried, and 3) involved in an exclusive romantic relationship with someone of the opposite sex that had

lasted two months or more. Here, we present findings from this project that describe how, why, and when emerging adults cohabit.

Among this group of unmarried, but dating young adults, 32% of them were currently living with a romantic partner. Of those who weren't currently cohabiting, 25% had lived with someone in the past and 60% agreed that "living together is a good way to test a relationship before marriage". In fact, 46% agreed that living together would improve their chances for a good marriage. These figures suggest that cohabitation is a relationship stage that many emerging adults will experience. Indeed, it is estimated that at least 50 to 70% of couples who marry will cohabit beforehand (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004), and these estimates are likely low. Furthermore, they do not address all the individuals who will cohabit with someone other than a partner they eventually marry. Hence, an overwhelming percentage of young adults will cohabit with a romantic partner, suggesting that cohabiting has become normative rather than unusual (Smock, 2000; Stanley et al., 2004).

The fact that cohabitation has become common raises the question of who does not cohabit. While there are many reasons an emerging adult involved in a serious romantic relationship may or may not cohabit, it appears that the group least likely to cohabit apart from marriage or prior to marriage are those who are traditionally religious. However, even though such an orientation makes cohabiting less likely, it is a weaker relationship than many might guess; many conservatively religious emerging adults end up cohabiting, though most frequently in the situation where the intention to marry is clear (Eggebeen & Dew, 2009).

Our national study provides insights on the complex relationship between one's values and behavior in this regard. Participants were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, "My religious beliefs suggest that it is wrong for people to live together without being

married.” Their responses indicated that their own behavior is sometimes at odds with their belief systems. Among individuals who were in dating, non-cohabiting relationships, 49% agreed with this statement. Most interestingly, 30% of those who were living with a partner agreed that cohabitation was against their own religious beliefs.

We also asked several questions related to the experience of cohabitation for those who were currently living with partners. In particular, we were interested in how emerging adults described the process by which their cohabitation began. Based on qualitative research that found that over 50% of cohabiters reported no process of talking or deliberating with their partners about cohabiting prior to moving in together (Manning & Smock, 2005), we asked our sample whether their process of beginning to cohabit resembled something more like making an explicit decision to cohabit (deciding) versus something they just slipped into without much thought (sliding). Respondent were given three options to choose from: 1) “We talked about it, planned it, and then made a decision together to do it,” 2) “We didn’t think about it or plan it. We slid into it,” and 3) “We talked about it, but then it just sort of happened.” About one-third of the sample fell into each category meaning that two-thirds reported they did not make a clear decision to live together and instead they “slid into it” or it “just sort of happened.” Hence, our quantitative findings in this large sample confirm that beginning to live together is not typically a deliberative process for young adults. As we will later argue, we suspect that this non-deliberativeness has negative consequences for many emerging adults.

In this project, cohabiting young adults are also asked about their reasons for moving in together. That is, we were interested in why so many emerging adults choose to cohabit nowadays. Researchers and practitioners have speculated that many people live together to test their relationships or try out marriage before deciding about whether it’s the right move for their

relationship, and many young adults endorse this practice for having this benefit (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). However, few emerging adults in our national study cite testing the relationship as their primary reason for cohabiting. Table 1 shows that the top reason for cohabiting is to spend more time together. When asked to rank order six possible reasons for moving in together, 45% of the sample said their number one reason was to spend more time together. The next most commonly cited reason was convenience. Convenience-related reasons include potential external (non-relationship) benefits of cohabitation such as sharing financial obligations and expenses, or living in a location closer to work or school. Moving in together to test the relationship was rarely the primary reason for beginning to cohabit. Only 5% of women and 9% of men cited this as their top reason.

Though rarely the primary reason for living together, cohabiting to test the relationship turns out to be important. Specifically, the degree to which individuals reported cohabiting to test their relationship may be linked to lower relationship quality. In a separate sample of cohabiting couples, how strongly individuals endorsed cohabiting to test their relationship was associated with more problems with communication and violence, as well as lower commitment and confidence in the relationship (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009a). In this other study, testing the relationship was also linked with lower individual wellbeing in terms of depression and anxiety. Thus, not only does existing evidence run counter to the belief that cohabiting prior to marriage lowers one's risks for marital problems, cohabiting may be particularly risky when done for the purpose of testing the relationship. If one senses a need to live together in order to test out a relationship, he or she may already be aware of problems in the relationship that could stand in the way of it turning into a satisfying marriage.

Lastly, we believe it is important to examine when emerging adults begin cohabitation relative to other emblems of commitment in their relationship. Most significantly, do individuals tend to cohabit before or after they have made a commitment to marry their partner? Of those who were cohabiting in this study, 66% reported that they had no plans to marry their partner when they moved into together. Twenty-three percent said they had made plans together to marry, but that they were not engaged when they began cohabitation and 11% reported that they had already become engaged before they began living together. Of those who did not have plans when they started cohabiting, more than half of them (59%) developed plans for marriage or became engaged during cohabitation, indicating that the most typical sequence among emerging adults is for a couple to move into together, and then develop plans for marriage rather than vice versa.

Any discussion of cohabitation must also address children. As has been widely discussed, childbearing has become increasingly disconnected with marriage (Cherlin, 2004). This demographic shift is a particularly important one. At present, nearly 40% of children in the United States are born to unmarried parents (Ventura, 2009). However, unmarried does not mean unpartnered. Many unmarried couples are having children live together. These trends mean that more and more children are being born to parents in relationships that, on average, have less commitment (Stanley et al., 2004) and far less stability (see Galston, 2008). As Raley and Bumpass note (2003), while the rate of divorce has leveled off, the number of children being born into unstable homes continues to increase.

In our national study, 31% of the cohabiting individuals reported that they have at least one child together with their partner. “We had a child to raise together” was also cited as the primary reason to begin cohabiting for 13% of the women and 7% of the men in the sample.

Many young adults also have children from a previous relationship when they enter a new cohabiting relationship – 25% of our cohabiting sample had at least one child from a previous relationship when their current cohabitation started. Thus, the increase in the popularity of cohabitation is significant not only for the adults involved, but also for the many children whose parents will cohabit at some point while they are growing up. While beyond the scope of this chapter, these trends suggest a steady increase in the number of families that have complex, step-family-like dynamics to negotiate. This is just one among many reasons why future emerging adults may need more education and training than in the past to navigate the pathways of family development.

The Age of Ambiguity

This book is focused on romantic relationships in an important developmental period, emerging adulthood. One of the primary signs of a developmental process is that personality and life patterns become less ambiguous and more defined. Differentiation is a core aspect of development. One of the ironies of cohabitation and the ways that romantic relationships tend to develop during emerging adulthood today is how ambiguity increasingly appears to characterize romantic endeavors in this developmental period. We posit that there has been a general increase in ambiguity in romantic relationships, and that this ambiguity is motivated. Hence, what we describe here is really the beginnings of a theory of the role that ambiguity may now play in the romantic relationships of emerging adults.

It has been observed that cohabitation is, in particular, an ambiguous form of union (Lindsay, 2000). As an example, consider what you know when a person tells you she is married versus if that same person were to tell you she is cohabiting with a partner. In the latter case, you only know that she is cohabiting with a partner; unless more is said, you do not know the seriousness of the relationship or if there is clear commitment, as in a plan for marriage. Unlike

marriage or engagement, cohabiting as a status conveys little information beyond the status of seriously dating, at least in contemporary American society. Is cohabitation just a new, increasingly accepted relationship status or might the ambiguity it reflects be motivated and seen as desirable by emerging adults? Is the ambiguity seen in the dynamics of cohabitation part of a growing preference for ambiguity in romantic unions?

Emerging adults navigate a relationship development landscape quite unlike what people experienced 20 or 30 years ago. We have elsewhere argued that what used to be relatively clear steps and stages for relationship development have become less structured or less scripted (Stanley, 2002, June; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). To borrow a concept from Vygotsky's (1962) theory of development, it can be argued that there has been a decline of the various societal customs that used to "scaffold" development in romantic relationships from adolescence into marriage. Customs that were common decades ago, such as going steady, or using friendship or class rings to convey commitment status, are no longer prominent. Of course, those customs replaced earlier customs, and all such customs vary by culture and era. Nevertheless, while some new customs may be emerging that replace older ones, we believe that there are fewer widely utilized tools for defining relationships than existed in the past—at least in the United States. One, apparently growing, exception to this trend is the tendency for emerging adults to use social networking tools such as Facebook or MySpace to define, clarify, and communicate to others the nature of their relationships. In our research project described earlier, fully 65% of the individuals use such a social networking site. Facebook, for example, allows a person to indicate a range of relationship stage or status options, such as single, in a relationship, in an open relationship, engaged, married, and widowed, or a user can choose "it's complicated". Such networking tools may well be replacing some of the functions that community and family based

social networks used to scaffold in the development of marriages and families. Consistent with various other social changes, this trend moves the control of the social customs to the individual, and away from the family. Sociologists such as Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt have noted the decline in importance that parents and family play in guiding young adults in these immensely important decisions (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). The role and use of emerging technologies in relationship development and maintenance should be a focus of research in the future. For example, Gretchen Kelmer, in our lab (Stanley & Rhoades), is beginning to study the use of FaceBook and MySpace in romantic relationship development with our new data set noted earlier.

Regardless of trends in social networking that may provide tools to clarify relationships, we believe there has been a growing trend toward ambiguity in patterns of romantic relationship development. We hypothesize that ambiguity feels safer than clarity when clarity is perceived to be associated with increased risk of rejection and loss. One foundation for this notion is the observation that youth in recent years have experienced or witnessed a great deal of marital instability, and this has undermined their confidence in the institution of marriage. Although more research is needed to understand the broad effects of this on the current generation, it is clear that the experience of parental divorce leads to lower confidence in marriage as an institution (Amato & DeBoer, 2001) and lower confidence in one's own marriage as a young adult (Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008). Indeed, Cui and Fincham (in press) show that parental divorce and interparental conflict impact current relationship functioning via different mechanisms, and that they do so even when the other is taken into account. Specifically, exposure to divorce impacts current relationship satisfaction among emerging adults via attitudes towards marriage while exposure to interparental conflict has an impact via

conflict resolution abilities. As interparental conflict typically precedes divorce, offspring of divorced parents experience a “double whammy” whereby they are compromised in both attitudes and skill levels when they enter marriage.

While the proportion of emerging adults in the U.S. who aspire to marriage is not much different from what it was at the turn of the twentieth century (Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005), the increased awareness of the possibility of relationship instability and divorce may be partly related to a number of patterns that are now perceived to be protective (regardless of actual evidence). Premarital cohabitation is seen as increasing one’s odds of success in marriage (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Delaying marriage until after one has become established financially, or in a career, may be motivated, in part, by a desire to buy personal insurance against the loss of divorce (cf. Popenoe & Whitehead, 2001). Similarly, the now ubiquitous goal of finding one’s soulmate (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2001) can be seen as a desire to find what is essentially the super lover who carries no risk of rejection.

If, as we posit, ambiguity in romantic relationships has increased, and if it is motivated, the obvious question is why this would be so. We can imagine a number of reasons why ambiguity has become common. First, some people may perceive ambiguity regarding the nature and direction of romantic relationships as practical, at least up until they are ready for marriage. Marriage is totally unambiguous, but it is also associated with both increased costs of exiting and high rates of instability. Ambiguity about commitment and the future can allow a romantic relationship of uncertain future and quality to continue for some time without being associated with the pressure of marriage.

A second perceived benefit of ambiguity can be posited in relation to demographic trends and deeper attachment dynamics. Aside from the impact of divorce and parental conflict, an

increasing number of children will not experience stability in the relationship of their parents; an increasing number are unlikely to marry in the first place. Sociologist Sara McLanahan summarizes a copious amount of research based largely on the Fragile Families data set showing that a large number of children growing up in the U.S. will not only experience the dissolution of relationship between their biological parents, but will go on to experience both biological parents going through numerous romantic relationships before these children reach the age of five (McLanahan, in press). While it cannot be demonstrated from any data of which we are aware, it is certainly arguable that the high rates of parental relationship instability combined with the increasing likelihood of parents churning through romantic partners while children are very young will create future generations of emerging adults with an increasing percentage of people with serious attachment insecurities based on their early life experiences.

There is a robust literature demonstrating the myriad of ways in which such attachment insecurities last into adulthood and impair romantic relationship development and security (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In just one potential mechanism of effect, the development of insecure-avoidant characteristics seems increasingly likely for those growing up in the U.S. This possibility alone could propel an increase in preference for ambiguity in the romantic relationships of emerging adults. If it is not totally clear when a relationship begins or how serious it really is, it may be believed that it will hurt less when it ends. Hence, those with high levels of attachment insecurity based in family history may feel comforted by ambiguity when the alternative is clarity that heightens a sense of insecurity about stability. Of course, such ambiguity may not be comforting or preferred among those who are anxious in their attachment style, but they may well learn not to rock the boat and push too hard for clarity when doing so threatens what stability of relationship they currently enjoy.

A third reason ambiguity could be preferred by some emerging adults relates to the fact that ambiguity can mask differences and, therefore, allow for a higher level of liking between people than could be sustained if more detailed information were salient. Indeed, a growing literature documents that increased information about others can lead to less liking not more. For example, Norton, Frost, & Ariely (2007) conducted a series of experiments wherein they show that less is sometimes more owing to the way that ambiguity about important dissimilarities protects individuals from awareness of those dissimilarities. They find that knowledge of dissimilarities can have a negative, cascading effect: as differences become salient, those differences prime perception so that other differences are noted over time. Therefore, where a relationship is deemed desirable and where familiarity may foster awareness of information that decreases likability, ambiguity is protective. But ambiguity can only be protective up to a point. It is not protective in potentially long-term relationships where real differences will eventually emerge that affect the likelihood of success and happiness. Nevertheless, as a short-term strategy favoring relationship maintenance, ambiguity can be seen as protective of the illusion of similarity.

This issue of ambiguity regarding similarities has a specific application when it comes to the issue of asymmetrical commitment in relationships. After all, if one partner desires marriage in the future and the other does not—or is not close to committing to such a thing—the less committed partner has good reason to avoid any process that would jeopardize the status quo and make the actual commitment differences less ambiguous. The more committed partner might push for discussions, such as having “the talk,” about the meaning of the relationship. However, the less committed partner may logically foresee only loss in such a process: loss of the relationship as the commitment differential becomes undeniable or loss of independence if he or

she has to up commitment or lose the relationship. More committed partners, at times, surely understand that pushing too hard may cause the less committed partner to bolt. By extension of the principle of least interest (Waller & Hill, 1951), commitment asymmetries produce a situation wherein the one who is most committed has the least power, making a resolution of this dynamic difficult by the more committed partner as long as that partner is unwilling to give up (or at least act as if they will give up) the present relationship. In addition to providing a threat to the relationship, behaviors that reduce ambiguity can also highlight the discomfiting commitment imbalance, where it exists. In our research on cohabitation, we find that commitment imbalances are greatest among those who cohabited prior to engagement or marriage (Rhoades, et al., 2006), which is precisely the group that we believe begins cohabiting under conditions of greatest ambiguity (as explained in the next section of this chapter). Further, these couples have lower quality marriages years into marriage, with the asymmetrical commitments showing no evidence of evening out over time. There is a potential, long-term cost to ambiguity on important dimensions.

In summary, ambiguity may be preferred to clarity wherever clarity is associated with the possibility of a romantic attachment with uncertain future ending abruptly. As noted, this thinking is hypothetical, but it does lead to testable predictions. Even if ambiguity is reinforced, it is not without costs in certain situations, as illustrated by research on cohabitation. To explain how cohabitation may be linked to both ambiguity and risks in romantic relationships, we now turn to the existing evidence that shows that cohabiting prior to engagement or marriage is associated with greater risks for lower marital quality and divorce.

The Cohabitation Effect

As noted earlier, research reliably demonstrates that couples who cohabited prior to marriage, and especially prior to engagement, are at greater risk once married. Furthermore, while the point is argued among scholars, with some limited evidence for the effect diminishing over time (Hewitt & de Vaus, 2009), we do not think the effect is going to go away. We not only have empirical reasons for this belief, including studies with very recent samples (Kamp Dush et al., 2003; Rhoades et al., 2009b), there are strong theoretical reasons to expect a version of this effect to continue. These reasons have to do with the nature of ambiguity.

The primary explanation for the cohabitation effect in the literature has been that it is due to selection effects (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Brown & Booth, 1996; Smock, 2000). In other words, pre-existing characteristics of people who cohabit account for their additional risk and none of the additional risk is related to the experience of cohabitation. The fact that cohabiters are different from non-cohabiters is indisputable; what is in dispute is the degree to which factors associated with selection explain all the additional risk associated with premarital cohabitation. Numerous studies have not been able to co-vary away the risk by controlling for variables presumed to be associated with selection (e.g., Kamp Dush et al., 2003; Rhoades et al., 2009b; Stafford, Kline, & Rankin, 2004; Stanley et al., 2004). If selection does not explain all the added risk, what are the other candidates?

Some research suggests that the experience of cohabitation, especially for longer periods of time or with multiple partners, adds risk. Specifically, it has been found that the experience of cohabitation leads to a diminished sense of the importance of marriage and having children (Axinn & Barber, 1997; Axinn & Thornton, 1992). In other words, the ongoing experience of cohabitation outside of marriage can diminish the sense that marriage and family matters. That change in attitudes could then undermine motivation to build and sustain marriages.

Another important candidate for the experience of cohabitation adding risk comes from our work. Based in part on a theory of commitment that recognizes that not all motivations to remain in a relationship are internal (Stanley & Markman, 1992), we speculated that it is simply harder to break up from a cohabiting relationship than a dating but noncohabiting relationship (see Stanley, 2002, June; Stanley et al., 2004). Essentially, what cohabitation may add to the risk for some couples who marry is that some of those couples marry a partner that they would not have married had it been easier to break up. Put another way, cohabitation leads to increases in constraints that tip the scale far enough that some relationships that would otherwise end prior to marriage do not, and become riskier marriages instead.

We have referred to this phenomenon as inertia (Kline et al., 2004; Stanley, 2002, June; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Cohabitation has more inertia than mere dating. Importantly, this theory of added risk does not so much suggest that cohabitation is altering the risk for a specific couple as much as making it more likely that a couple with more risks will remain together into marriage (Stanley, et al., 2006). The inertia perspective suggests that those who have not clarified their mutual commitment prior to increasing their inertia should be at greater risk owing to cohabitation. They are the couples who have an increased likelihood of remaining together because of increased constraints, not solely because of higher relationship quality or higher interpersonal commitment between partners.

One way to test what inertia predicts is to examine differences between couples who cohabit prior to engagement versus those who cohabit only after engagement or marriage. Engagement represents a public, mutual marker of a shared commitment status to remain together in the future. Couples who cohabit only after engagement (or marriage) are not nearly as likely to marry their partner out of the inertia of cohabitation as those who begin to cohabit

before the future is agreed upon. In line with this prediction, we consistently find that those couples who live together prior to engagement are those most at risk for problems in marriage on a host of dimensions ranging from negative communication and physical aggression to commitment and confidence in the future of the relationship (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades et al., 2009b). Indeed, our research increasingly confirms that the “premarital cohabitation effect” is really the “pre-engagement cohabitation effect.” It is also possible that engagement, itself, is another protective relationship behavior and status because people who are at lower risk select for it. However, in analyses of several data sets, we find that controlling for many variables associated with selection does not negate the cohabitation pre-engagement effect.

Engagement is a highly defined, publically understood status reflecting clarity about a mutual commitment to become married in the future. Short of marriage itself, it is arguably the strongest symbolic representation of commitment. It is anything but ambiguous in the way it is typically perceived in our culture. Hence, while cohabitation itself may not be all that informative about the direction of a relationship, engagement as a process may be protective precisely because it is informative. Not only is engagement informative to the social network of the couple, it is informative between two partners. There is very little likelihood of misreading a partner’s commitment intentions when you are publically engaged. In addition to the protective value when it comes to cohabitation, engagement more generally signifies to all that the relationship in question is not going to turn into a “He’s Just Not That Into You” story.

This line of thinking and research could be confined merely to premarital cohabitation but we believe that it points to a larger, more challenging reality for emerging adults. What seems to increasingly characterize romantic relationship development among teens and young adults is ambiguity. Most importantly, we believe that various, potentially life altering,

relationship transitions now occur when there is very little understood or settled about the relationships, and this fact contributes to risk (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). What types of relationship transitions are potentially life-altering? Although it may be different for different people, we believe this list typically would include sexual involvement, pregnancy, and cohabitation. Of course, there are many cases where sexual involvement or cohabitation do not lead to life-long consequences—at least not those that are easily measured—but it is also easy to construct a list of examples where they are life-altering. For example, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a report in 2008 showing that 25% of all females in their teen years have already contracted a sexually-transmitted disease. Likewise, in addition to the risks of remaining too long in a relationship with a poor fit, some people move in with a partner before learning enough about the person, finding themselves in a more constrained relationship with a violent or otherwise unhealthy partner.

The change we draw attention to is simply this. Emerging adults are at greater risk than they used to be for going through important relationship transitions without making decisions about those transitions. The case of cohabitation is, again, particularly illuminating. As described earlier, couples tend to slide into cohabiting (Manning & Smock, 2005), often with a pattern where one partner was over at the other's place an increasing number of nights, and then the couple began to live together full time when the partner's lease was up. The important point here is that the cohabitation began with an unexamined, non-deliberative process. We have given this dynamic the shorthand name, "sliding versus deciding" (Stanley et al., 2006). While sliding transitions are not necessarily risky, we believe that they hold more potential for risk than ones based on explicit decisions (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). Furthermore, a theoretical case can be made that sliding transitions undermine the development of commitment since clear decisions

are more likely to support behavioral intentions and follow through on them. This point can be argued from within a number of theoretical models, with cognitive dissonance being an excellent example of how decisions are commitments that support post-decisional motivation (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002).

To summarize, we are suggesting that the experience of cohabitation without engagement or marriage may add to risks for emerging adults because it increases the difficulty of ending a relationship, regardless of one's commitment to it. These processes may increase the number of couples where the partners are poorly matched, and lead to premature entanglement foreclosing an adequate search for a more suitable life partner (Glenn, 2002). The processes may also undermine the development of a full commitment between partners, since sliding transitions may interfere with a strongly developed sense that one has chosen and committed to the path ahead.

Practical Implications for Emerging Adults

Romantic relationships have considerable impact on emerging adults. After all, one of the three developmental tasks ascribed to emerging adulthood involves partnering (Arnett, 2000). Our point thus far is that very common patterns of relationship experience and development can have lasting implications for risk and the likelihood of achieving other major life goals. The characteristics that lead to some forms of cohabitation being associated with increased risk (especially cohabitation prior to engagement) also lead to straightforward strategies to reduce those risks. For example, cohabitation is, at present, an ambiguous relationship state unless marriage or other intentions about the future have been clarified between partners. But ambiguity can be countered with clarity. Emerging adults tend to go through relationship transitions like entering cohabitation rapidly (Sassler, 2004), doubtless adding to risks. But speed can be countered with caution and simple strategies to slow things down in how

relationships develop. In essence, we believe that emerging adults can learn how to be more deliberative—to slide less and decide more—and that doing so will foster success.

Emerging adults, as a group, are heavily involved in educational institutions which provide contact points for preventive education. Chapter XX covers relationship education for emerging adults in detail, but here we address lessons learned from the cohabitation literature that could be particularly appropriate for emerging adults.

Given the data on how individuals wind up cohabiting and the data indicating that cohabiting may impact future relationships and marriages in important ways, the concept of sliding vs. deciding through relationship transitions, particularly into cohabitation, could be valuable to those in or approaching emerging adulthood. Emerging adults could be encouraged to weigh the pros and cons of different relationship experiences and options and to actively make decisions about how they would like relationships and romantic experiences to be. These kinds of messages have not traditionally been part of relationship education, but are now becoming more common as the value of early relationship education for individuals (rather than only couples) is becoming more widely recognized (see chapter XX this volume; Rhoades & Stanley, 2009).

In addition to content on relationship transitions and choices, basic content on communication skills and tools may also be particularly useful for emerging adults. We have argued in this chapter that individuals in their late teens and early twenties face many more relationship experiences and issues to negotiate than in past generations. To be able to talk about and clarify relationship intentions and what they might mean for their relationships, emerging adults will need strong communication skills. Many of the skills covered in traditional relationship education, such as listening well and problem-solving skills will be applicable, but

other more directed skills training might also be valuable. For example, emerging adults could learn specific tools to be able to talk openly with their partners about their commitment levels, to define their relationships (sometimes called a “DTR” talk), and, with regard to cohabitation, to address what living together might mean for the future of their relationship (also see Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009c).

Beyond cohabitation transitions, the notion of sliding and deciding may apply to other relationship transitions and issues during emerging adulthood. Given that 17% of men and 33% of women aged 20-24 have at least one child, many of whom are unplanned, psycho-education around pregnancy planning could be wrapped into relationship education training. Information on sliding vs. deciding into sexual intercourse, condom use, and pregnancy could be particularly useful to this age group.

Future Directions

Cohabitation has become important to study because it has become a central feature of romantic relationship development for many emerging adults. Research on cohabitation provides a window on many dimensions that are central to understanding risk and protective factors in romantic relationships, marriage, and family; the study of cohabitation includes attention to cultural values and beliefs, social customs, personal attitudes, commitment dynamics, personal vulnerabilities, and relationship (sexual) histories. Research in this area should continue to address a number of specific issues to fully realize the potential it has to elucidate romantic relationship dynamics among emerging adults. These issues include:

- Examination of beliefs and attitudes, and how those affect behavior into and out of cohabiting relationships

- Examination of how cohabiting relationships differ from dating relationships, and for whom
- Identification of those for whom cohabitation may lower risks; while most evidence suggests risks are not lowered for most individuals, there are likely some for whom this occurs
- Examination of characteristics of cohabitations that occur as either steps toward marriage, long-term alternatives to marriage, or relationships of ambiguous expectation
- Analysis of the long-term effects on children of childbearing during cohabitation, for both parents who remain together and those who break up
- Exploration of power dynamics in cohabiting unions, and the implications for individual risk with commitment asymmetry between partners
- Tests of the theory that those with greater attachment insecurity—or generalized uncertainty about committed romantic relationships—may, on average, prefer ambiguity in romantic relationships and otherwise be at increased risk for cohabiting under conditions of low or unclear commitment

These and many other lines of inquiry can be pursued in the context of research on cohabitation, resulting in new understandings of the romantic patterns and relationship trajectories of emerging adults.

Conclusion

The increase in the popularity of cohabitation and the delay of marriage indicate to us that emerging adults are facing many more significant relationship transitions and decisions today than the same age group would have a generation or two ago. It is not the case that most

emerging adults are remaining single — on the contrary, they are likely to be involved in multiple romantic relationships, some serious enough that they involve sharing a home and, for some, having a child together before marriage.

Importantly, the meaning of cohabitation in the United States continues to change. For example, while it was initially a prelude to marriage and most often ended in marriage, cohabitations increasingly are unconnected with plans for marriage and result in dissolution (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), even when there are children involved. In addition, as federal and/or state laws change around issues like domestic partnerships, civil unions, and health benefits, we may see the meaning of cohabitation change, as well. It is a rather ambiguous relationship stage or status today, but it may become more institutionalized over time. If so, it may, like marriage does today, help mark the transition to adulthood. However, new research must address what it means to today's emerging adults and to their relationships, as what we know from even 10 years ago may soon be outdated. Without a better understanding of cohabitation, we will be left with an incomplete picture of romantic relationship in emerging adulthood.

Footnote

1. It is worth noting, however, that a sizable minority of those in the age range (18-25 years) associated with emerging adulthood do marry. For example, in the U.S.A. 25% of women and 16% of men marry before age 23 (Uecker, & Stokes, 2008).

Table 1

Emerging Adults' Top Reasons for Cohabiting with their Partners

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
I wanted to spend more time with my partner	46%	44%
It was inconvenient to live apart	24%	22%
I wanted us to take a step up in commitment	13%	16%
We had a child to raise together	7%	13%
I wanted to test out our relationship before marriage	9%	5%
I don't believe in the institution of marriage	0.8%	0.4%

Notes. $N = 414$.

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