

The Influence of Cohabitation on Marital Quality for Men and Women Prior to Attending Relationship Education

Workshops

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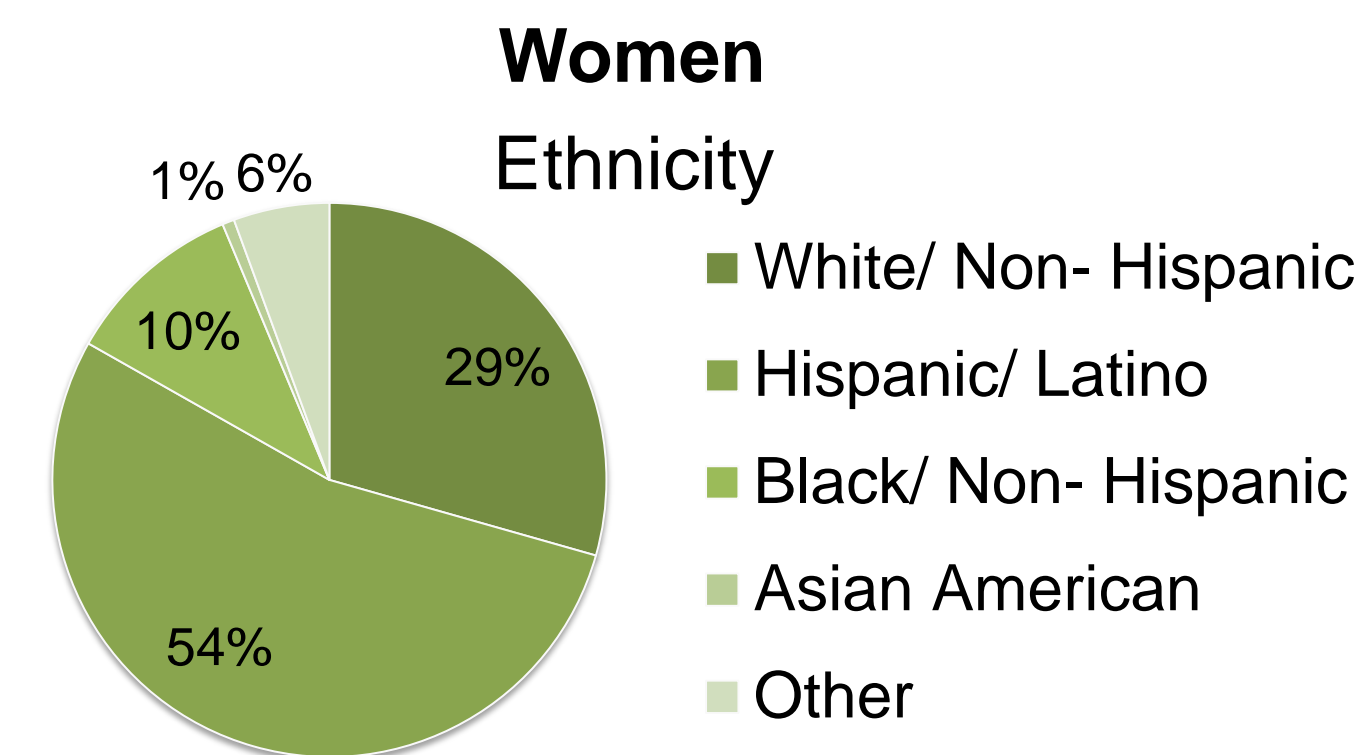
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Abstract

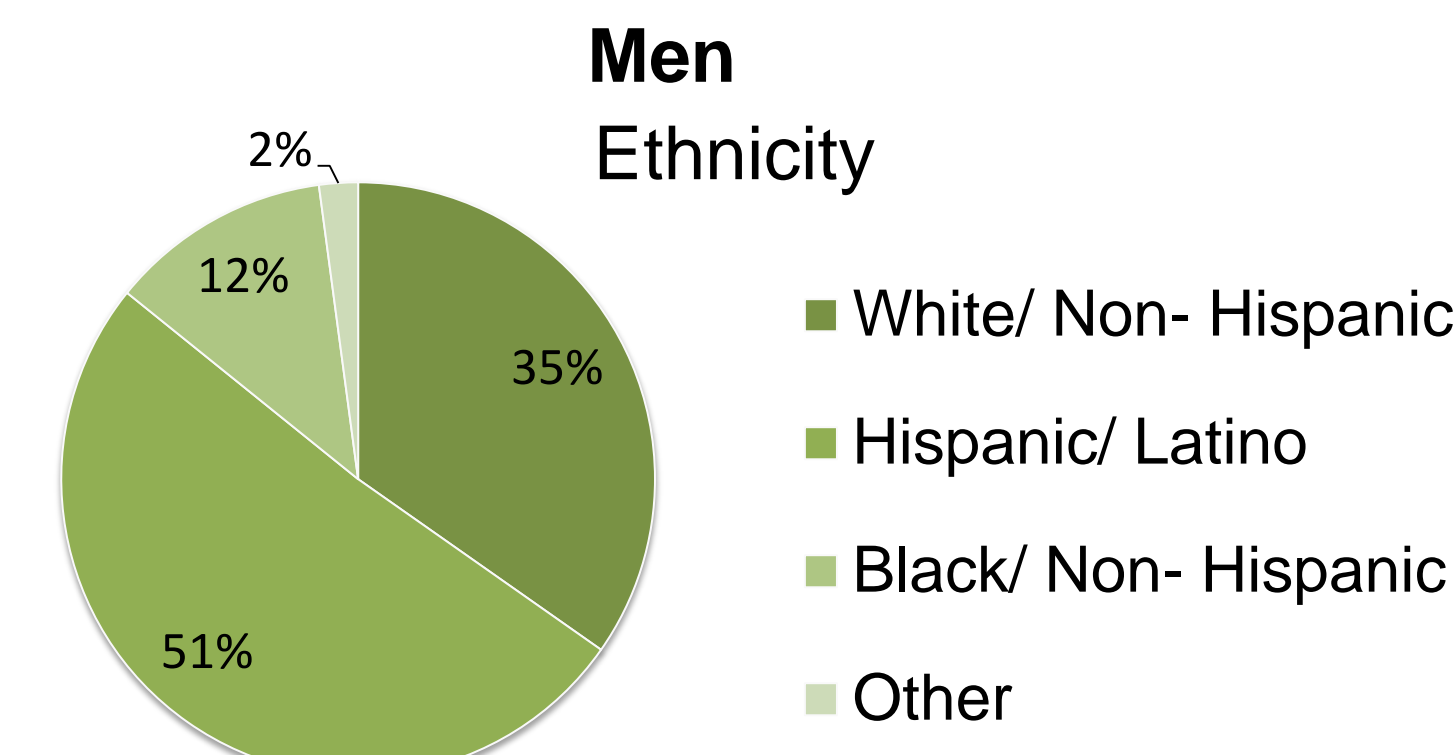
Studies have affirmed that couples who cohabit prior to marriage compared to couples who do not experience increased risk factors in their relationships, such as diminished relationship quality and stability.¹ Additionally, other risk factors, such as low-income, have been associated with increased relationship distress. Therefore, these couples may be more likely to divorce. In 2002, the federal government began funding grants to provide relationship education interventions to at-risk couples. We were interested in what factors contributed to relationship distress upon participation in a marriage education program. For the current study, we evaluated the effect of cohabiting on current marital quality for men and women prior to beginning a relationship education intervention. We used a demographic information form to assess for cohabitation prior to marriage, and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS: Spanier, 1976) to assess for marital quality. We found a statistically significant difference in total DAS scores between women who cohabited and women who did not, with cohabiters indicating higher levels of distress. We found no significant differences in total DAS scores in length of time cohabiting, and no differences in total DAS between income categories.

Results

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What differences exist in marital quality, as measured by total DAS scores, for women and men who cohabited prior to marriage versus those who did not?



Status	N (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation	F-Score
Cohab.	83 (58%)	93.27	22.19	(1, 141)= 12.120, p=.001
Non-Cohab.	60 (42%)	106.23	21.69	



Status	N (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation	F-Score
Cohab.	82 (58%)	99.37	19.12	(1, 139)= 2.708, p= .102
Non-Cohab.	59 (42%)	105	21.3	

*Approximately 8% of variance is attributed to cohabiting, a medium effect.

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What differences exist in marital quality, as measured by the total DAS scores of cohabiting individuals, by length of time cohabiting and combined monthly income?

Cohabiting Women

Months Cohab.	Income Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	N (%)
0-31 months	0-2100	87.05	23.53	19 (30%)
	2101-3770	89.48	23.77	23 (37%)
	3771 & Up	100.81	19.93	21 (33%)
	Total	92.52	22.92	63 (100%)
32-60 months	0-2100	101.4	13.74	5 (38%)
	2101-3770	104.5	17.46	4 (31%)
	3771 & Up	100.75	22.07	4 (31%)
	Total	102.15	16.24	13 (100%)
61-116 months	0-2100	97	1.41	2 (33%)
	2101-3770	75		1 (17%)
	3771 & Up	90.33	19.76	3 (50%)
	Total	90	14.87	6 (100%)
Total	0-2100	90.58	21.57	26 (32%)
	2101-3770	91.11	23.08	28 (34%)
	3771 & Up	99.68	19.7	28 (34%)
	Total	93.87	21.64	82 (100%)

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Months Cohab.	2	611.51	1.303	0.278	0.034
Income Group	2	136.91	0.292	0.748	0.008
Error	73	469.23			

Cohabiting Men

Months Cohab.	Income Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	N (%)
0-31 months	0-2100	96	22.37	19 (32%)
	2101-3770	101.32	18.6	19 (32%)
	3771 & Up	101.05	20.6	21 (36%)
	Total	99.51	20.37	59 (100%)
32-60 months	0-2100	103.25	13.48	4 (31%)
	2101-3770	93.67	13.51	6 (46%)
	3771 & Up	114.33	3.79	3 (23%)
	Total	101.38	14.02	13 (100%)
61-116 months	0-2100	111.67	10.26	3 (33%)
	2101-3770	84	4.24	2 (22%)
	3771 & Up	90.75	23.47	4 (44%)
	Total	96.22	19.42	9 (100%)
Total	0-2100	98.92	20.48	26 (32%)
	2101-3770	98.33	17.39	27 (33%)
	3771 & Up	101	20.29	28 (35%)
	Total	99.44	19.23	81 (100%)

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Months Cohab.	2	174.43	0.464	0.631	0.013
Income Group	2	429.94	1.143	0.325	0.031
Error	72	376.18			

Introduction

Over the past 30 years there has been a rise in couples cohabiting prior to getting married. This has generated interest and concern in what kind of effect cohabitation has on later marital unions.¹ Studies have found evidence that both link and fail to link cohabitation with adverse consequences. Research has concluded that couples who cohabit prior to marriage are associated with poorer marital quality, lower marital satisfaction, higher levels of domestic violence and greater probability of divorce in the U.S.² Conflicting research identified premarital characteristics as predictors of marital dissatisfaction and dissolution and did not find cohabitation to be influential among couples who were divorced, married but distressed, or happily married.³

Therefore, recent studies are focusing on understanding the reasons why couples cohabit.⁴ The purpose of this study is to examine differences in marital quality for individuals who cohabited before marriage and those who did not, for low-income couples participating in marriage and relationship education. We are also interested in whether the length of cohabitation prior to marriage and combined monthly income affect marital quality in cohabiters. The findings of this study could help researchers understand how cohabitation influences individual perceptions of marital adjustment.

Research Questions

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What differences exist in marital quality, as measured by total DAS scores at pre-assessment, for women and men who cohabited prior to marriage versus those who did not?

- H₀1: No differences exist in marital quality for women who cohabited prior to marriage versus women who did not.
- H₀2: No differences exist in marital quality for men who cohabited prior to marriage versus men who did not.

Research Question 2 (RQ2): In cohabiting women and men, what differences exist in marital quality, as measured by total DAS scores at pre-assessment, by length of time cohabiting and combined monthly income?

- H₀1: No differences exist in marital quality for cohabiting women by length of time cohabiting and combined monthly income
- H₀2: No differences exist in marital quality for cohabiting men by length of time cohabiting and combined monthly income.

Method

In October 2006, the Marriage and Family Research Institute received federal funding from the Office of Family Assistance of the Department of Health & Human Services to implement the OFA Together Project. The project provided marriage education services to low-income married couples with children and collected data comparing couples who participated in the services to those in a control group. All low-income married couples who completed the pre-intervention assessment, specifically the demographics form and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) were included in the present study.

We scored the DAS and computed the total DAS score. Subsequently, we input the data from the DAS and intake form into SPSS. Univariate analyses of variance were conducted for women and then men to examine differences in marital quality for cohabiters versus non-cohabiters. Univariate two-way analyses of variance were run for only cohabiting women and then only cohabiting men to observe if differences existed between length of time cohabiting or combined monthly income existed and total DAS scores.

Discussion

Cohabiting women demonstrated statistically significantly more marital distress than non-cohabiting women at pre-assessment. This finding was not replicated in men; cohabiting men were not significantly less happy with their marriages than non-cohabiting men. For both cohabiting women and men, the length of time cohabiting and the amount of money made monthly did not significantly influence marital quality.

The results found show that women may be affected more by the adverse consequences of cohabiting. Cohabiting women may have fallen victim to relationship inertia; when individuals who cohabit prior to marriage end up "sliding" into marriage instead of intentionally deciding to marry.² We were surprised to find that the combined monthly income did not appear to effect their marital quality because previous research has continuously cited a trend in these two variables.

Study Limitations

The present study was not completely representative. It contained a majority of Hispanic individuals and cohabiting individuals. The total size of the sample was small, causing the cohabiting group and the non-cohabiting group to be similarly undersized. The number of months participants claimed to have cohabited before marriage may have been misrepresented due to poor memory..

Conclusion

We were able to reject the first null hypothesis, but failed to reject the last three null hypotheses. The significant difference in marital quality for cohabiting women versus non-cohabiting women supports previous research that discusses relationship inertia. Future research should focus on teasing apart the differences in marital quality for cohabiting women and non-cohabiting women. Studies could center on identifying what areas of marital quality differ between the groups.

The absence of the income trend may have occurred because the sample size was not big enough. Future research may want to examine the marital quality of cohabiting individuals and income with a larger sample size and including participants with a greater range in income level.

Acknowledgments

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