Article

What Do Those Cohabiting Believe about Relationship Social Support and Premarital Counseling? A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract: Relationship researchers have long studied factors that boost or detract from relationship success. Social support and premarital counseling are factors that have been shown to boost relationship satisfaction and relationship success. However, little is known about how relationship status may influence attitudes toward social support and premarital counseling. Using a human ecology lens, this study explores the relationship between relationship status and attitudes toward social support and premarital counseling from a sample of 385 individuals. Implications for family practitioners and future researchers are provided based on study results.

Keywords: cohabitation; social support; premarital counseling; relationship support

1. Introduction

Relationship researchers have investigated factors that both contribute to and detract from relationship health for many years. For instance, while cohabitation has become a normative relationship behavior, cohabiting relationships are often less stable (Rosenfeld and Roesler 2019). Premarital counseling has been shown to help produce positive effects for the relationship (Furman 2002; Harris et al. 2019; Stanley et al. 2006b). Additionally, support offered by those close to the relationship, such as from family and friends, can help reduce stress and negative environmental factors and help boost relational well-being (Mert 2018). However, little is known about how those in different relationship circumstances differ in their views about certain relationship practices and supports. Such investigations can help those who work with couples and relationships to better understand the perspectives and needs of the audiences with whom they work to better tailor their efforts and increase the effectiveness of programming. This study takes a human ecology approach to explore how those in different relationship circumstances view support from family and friends, as well as attitudes toward premarital education.

1.1. Cohabiting Couples in the U.S.

Cohabitation has become quite normative relationship behavior in the U.S. (59% of those aged 18–44 have lived with an unmarried partner; Horowitz et al. 2019). While age, SES, and level of education are all interfused with the decision to cohabit and/or marry (Conger et al. 2010), partners who cohabit may have many risks associated with living together. Cohabiting partners often experience greater incidents of cheating and lowered trust levels (Horowitz et al. 2019; Steuber et al. 2014; Treas and Giesen 2004). Furthermore, domestic violence rates are often higher in cohabiting relationships, especially when a partner experienced unstable upbringing where examples of domineering isolation and control were common (Kenney and McLanahan 2006; Rakovec-Felser 2014). Additionally, cohabiting relationships are quite unstable in general, and those that do go on to produce a marriage are often more likely to end in divorce (Guzzo 2014; Rosenfeld and Roesler 2019), especially when the relationship partners did not make clear decisions together about each step and stage of relationship development (Stanley et al. 2006a).

1.2. Premarital Counseling/Education and Relationships

A large body of research suggests that engagement in premarital couple education or counseling is one way to decrease the likelihood of marital instability and increase positive outcomes experienced by couples (e.g., Harris et al. 2019; Stahmann and Hiebert 1997; Stanley 2001; Tambling and Glebova 2013). According to Murray and Murray (2004), premarital counseling and/or education is an intervention that occurs with couples who plan to marry, aimed at providing couples with information on ways to improve their relationship once they are married. Yilmaz and Kalkan (2010) found that premarital counseling benefited couples by learning about themselves and their partners in the premarital period, making their expectations for marriage clear, and having problem-solving skills for the problems that may occur in the future. Additionally, Stanley et al. (2006b) found that premarital education participation boosts marital quality and stability, showing that premarital education was associated with a 31% decrease in the odds of divorce. Tambling and Glebova (2013) found that premarital counseling addresses many topics related to couple distress and divorce, and Harris et al. (2019) found that premarital counseling increased the participants' understanding of how to meet their own and their partner's needs and resolve conflict in healthy ways. Some results also show that those who receive premarital counseling are more likely to seek help later in the marriage (Williamson et al. 2018). These findings validate the notion that premarital counseling not only helps couples to gain skills necessary to have a harmonious marriage, but also lowers the odds of the couple divorcing in the future.

1.3. Social Support and Relationships

Romantic relationships do not exist in a vacuum, they develop within a social network that most often includes family and friends. Most research shows that individuals who receive support/approval from their social circles tend to have more stable relationships (Jin and Oh 2010; Mert 2018). Support from family and friends is often correlated with higher levels of romantic involvement, love, satisfaction, and commitment (Jin and Oh 2010). Social support that is open, clarifies situations, and constructive social support often boosts positive relationship outcomes (Jin and Oh 2010; Mert 2018). Positive outcomes for the romantic relationship include reduction in stress, increased partner receptiveness, and better mood (Don and Hammond 2017). Social and emotional support from family and friends include expressions of love, kindness, or reassurance. This type of support tends to reduce stress and distress and augment relationship satisfaction (Don and Hammond 2017).

1.4. Tying to Theory and the Current Study

The human ecology theory emphasizes the connection between humans and various levels of their environment (Hamon and Smith 2016; White and Klein 2008)—in essence, human ecology highlights how various contexts influence relationships. From this point of view, relationships are influenced by various social interactions (e.g., social support of family and friends) and societal practices (e.g., premarital counseling)—and the influence of the environment on the relationship may depend on the context of the relationship situation (e.g., married, cohabiting, etc.) and the particular region under consideration (Moran and Brondízio 2013). For instance, social support for a marriage or other long-term relationship commitment may be viewed differently for someone single versus someone married, and views on premarital counseling may also be viewed differently for those engaged versus those dating. Furthermore, views on relationship social support and premarital counseling may vary by region (e.g., some areas/regions are, overall, more conservative than others), and views of certain types of relationship arrangements may also vary by area/region (e.g., views on marriage or cohabiting arrangements may differ by area/region). Hence, the environmental effect on the person or on the relationship may depend on the relationship context and/or the level of development present in the relationship. This study explores this relationship—how attitudes toward relationship support from family and friends and toward premarital counseling differ by relationship status.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The sample was composed of 385 individuals. The sample was primarily female (88%), with ages ranging from 18–70 (mean = 30.5, median = 25, SD = 11.88). In terms of race/ethnicity, most reported being White/Caucasian (67%), Asian (10%), and Native American (9%). In terms of education, most reported "some college" (35%), "college graduate" (29%), and "high school graduate" (13%). For income, 39% reported an income up to $30,000, 25%—between $30,000 and $60,000, 16%—between $60,000 and $90,000, and 20%—over $90,000. For relationship status, most reported being "married" (43%, mean age = 37), "single" (20%, mean age = 24), "committed dating relationship (dating)" (19%, mean age = 23), "living with a romantic partner (cohabiting)" (8%, mean age = 25), "engaged" (5%, mean age = 24), and "divorced or separated" (5%, mean age = 37). In terms of geographical location, most participants (89%) reported living in Oklahoma, 4%—in Texas (all other states of residence were < 1% of the sample).

2.2. Procedure

After gaining the IRB approval, the participants completed an online survey, which was distributed through university classes and social media.

2.3. Measures

Wedding/relationship attitudes: measured via the following items on a 1–7 Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree": "I believe that it is important to have the support and approval of my friends prior to marriage"; "I believe that it is important to have the support and approval of my parents/family prior to marriage"; "I believe it is important to have pre-marital counseling prior to getting married."

2.4. Analytic Plan

Due to violations to some of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) assumptions, a non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test was conducted to assess the relationship between responses on the importance of having the support of friends/parents/family, as well as the importance of premarital counseling with relationship status (cohabiting, divorced/separated, married, single, dating, and engaged). After the initial, overall tests were conducted, pairwise comparisons were analyzed to investigate specific group differences. All the analyses were completed with SPSS version 24.0. For the reader's information, men and women in this study only differed on the item assessing the importance of parents/family approval prior to marriage, where in men it was significantly lower [$t(377) = 2.79$, $p = 0.036$].

3. Results

The Kruskal–Wallis test results for the item "I believe that it is important to have the support and approval of my friends prior to marriage" showed a significant effect of relationship status on rating the importance of having the support and approval of friends prior to marriage [$H(5, 382) = 37.61$, $p < 0.001$]. Further, post hoc pairwise comparisons showed the cohabiting group to be significantly lower than the single group ($p < 0.001$) and the dating group ($p = 0.002$).

The Kruskal–Wallis test results for the item "I believe that it is important to have the support and approval of my parents/family prior to marriage" showed a significant effect of relationship status on rating the importance of having the support and approval of friends prior to marriage [$H(5, 379) = 20.55$, $p < 0.01$]. Further, post hoc pairwise comparisons showed the cohabiting group to be significantly lower than the single group ($p < 0.03$) and the dating group ($p = 0.014$).

The Kruskal–Wallis test results for the item "I believe it is important to have premarital counseling prior to getting married" showed a significant effect of relationship status on rating the importance of having premarital counseling prior to marriage [$H(5, 380) = 28.37$, $p < 0.0001$]. Further, post hoc pairwise comparisons showed the cohabiting group to be

significantly lower than the single group ($p = 0.009$), the married group ($p = 0.001$), and the divorced/separated group ($p = 0.002$). Please see Tables 1 and 2 for descriptive statistics and all Kruskal–Wallis test results and pairwise comparison results.

Table 1. Variable descriptive statistics.

Relationship Status	*n*	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Approval of friends				
Cohabiting	32	2.73	3.00	1.34
Married	163	3.50	3.00	1.65
Engaged	21	3.86	4.00	2.03
Dating	70	4.23	5.00	1.68
Divorced/separated	20	3.95	5.00	2.24
Single	74	4.65	3.00	1.53
Approval of parents/family				
Cohabiting	32	4.37	5.00	1.90
Married	163	5.05	6.00	1.67
Engaged	21	5.81	6.00	1.03
Dating	70	5.61	6.00	5.81
Divorced/separated	20	4.85	5.00	1.84
Single	74	5.59	6.00	1.41
Importance of premarital counseling				
Cohabiting	32	3.83	4.00	1.95
Married	163	5.37	6.00	1.52
Engaged	21	5.19	5.00	1.69
Dating	70	4.57	5.00	1.84
Divorced/separated	20	5.90	6.00	1.07
Single	74	5.34	6.00	1.43

Table 2. Kruskal–Wallis test results and pairwise comparison results.

Relationship Status	Overall Test Statistic	*df*	1	2	3	4	5
Approval of friends	37.61 ***	5					
1. Cohabiting							
2. Married			48.07				
3. Engaged			−71.29	−23.22			
4. Dating			−92.91 **	−44.83	21.61		
5. Divorced/separated			76.51	−28.44	5.22	−16.40	
6. Single			−118.00 ***	−69.92 ***	46.70	25.09	−41.49
Approval of parents/family	20.55 **	5					
1. Cohabiting							
2. Married			38.37				
3. Engaged			−81.39	−43.02			
4. Dating			−79.31 *	−40.95	−2.07		
5. Divorced/separated			29.68	8.69	−51.71	−49.64	
6. Single			−73.81 *	−35.44	−7.58	−44.13	−44.13
Importance of premarital counseling	28.37 ***	5					
1. Cohabiting							
2. Married			86.77 ***				
3. Engaged			−76.78	9.98			
4. Dating			−38.28	48.48 *	38.50		
5. Divorced/separated			120.82 **	−34.05	44.03	82.53	
6. Single			−82.17 **	4.60	5.39	43.88	38.65

Note (significance tests include the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests): * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

This was the first study investigating the connection between relationship status and attitudes toward marital support from family and friends, as well as attitudes toward premarital counseling. The findings showed that those in the cohabiting group did not exhibit as much positive appraisal for the support and approval of family and friends and for premarital counseling as some of the other relationship status groups. The major findings of the study are discussed in further detail below.

For the support and approval of friends and family variables, the results show a pattern that those cohabiting were significantly less positive in their ratings than those single and those dating. Those cohabiting may be further along in terms of the development of the relationship and may not be thinking as persistently about family and friend social networks for their relationships. Those single and dating may be exploring partners, getting to know one another, and focusing on potential future relationship plans, which may often involve the contributions of family and friends. Hence, the support of friends and family may be more readily apparent in the relational lives of those single and dating. Furthermore, those cohabiting may experience more social disapproval and overall disapproval of their relationships from friends and family than others, especially in the "Bible Belt" sections of the U.S. (Huang et al. 2011). Frequency analysis of the data for this study shows that 89% reported living in the state of Oklahoma and may have experienced some of this disapproval, which may have led to more tenuous relationships with friends and family.

The results for the rating of the importance of premarital counseling show that those cohabiting exhibit markedly less support than those married and divorced/separated, but also significantly less support than those single. These findings are interesting, especially since numerous research reports show the benefits of premarital counseling to future marriages. One discussion point here is that premarital counseling, especially in more conservative areas of the U.S., often takes place in religious settings—often by a pastor or other religious leader (Wilmoth and Smyser 2010), alluding to the importance of relational context. Those cohabiting have been shown to profess less religiosity than those married (Kenney and McLanahan 2006). Although not a direct research question of this study, further results on the data of this study show that those cohabiting reported significantly less religiosity than those married, single, dating, and engaged. Hence, this finding may be partially explained by those cohabiting in this study having less belief and connection to religious institutions whereby premarital counseling could be conducted.

Other, overall explanations have more to do with the demographics of those cohabiting in comparison to other groups—particularly to those married. On average, those cohabiting tend to report less religious involvement (Kenney and McLanahan 2006) and tend to be younger, less educated, and have fewer economic resources than those married (Sassler and Lichter 2020). All of these factors have been shown to reduce relationship satisfaction and stability (Amato 2010). The findings of this study show that those cohabiting report less positive ratings of the support and approval of friends and family and less support for premarital counseling. These are the factors that can potentially bolster the relationship. Hence, those cohabiting may be more vulnerable to relationship difficulty in a number of different ways.

Tying to the human ecology theory, cohabitation may represent an ecological niche which may contain some unique elements (Rosenkrantz Aronson and Huston 2004; Moran and Brondízio 2013). In terms of macroinfluences, the larger level national trends and state/regional influences may contribute certain detriments to cohabiting relationship success, such as fewer economic resources and more disapproval of the relationship. In more micro-level terms, cohabiters may experience less religiosity and less connection to religious organizations and institutions. The influence of these different factors, at varying degrees of the environment and in various contexts (White and Klein 2008), may contribute to the overall appraisals of social support and approval of family and friends and less support for premarital counseling.

5. Implications for Practitioners and Future Research

For those working with couples and families, it is often helpful to be aware of the thoughts of those with whom they work. For instance, the use of a basic pretest before providing a relationship program to assess the values and beliefs of the audience would be important. This may also lead to increased information for premarital education programs to cover social supports, such as how to cope with disapproval due to cohabitation or how to mend relationships damaged due to disapproval. Overall, more specific supports and services pertaining to the needs of cohabiting couples are needed, and according to the study, those cohabiting may be less likely to perceive factors such as social support and premarital counseling as important. Educators and counselors need to make classes and sessions more relevant to cohabiting couples, and this may mean more training in areas such as family/friend disapproval, strain on support systems, and relationship difficulties due to cohabitation.

Additionally, couple and family life educators and counselors need to know how to work with diverse families. More information is needed to see if the findings of this study would translate to larger and more diverse samples—samples which include stronger presence of LGBTQIA individuals, as well as other diverse circumstances. Family life programming and counseling is definitely not a one-size-fits-all enterprise, and more people will find premarital counseling effective and beneficial if it is relative to their challenges and dynamic.

6. Limitations and Conclusions

This study features some limitations of which readers should be aware. The research uses a correlational design; as such, results do not imply causality. The sample is primarily female and the voices of men are largely absent. While the sample does contain some racial/ethnic diversity, over 40% of the sample were married, and the findings may not generalize to larger samples with more widely diverse relationship status groups and diverse sexual and gender orientations. Furthermore, as mentioned in the paper, 89% of the sample reported living in Oklahoma, and future investigation should seek to verify these results working with samples that are more geographically diverse. In addition, this study does not include other important variables such as relationship length, previous participation in premarital counseling, previous relationship/marital/divorce experience, and marital interest—all of which would be important to include in future analyses.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a starting point for exploration of the connection between attitudes on relational supports and relationship practices and those in different relationship situations. Our results show that the ecological context may not be the same for all relationship groups, and these differences may produce varying attitudes toward relationships and relationship practices. As our understanding of these associations grows, we will be better able to meet the relationship needs of those of varying relationship groups and circumstances by better planning for and connecting with the needs of various relationship groups.

Data Availability Statement: Data can be made available upon request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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