Cohabitation and Marriage: How are they related

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There is a great deal of public discussion concerning the “decline of marriage” in the media, in politics, in religious circles, and in research. The line of reasoning is that marriage is endangered because of high divorce rates, a substantial increase in cohabitation, and births to single mothers. To this should be added the fact that more people are simply remaining single than in the past, at least for the time being. All of these changes may have altered the meaning itself of marriage for many (Walker and McGraw, 2000) and some scholars are concerned about the “stripping away of marriage from parenting” (Doherty et al., 2000). The issues of divorce and lone parenthood are addressed elsewhere (Ambert, 2005a, c; 2002a, b). In this article, we look at cohabitation and marriage and ask, How are they related? Are they equivalent? Is cohabitation replacing marriage? Should we be concerned?

DEFINITIONS AND INSTITUTION

Marriage is defined as a sexual, economic, and emotional partnership between a man and a woman that is socially and legally sanctioned. In Canada this definition is modified to include same-sex couples who marry.) Until recently, in all societies of the world, marriage has been at the basis of family formation, that is, of reproduction. It is an institution: It involves norms dictating the rights and responsibilities of spouses, of society toward them, and of spouses as parents. Commitment is a key, multifaceted aspect of the institution of marriage (Johnson, 1999) and so is fidelity—although, in many societies, it is required of women only.

Still, especially in North America, marriage has become a private relationship based on personal satisfaction rather than a covenant built on mutual fulfillment and responsibilities. Cherlin (2004) calls this the individualized marriage. However, he also points out that marriage still has high symbolic significance and, because it is still more institutionalized, it “allows individuals to invest in the partnership with less fear of abandonment” (p. 855).

For its part, cohabitation is first of all a sexual and emotional relationship within the context of living together. It is often seen as entailing fewer responsibilities at the legal, economic, and even emotional levels. Some individuals choose cohabitation because it requires, in their opinion, less sexual fidelity than marriage (Bumpass et al., 1991). It is perceived to be a freer lifestyle than marriage, that is, a relationship not bound by the norm of permanency. In fact, in French, cohabitations are called “unions libres,” or free unions.

It is easier to enter into a cohabitational than a marital relationship because formal ceremonies and social recognition are not required. Consequently, at the social level, it is also an easier relationship to dissolve than marriage, especially when there are no children. Obviously, cohabitation is less institutionalized and norms dictating what is a proper relationship within this context can be freely interpreted. Cohabiting couples are not expected to remain together; when pressure is exerted upon them, it is to convince them to marry—particularly after the birth of a child. However, this probably applies less of cohabitation following a divorce and perhaps less in Quebec.
Cohabitors have sought and gained rights similar to those of married couples, in terms of property, health insurance, pension plans, and child support. These rights generally enter into effect after a one to three-year period. However, neither Alberta nor Quebec have followed suit, although for different reasons. In Alberta, it was felt that such rights might undermine marriage. In Quebec, the rationale was respect for the freedom of choice for those who prefer cohabitation in order to avoid the obligations attached to marriage (Le Bourdais and Juby, 2001). Nevertheless, both in Quebec and in France, people refer equally to their spouse or cohabitor as their “conjoint.” In the recent past, this term was reserved for one’s spouse. Furthermore, as if to downplay the importance of marital ties, in Quebec, many married couples refer to each other as my “copine” (my girlfriend) of my “copin” or “chum” (my boyfriend). These linguistic changes serve the purpose of negating differences between cohabiting and married couples.

All in all, cohabitations are not as institutionalized as marriage and not as well accepted by all groups in a society, with the exception of a few northern European and Caribbean countries where most take them for granted. As a result, cohabitators are more free to tailor their relationship according to their needs or, often, according to the wish of the one partner who yields the most power and/or is less committed. This lack of norms means that, within a same couple, the partners may begin to cohabit with very different expectations concerning permanency, fidelity, and the pooling of financial resources, for instance. One consequence may be a certain level of tension. In contrast, it is expected that fidelity and the pooling of financial resources will occur in marriage. Overall, the “role demands of cohabitation are less than those for marriage” (Thornton et al., 1995:772). Marital role demands serve the function of preventing many misunderstandings from arising.

**IS MARRIAGE BEING REPLACED BY COHABITATION?**

While cohabitation rates have shot up in the past decade or so, marriage rates have come down substantially. In Canada, the marriage rate peaked at 10.6 per 1,000 population in 1941 to decline to 7.1 in 1990 and then to 5.0 in 2001. This steep decline in the 1990s is partly driven by the exceptionally low rate of marriage in Quebec which had dropped to 3.4 per 1,000 population by 2000 (Statistics Canada, 2003). Quebec has a large population and any change in its rates affects the overall Canadian rates. It should be noted that Quebecers marry even less than people in France: in 2001, despite the prevalence of cohabitation, France had the same marriage rate as that of Canada at 5.1 (Doisneau, 2002).

In the U.S. the marriage rate soared after the Depression and peaked in 1946 at 16.4 marriages per 1,000 population and has fluctuated since but within a downward trend to 8.9 marriages per 1,000 population in 1996 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997). In the past century, Americans have always had higher marriage rates than their Canadian counterparts.

In Canada and the U.S., the cohabitational rates have gone up, mainly so in the 1990s. There were over 4.1 million cohabiting heterosexual couples in the U.S. and 1.3 million in Canada in 2000. In 2001, 16% of all Canadian couples and 8.2% of all American couples were cohabiting. However, in Quebec, 30% of all couples were cohabiting, which is exactly the same proportion as in Sweden but much higher than in France (see Table 1). When Quebec is excluded from the statistics, 11.7% of Canadian couples cohabit. Hence, the cohabitation rate for the rest of Canada more closely resembles the American than the Quebec one.
One often reads that, in Sweden, “most couples cohabit” and “most children are born to single mothers.” Rather, the facts are that a majority of young Swedes begin their first union within a cohabitation, as is the case in Quebec. And it is generally within this cohabitation that first-born children enter the world. However, later on, especially after children are born, a majority eventually marry. Therefore, at least in the short term in the life course of young couples, cohabitation has delayed marriage. Cohabitation is also delaying marriage in yet another way: Cohabitors are less likely to be actively searching for a marital partner than others (Wu, 1999). But cohabitation is also replacing marriage for a proportion of people, even more so after a divorce, and especially in Quebec (Wu and Schimmele, 2005).

However, among young adults aged 20 to 29, the proportion of those who are neither cohabiting nor married has also increased. This means that fewer young adults are living in unions than in the past; therefore, it is not only cohabitation which is delaying marriage but also a longer period of singlehood. For instance, from 1981 to 2001, the proportion of 25-to 29-year-old Canadians living in a union of any type decreased from 64 to 45% for men and from 73 to 57% for women (Statistics Canada, 2002).

A longer period of singlehood results from the necessity to pursue an advanced education, to establish a career, and to get settled economically (Beaujot and Bélanger, 2001)—all of which take a longer time than was the case 20 years ago. A longer period of singlehood is also a result of the fact that sexual relationships outside of marriage are now more accessible and socially acceptable in western societies.

### Table 1: Proportion of couples which cohabit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>As % of all couples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>30.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Canada</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other provinces</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistics Canada, 2002
Nevertheless, it is expected that a majority of youths who are currently aged 20 to 29 years, and are the group the most likely to cohabit, will eventually marry. As I have pointed out elsewhere, this goal will be more difficult to achieve for young solo mothers (Ambert, 2002a). Overall, the majority of young people who will eventually marry will be smaller than in the past—approximately 75% in Canada compared to the traditional 90% (Turcotte, 2002). Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk (2004) have even predicted that only one woman in three is expected to marry in Quebec.

**WHO COHABITS? WHO MARRIES?**

In the past, cohabitation tended to be concentrated among the disadvantaged and it is still more widespread among couples with lower levels of education and income (Bumpass and Lu, 2002). Furthermore, even among cohabitors who expect to marry their partner, those who are economically disadvantaged are less likely to realize their expectations (Smock and Manning, 1997).

But as cohabitation is spreading and is becoming more acceptable, the differences between those who cohabit and those who marry are becoming less salient and some do not apply in European countries (Seltzer, 2004). It is therefore difficult to predict if and how long the following differences between those who marry and those who cohabit will remain and if these differences apply to Quebec (Turcotte, 2002; Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Wu, 2000):

1. cohabiters are found predominantly among younger cohorts, although their numbers have increased at all age levels;
2. among older age groups, cohabiters are often divorced;
3. male cohabiters tend to have a lower income than married males;
4. cohabiters are less religious than the married;
5. cohabiters tend to be less traditional than those who marry and are also more likely to have parents who are also less traditional;
6. female cohabiters more frequently have had a birth without a live-in partner than those females who marry;
7. the age difference among partners is often greater than for first marriages and a higher proportion of women are older and earn more than their partner compared to what is the case among married couples.

**DO COUPLES WHO COHABIT BEFORE MARRIAGE DIVORCE LESS THAN OTHERS?**

No, on average they divorce more, at least in Canada, the U.S., and Great Britain. The Canadian General Social Survey found that, in the 20-to-30 age group, 63% of women whose first relationship had been cohabitational had separated by 1995 compared to 33% of women who had married first (Le Bourdais et al., 2000a). The first figure included women who had cohabited and had separated before marrying their partner and others who had gone on to marry and then separate from this partner.
Overall, cohabitation before marriage seems to raise the risk of divorce later on. Wu (2000) even found that simply being married to a spouse who has previously cohabited raises one’s risk of divorcing. However, it should be noted that the research does not tell us whether these conclusions apply across all ethnic groups in Canada and the U.S. although we know that, in Quebec, couples who first cohabit and then marry do not necessarily have a higher chance of divorcing than those who directly marry, as is the case in the rest of Canada (Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004). But it should also be pointed out that Quebec’s divorce rate is far higher than that of the rest of Canada (Ambert, 2005c).

WHY DOES COHABITATION BEFORE MARRIAGE NOT REDUCE THE RISK OF DIVORCE?

1. A first explanation may reside in selection effects: As we have seen, some individuals choose cohabitation because it does not require, in their opinion, sexual fidelity and, particularly among men, it represents a lesser commitment than marriage (Clarkberg et al., 1996). However, many of these less committed couples do move on to the next stage, which is marriage.

2. At that point, there is some evidence to the effect that the experience of a less secure, committed, and even faithful cohabitation shapes subsequent marital behaviour (Dush et al., 2003). Some couples continue to live their marriage through the perspective of the insecurity, lack of pooling of resources, low commitment level, and even lack of fidelity of their prior cohabitation. Others simply learn to accept the temporary nature of relationships (Smock and Gupta, 2002). The result is a marriage which is at risk (Wu, 2000). Furthermore, some studies actually indicate that the married who cohabited before marriage are less sexually exclusive both before and after marriage (Forste and Tanfer, 1996). And we also know that lack of sexual exclusivity is related to a higher rate of marital dissolution (Ambert, 2005c).

3. Cohan and Kleinbaum (2002) report that, in the first two years of their marriage, couples who had cohabited had somewhat less positive problem-solving behaviours and were on average less supportive of each other than those who had not cohabited. McLaughlin et al. (1992) have found that newly married couples who had cohabited before marriage had much higher rates of premarital violence than those who had not lived together. Premarital violence is in turn followed by more marital violence than when none has taken place before, and we know that domestic violence is related to divorce. As well, Magdol et al. (1998) have reported that, in a group of 21-year-olds, cohabiters were significantly more likely than daters to be abusive. Overall, entry into cohabitation raises a woman’s risk of physical abuse (GSS, 2000; Sev’er, 2002).

We do not know what causes the relationship between abuse and cohabitation: Is it the fact of cohabiting itself (with its lesser commitment and absence of norms to guide the relationship) that leads to higher rates of abuse? Or do some individuals with a tendency for aggressiveness channel themselves more into cohabitation than marriage? It is probably a combination of both factors. It is also possible that the combination of cohabitation and domestic violence arises mainly in instances of poverty and related stressors.

4. Cohabiters are more approving of divorce as a solution to marital problems.
5. We have seen that, on average, couples who cohabit are less religious than those who marry without prior cohabitation. Several studies indicate a correlation between religiosity and marital happiness as well as stability (Call and Heaton, 1997). If couples who are both less religious and less committed to each other and to the institution of marriage cohabit and then go on to marry, it is not surprising that they will have a higher divorce rate. They experience a triple risk—a phenomenon which may be particularly relevant to Quebec which is the province with the highest divorce rate (Statistics Canada, 2004).

6. Finally, there is also the possibility that, among young people who move in with their date quickly, a pattern develops that may not be conducive to stability. Quick transitions from a first or second date to cohabitation probably result in relationship instability. If the ex-partners then go on to repeat this pattern of instant and serial relationships, they may one day contract an equally quick marriage to which it will be difficult to remain faithful, thus increasing the odds of divorcing.

All the above factors combined make it more likely that cohabitators who marry will eventually divorce. But there are some caveats as we see later and there may be variations by ethnic/racial group, as may be the case among blacks and Mexican Americans (Phillips and Sweeney, 2005), and among Quebecois if we can assume that their high divorce rate has another causality pattern.

HOW STABLE ARE COHABITATIONS?

Quite unstable. In fact, over the recent years, cohabitations have become even less stable, in part because fewer result in marriage (Bumpass and Lu, 2000). Thus, it comes as no surprise to the reader that cohabitations are not as stable as marriages—and this is true in all western societies. Furthermore, cohabitations tend to dissolve more rapidly than marriages. More than 50% of all these unions end in dissolution within five years (Milan, 2000). The reasons for this relative instability are detailed later.

Cohabitations are somewhat more stable in Quebec than in the rest of Canada. For instance, it is estimated, based on 2001 information, that 55% of Quebec women aged 30 to 39 who opted for a cohabitation as a first union will go through a separation compared to 66% among women in the other provinces (Turcotte, 2002). Nevertheless, no matter how one looks at these rates, they are far higher than the 30% or so of divorce after 5 years of marriage that occurs in Canada.

TYPES OF COHABITATION AND STABILITY OF RELATIONSHIP

Cohabitations are not a homogeneous category so that stability depends in part on the stage a society has reached vis-à-vis this conjugal form (Kiernan, 2001) and on the reasons why a couple cohabits (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004). The term “stability” includes cohabitations that last and others that are transformed into a lasting marriage. The latter are forming a smaller proportion of all cohabitations than before. For instance, in the 1970s, about 60% of cohabitators went on to marry their partner within 3 years of the onset of living together. This compares to only about 35% in the early 1990s (Bumpass, 1998).
Bianchi and Casper (2000) have found that nearly 50% of American couples who cohabit do so as a precursor to marriage, although this occurs less often among African Americans (Teachman et al., 2000). Such cohabiters are more or less engaged; they are committed to each other and to getting married. Nevertheless, after 5 years, only 52% of these “precursor” couples in the Bianchi and Casper study had married, 31% had separated, and 17% were still cohabiting. These precursor couples had the lowest dissolution rate of all cohabiters and the highest marriage rate. In contrast, among those who cohabited as a substitute for marriage, 39% were still cohabiting—the highest rates of continuous living together after 5 years—and they had the lowest rate of marriage at 25%.

A large proportion of young cohabiters now begin living together rather quickly after the onset of dating, with little thought of permanency and least of all of marriage. For them, cohabitation is replacing dating. One would expect, as pointed out earlier, very high rates of eventual dissolution as a short acquaintanceship is a precursor to divorce among the married. However, it is worth noting again that we do not know if all ethnic groups have the same reasons for and patterns of cohabitation formation. But we do know that Canadian residents who are immigrants are less willing to cohabit than Canadian-born residents, the English-speaking less than the French, and women less than men (Milan, 2003).

It may well be that instability is in the very nature of casual and/or rapid-entry cohabitations. Such casual cohabitations are more akin to “glorified” dating than to other types of cohabitations. Unfortunately, as we will see later, they may be more painful and complicated to dissolve than dating is. More research is needed to define the various characteristics and trajectories of types of cohabitations.

HOW OFTEN DO COHABITATIONS INCLUDE CHILDREN?

A substantial proportion of cohabiters have a child, although these children often fall under the statistics of one-parent families (Ambert, 2002a). In 2001, 8.2% of Canadian children aged 0 to 14 lived in common-law households—excluding Quebec where 29% lived in such households. When Quebec is included, the Canadian rate jumps to 13% of all children aged 0 to 14. However, the lifetime rate is likely to be much higher, especially for reconstituted families after divorce. For the U.S., it is estimated that 40% of all American children will live with their single mother (never-married or divorced) and her boyfriend at some point before their 16th birthday (Bumpass and Lu, 2002).

Thus, a substantial proportion of cohabitations involve children, and there is some evidence that cohabiting couples with own children have a higher level of stability than childless ones (Wu, 1995) and are more likely to marry. However, the latter does not occur equally among all ethnic groups. Still, Le Bourdais et al. (2000b) estimated that Quebec children whose parents are still cohabiting are three times more likely to experience a parental separation than those whose parents are married (compared to over four times for the remainder of Canadian children).

It would be important to know which types of cohabitations include children and in which types children are actually planned (Musick, 2002). Furthermore, what of those cohabitations in which the man is not the father of his partner’s children? Extrapolating from high divorce rates of remarriage with stepchildren, one would expect high rates of cohabitational dissolution when a single woman cohabits with a man who is not her child’s father, which is exactly what Marcil-Gratton et al. (2003) have found.
WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS/DISADVANTAGES OF COHABITATION?

We look at the benefits of cohabitation for adults, children, and society. We ask: what does cohabitation do for people and society? By the same token, we also have to consider potential and actual disadvantages.

For younger adults

Interestingly, despite an increasing acceptance of cohabitation in society as a whole and particularly among sociologists, there is no body of research documenting its benefits. Similarly, there is little research examining its disadvantages. But disadvantages frequently emerge in research comparing cohabitors to daters and to married persons. However, such comparisons do not exist for older cohorts, especially those who choose to cohabit after a divorce or a period of widowhood.

Convenience and sexual availability

More recent trends indicate that perhaps a higher proportion of cohabitors than in the past simply drift into cohabitation because it is more convenient than dating. That is, it makes it easier to be with each other sexually than when living separately. Thus, sexual availability motivates many persons to cohabit rather than to continue dating, as a woman student expressed it in her (unedited) autobiography:

"Right now I'd rate myself as being fairly unhappy and it's because I have found out that my boyfriend I live with lives with me just so that he can have sex that he knows is safe. He does love me some you know but his kind of love is mainly sexual. That means that I have wasted the past 18 months of my life that I could have better spent looking for a better guy and also one that would have accepted me as a whole person and not just as a sex machine. Plus I am unhappy because I didn't want to live together because it really goes against my principles but more than that it has caused a sort of breaking up between me and my parents and I don't think that [the man] is worth it. Now I have to think about ending this relationship but it's hard you know because I am really attached to him."

Ironically, this student's quote speaks more of disadvantages. It is indeed remarkable that, in the many autobiographies of cohabiting women students, I have been unable to find material that was unequivocally favourable to this lifestyle.

Living-together also results when one or the other dater is looking for an apartment. Cohabiting is then a form of savings: sharing an apartment is less expensive than maintaining two separate ones. Couples who move together for such reasons generally do not think long term and this arrangement is currently pleasant, economically advantageous, and less complicated. Some even move in together to escape from their families.

Adults who divorce may also find similar economic advantages in cohabitation, especially in view of the fact that many divorced men have to support a child who lives elsewhere. It is a matter of convenience and economies of scale. But, overall, cohabitors are far less likely to pool their finances than are married couples (Heimdal and Houseknecht, 2003).

For young couples who are engaged, cohabitation may be functional, particularly if they do not have the money or time to fund the type of wedding they or their parents dream of, or they cannot afford to live as they think married couples should do in terms of housing quality. As one woman student put it,
“We’re getting married this summer and we’re both looking forward to it. We’ve lived together for one year because we could not afford the wedding and we felt that paying for one apartment as opposed to two would help us financially for when we got married. I would not however have lived with him had we not been engaged. That’s a good way to get burned.”

**Relationship aspects**

For many young couples, living together may serve the function of testing to see if they can graduate to a more permanent relationship, whether long-term cohabitation or marriage. However, it is likely that this function serves only a relatively small proportion of cohabitors at the outset, as most do not move together for that purpose. Thus, **“trial” marriages** are more rare than believed or than was the case just 20 years ago. This cohort difference stems from the greater acceptability of cohabitation: In the past, couples who moved together often had been in a long-term relationship and were planning on getting married. This goal made their cohabitation socially acceptable. Today, couples do not need this “excuse” to cohabit and do not need to be concerned about marriage as the “next step” (Seltzer, 2000).

Cohabitors have intercourse more frequently than married couples (Laumann et al., 1994). In part, this is because cohabitations are of shorter duration and the frequency of sex is generally higher earlier on in unions of any type. This result may also stem from the nature of cohabitation itself: These relationships are more individualistic and may be more invested in sexuality while marriage may be more invested in general commitment (Clarkberg et al., 1996). However, married spouses are usually happier with their relationships than are cohabitors (Nock, 1998). But when cohabitors plan to marry, the quality of their relationship is not much different from that of married couples that have been together for the same duration (Brown and Booth, 1996).

Another benefit of cohabitation is that, because it is less institutionalized, couples may feel more **free to invent their relationships** outside the mould of traditional expectations and gender roles. Indeed, there seems to be a more equal division of labour within cohabitation than within marriage (Shelton and John, 1993). However, this may stem at least in part from fewer cohabitors having children than married couples: When children arrive, women begin to be vested with more housework and childcare than their husbands (Kluwer et al., 2002). Thus, this more equal division of labour often found among cohabitors may be more the result of their childless condition than of cohabitation itself. It also comes in part from the fact that women who cohabit feel less secure in their relationship; consequently, they are less likely to sacrifice their employment opportunities and to invest as much in housework as do married women (Seltzer, 2000).

Parents may be less interested and vested in their adult children’s cohabitations as they perceive or worry that these relationships are more unstable. In contrast, for better or worse, in-laws loom larger in a marriage because it is a more family oriented institution. In a study carried out by Aquilino (1997), **parents** felt closer to their married than their cohabiting children even though parents engaged in social activities with them.

**The issues of commitment and fidelity**

Some of the benefits of cohabitation have a negative facet. For instance, cohabitors are **less faithful** to their partners sexually as indicated in the percentages provided by Blumstein and Schwartz (1990) below. The respondents in this large and representative survey were men and women who reported at least one instance of sexuality outside their marriage or cohabitation in the past year:
In the Laumann et al. study (1994), the results were essentially similar: of those who were married, 94% had been monogamous compared to 75% of the cohabitors. More recently, Treas and Giesen (2000) have also found cohabitors to be less sexually exclusive than married persons, even after controlling for personal values regarding extramarital sex. For their part, Forste and Tanfer (1996) report that cohabiting women were 5 times more likely than married women to have had another sexual encounter since the beginning of their relationship. In fact, they had been slightly less faithful than dating women. The above authors agree that their data support the view that cohabitation is selective of less committed individuals (Clarkberg et al., 1995). Or, yet, cohabitation itself makes people less committed.

In fact, cohabiting men are often less committed to their relationship and partner than are married men. This was obvious in a previous quote but is further expressed by a divorced man during an interview and then by two students in their autobiographies:

“No, I don’t know if I’ll get married [to the woman he lives with]. Eventually, probably, but I am not yet ready for this. Right now I am not even sure that she’s the right woman for me so that I prefer to take it easy; I have a wait-and-see attitude at this point.” [At the follow-up interview two years later, this couple had separated. He was casual about it, but the woman was very upset.]

“I have lived with two different guys and that’s it! No more! It’s always the same thing: we just play at being married because they don’t want to do anything except play. They couldn’t get married because that, the usual line is ‘I’m not ready for such a commitment.’”

“I live with my boyfriend and I really like it for now but I worry about the future. I am 23 and want to get married one day but the way I see it, he likes it just fine the way it is and won’t want to commit himself to something more serious.”

What these quotes (with the recurring themes of “play” and lack of commitment) well illustrate is another advantage that cohabitation has over marriage for one of the partners: It can serve to delay commitment and give a longer time lead during which to find a better alternative. Naturally, the more committed partner is at a disadvantage. Many cohabitors, perhaps more male than female, remain in a permanent state of availability. In other words, they are still “playing the field” while benefiting from economic advantages, companionship, and sexuality.

Many of the benefits listed above (and there are probably others but, as mentioned, this topic has yet to be researched) carry disadvantages, at least for the one partner who is more committed, and this is well illustrated in the many quotes which have preceded. In terms of exchange theory, the committed partner has less power because the relationship is more important to him or her than it is to the partner who is less invested. As a result, the more invested partner is unhappy, may feel depressed, harbors regrets, and feels more insecure and less in control of his/her life. A male student who had been cohabiting with a young woman who is financially secure and owns her apartment put it this way:
“I can’t answer this question [about current level of happiness] because I am both happy and unhappy. I am happy because this is my last year [of university] and I hope to have a job and I hope that this is going to satisfy my girlfriend. I am also unhappy because if I don’t find the right kind of job she is not going to stay with me I think. I know that she wants to marry a guy who is better than her because she [is] complaining all the time about me not having money. So I don’t know that I’ll qualify. I don’t feel too good about this because I really love her....”

Even when only one partner prefers to remain less committed, the end result is that neither benefits from the rewards of a committed relationship. The committed partner’s status is a marginal one. Furthermore, in view of the fact that marriage is still the most valued conjugal state in our society, one partner often wishes to transform the cohabitation into a marriage—even in Quebec. Cohabitors may expect marriage as an end result even more than is the case in dating situations. Therefore, cohabitations may be problematic for many young and middle-age adults and perhaps more for women than men.

For older adults

For older adults who have already been married, cohabitation may carry far fewer risks than it does for younger adults. For those who are widowed or divorced, an eventual marriage may not be important at all because they have already reached this goal once. The issue of cohabitation delaying marriage does not apply to their case: Cohabitation becomes a substitute to marriage, a relationship in its own right with a similar level of commitment. At least one study has found that older cohabitors experience higher levels of happiness and stability than younger ones (King and Scott, 2005).

In fact, in later life (after age 60 perhaps) the double standard that often exists among young and middle-aged cohabitors may disappear entirely because, in terms of exchange theory, males may need a partner as much or even more than females. Hence, older males are likely to be more committed than younger males. We know, for instance, that, after widowhood, older men do not adapt easily to the loss of their wives and are more helpless than are widowed women (Lee et al., 1998).

Men generally benefit highly from living with a partner (Cooney and Dunne, 2001). In comparison, widowed and divorced women in later life are often hesitant to give up their newly acquired independence or to replace a late spouse whom they loved. They may also be afraid that a marriage will soon return them to the role of a nurse for an ailing husband (Davidson, 2001; Lopata, 1996). Such women may indeed welcome a new form of partnership and may find cohabitation functional. Others may actually look for an emotional and sexual relationship that does not involve the sharing of a dwelling—thus maintaining their independence.

The economic benefits of cohabitation may be even more important among the older generation (Chevan, 1996). Cohabitation offers the advantage of economies of scale while, at the same time, it may allow the partners to maintain their respective children’s inheritance intact. For instance, when one partner moves into the other’s house, a will can easily secure this house for the owner’s children in the event of death. This separation of certain assets also has the advantage of contributing to a warmer relationship with both cohabitors’ sets of children who may welcome the partner as a new family member rather than resent him or her as an interloper or a “gold digger.”
For children

Children born to cohabiting parents are not generally at a large advantage compared to those in one-parent families. The main reason lies in the relative instability of cohabitations. Therefore, children are at risk of living within an unstable family structure, especially when their mother cohabits with a man who is not their father (Graefe and Lichter, 1999). Even children whose parents cohabit will experience more instability than those whose parents marry before they are born (Lerman, 2002). The result of these observations is that children are more likely to experience the dissolution of their parents' union when their parents began their union as cohabitors or when a single mother cohabits and then marries. In some families, there is a “revolving door” situation, whereby serial partners succeed each other over the years. One study has found that children living with their mother and cohabiting boyfriend had lower school performance and more behavioral problems (Thomson et al., 1994).

As an advantage, when a single mother begins to cohabit, family poverty is reduced by as much as 30%; this, in turn, benefits children (Manning and Lichter, 1996). But this advantage is mitigated by the fact that children in cohabiting families have parents who are more similar to those in single than in married families in terms of education, employment, and earnings: Male cohabitors earn less than married men. Better-off cohabitors are more likely to marry when or before they have children (Manning and Smock, 1995). The economic advantage that may result following a cohabitation is often of short duration because of the fragility of these unions. Furthermore, the dissolution of a cohabitation means that children may be poorer than those whose parents had been married (Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004).

Very small children are more at risk when a mother cohabits with a man who is not the child’s natural father. These couples are generally quite young and often disadvantaged. Unemployment is common. Such mothers are in a precarious situation both conjugal and economically. In some instances, the mothers themselves enter into these unions for short-term benefits and do not commit themselves to marry a man whose economic situation is unstable. In other instances, the mothers are the most committed partner but they are in a weaker bargaining position because they have a child who does not belong to the partner.

The potential instability of these women’s union and the consequent instability of the support they receive result in stressors that can disrupt their parenting activities. As a result, children may not be adequately monitored and may suffer from general neglect. The mother’s partner is not as likely to compensate for this neglect as a married father or even stepfather might do because the partner’s attachment to the children is often low.

Physical abuse is also more likely (Gelles, 1989) and cases of young children seriously injured or killed by a mother’s live-in boyfriend are more frequent than in biological families. Girls, for their part, are at risk of being sexually abused (Gordon, 1989). This is especially so in homes where males are transient. In instances when the mother is obviously sexually active with a series of men, the intergenerational transmission of problems such as poverty, early pregnancy, and behavioral problems may become a long-term characteristic of the families.

After divorce, cohabitation instead of remarriage may bring in a less involved stepparent. Furthermore, when a divorced father cohabits, he visits his children less often than one who is remarried (Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004). Thus, at this time in North America, cohabitation is not a situation that signals investment in children as much as does marriage, although there are exceptions. Commitment and stability are at the core of children’s needs: yet, in a great proportion of cohabitations, these two requirements are absent.
For society
The benefits of cohabitation for society are more elusive to document. However, inasmuch as cohabitators are invested in each other and sexually faithful, cohabitation serves as an agent of social control in the domains of sexuality and health. Furthermore, for those couples who are committed and happy with the relationship, the advantages are similar to those of marriage—especially when their families fully support the union. These advantages are discussed in the sections on marriage.

But, inasmuch as cohabitations lack stability, it is possible that a great proportion of couples would reap far more benefits in the long term from simply dating. Breaking up a cohabitation is certainly more stressful than breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Wu and Hart (2001) have found that cohabitational dissolution is associated with a decrease in physical and mental health. It is also a more time consuming enterprise as a residential move generally follows.

It is actually possible that less committed and potentially unstable cohabitations create inner tension, anxiety, and stress for the adults and children concerned. These health hazards would in turn result in costs to the health care system, to employers, and to schools which have a high proportion of children living in cohabitational households. One would need far more research to document the benefits and costs of cohabitation to society.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS/DISADVANTAGES OF MARRIAGE?

Of the possible trajectories to family formation, marriage is the most common one in North America as it is in much of the world. It is the most institutionalized form of family formation: It is legally accepted, it is supported by rules of behaviour, it involves duties and rights that are clearly delineated and on which there is wide public consensus.

Despite high divorce rates, marriage is still a valued goal and status. Even subgroups with low marriage rates, particularly African Americans, value marriage. They are not turning away from it or refusing it: They simply feel that they cannot afford it. Failure to marry is often, but not always, a reflection of racial and economic inequalities rather than a rejection of marriage. However, marriage is definitely becoming a non-goal for many adults who have been married at least once; when these adults re-partner, they gravitate toward cohabitation (Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004).

For adults
Compared to cohabitation, marriage tends to last longer, represents a higher level of commitment, particularly by males, and is a more secure institution. Marriage also provides more socially visible linkages between two families and has a greater potential to increase social support (Amato, 2004). At the emotional level, besides commitment, marriage is based, at least in theory, on love, interdependence, the sharing of joys and sorrows alike. Spouses act as confidantes to each other and men confide to their wives more than they do to other persons.
Sexuality is a powerful ingredient in marriage, both physically and emotionally. We saw earlier that cohabitators engage in sex more often than married couples, which should make them happier. Yet, in their well-designed survey on sexuality, Laumann et al. (1994) have shown that men and women were by far happiest when they had had only one sex partner in the past 12 months and were married to that partner. We have also seen earlier that cohabitators are substantially less monogamous than married couples. Laumann et al. conclude that “A monogamous sexual partnership embedded in a formal marriage evidently produces the greatest satisfaction and pleasure” (p. 364). But this applies only to married couples who are reasonably satisfied with their overall relationship.

Research results in the domains of physical and psychological well-being, and even in the domain of longevity, are unanimous in finding that married men and women, compared to nonmarried men and women, score substantially higher on various scales of well-being (Waite and Gallagher, 2000). They have lower rates of emotional problems, they are healthier physically, and live longer (Coombs, 1991)—although the latter result may be equally a consequence of the fact that married people generally have higher incomes which in turn are related to better health and lower mortality.

But in a study of Japan and 17 Western countries, Stack and Eshleman (1998) indicate that it is marriage, rather than cohabitation, that increases both financial and health satisfaction which in turn increase happiness. Their results showed that being married was 3.4 times more closely tied to happiness than was cohabitation. The question that arises here is the following: Does marriage contribute (causation) to well-being or does it simply capture people who are healthier, better balanced, and more attractive partners to begin with (selection)?

**Selection or causation?**

Let’s first examine the evidence favoring the social selection hypothesis suggesting that there is a selection into marriage of the healthiest. Studies indicate that persons who suffer from serious mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, are less likely to marry, particularly among men (Link et al., 1987). Highly dysfunctional persons either do not marry or, when they do, their marriage does not last and the chance of ever remarrying is substantially reduced (Forthofer et al., 1996). Very ill persons as well as persons who are incompetent intellectually do not get selected into marriage as frequently as others. Therefore, a selection process takes place, particularly among men. Once people are married, another selection process is activated: the marriage of disturbed, incompetent, or anti-social persons is less likely to last as they become very difficult spouses with whom to live. Psychological balance certainly contributes to marital stability (Aseltine and Kessler, 1993).

Nevertheless, until now, most people have married at least once, whether they are well balanced or not, while a certain number of well-balanced persons choose not to marry. This means that the positive effects of marriage are at least as important as the selection effects in explaining the differences in well-being by marital status (Daniel, 1996). In other words, social causation often explains far better the differences between the married and the non-married. Indeed, marriage helps adults stabilize their personality, gain self-esteem and personal security, develop competencies and a sense of responsibility that were not necessary as single persons, particularly among men (Nock, 1998). Warm and supportive relationships enhance happiness, psychological well-being, physical health, and consequently longevity (Gove et al., 1990; Hu and Goldman, 1990; Lillard and Waite, 1995).
Married men are more regularly employed than other men, which provide them with greater personal stability (Daniel, 1996). When they change jobs, it is more with the goal of increasing their economic gains than is the case among single and divorced men (Gorman, 1999). Furthermore, today, a husband is better off financially than a single man when his wife is employed, which has become the norm. Married couples with an employed wife have an income advantage of $15,000 on average over married couples with a wife who is not gainfully employed (Sauvé, 2002).

As most marriages that last a few years eventually result in children, a two-income family is a more secure basis than a family with only one breadwinner. Therefore, men are generally more secure with than without a wife. Linda Waite (1995) calls marriage an insurance policy. Of course, this also applies to women. As Lerman (2002:6) puts it, “The presence of more than one potential earner helps diversify the risks arising from unemployment, lost wages, or shifts in demand for various occupations.”

Moreover, married adults are more likely to maintain a healthy lifestyle and diet than nonmarried adults. The married eat home more, stay out late less, use alcohol and illegal drugs less, and are better organized to take care of their basic needs (Bachman et al., 1997). A cohesive marriage is an important social resource and brings an informal element of social control in the life of individuals: this may be the reason why the married drink less than cohabiters (Horwitz and Raskin White, 1998). Furthermore, Horney et al. (1995) as well as Laub et al. (1998) have found that a good marriage eventually contributes to the cessation of illegal activities among criminals. However, the benefits of marriage described above may also accrue to stable and committed cohabitations, particularly among the divorced and the widowed.

**Who benefits the most from marriage: men or women?**

Some literature indicates that marriage may be more advantageous to men than to women (Marks, 1996). For instance, the scores of well-being of married men are higher than those of divorced and single men while the difference is not as large among women of various marital statuses. Why would marriage benefit women less in terms of psychological well-being? To begin with, women have more responsibilities than men once children arrive, particularly when both spouses are employed (McLanahan and Casper, 1995).

Therefore, for many women, marriage is a mixed blessing, thus explaining in part why the scores of well-being of single women are not all that different from those of their married counterparts. These scores have actually become more similar in recent decades and, in some instances, by mid-life the scores of single women are more positive than those of married women (Marks, 1996). Glenn and Weaver (1988) have also suggested that marriage may have become less essential to women’s well-being than in the past, in part because less pressure is placed on women to marry and many now have better-paying jobs than used to be the case.
However, it should be noted that no study has yet compared married men and women with cohabiting ones in terms of the diverse facets of well-being. Neither do studies exist on the relative responsibilities of cohabiting men and women who have children. The qualitative material presented earlier in the form of quotes highlights problems of emotional security, powerlessness, and unhappiness among young cohabiters who were not engaged to each other. There were clear indications in these quotes that the benefits of cohabitation are gender specific among the young: they may favour males over females even more than marriage does. And this may well be more the case when children are present.

It is also possible that cohabitation is even more gender specific in some ethnic groups than in others. However, women may be as advantaged by cohabitation as men in cultures where the phenomenon is more widespread, such as in Quebec and Sweden. As well, both genders may be equally advantaged when they cohabit later in life after a divorce or widowhood and after children from previous unions have become independent.

Within marriage, the quality of the relationship is an important determinant of well-being (Acock and Demo, 1994). All in all, marriage is beneficial to adults but a troublesome marriage negates some or all of these benefits, particularly for women. Second, the benefits accrued in marriage may differ for men and women depending on the domains studied—emotional well-being, physical health, happiness, security. These gendered benefits may also differ depending on the stage of the life course or age of the person. For instance, we do not know whether marriage is more or less beneficial to young than middle-age persons (Marks and Lambert, 1998).

Finally, the benefits of marriage depend on the time or cohort period that serves as a context for marriage. For example, recent cohorts of women seem to need marriage less than preceding cohorts. On the other side of the coin, it is also possible that research has not been able to focus on all the benefits of marriage for women. Furthermore, marriage advantages women, especially over their life span, in terms of wealth accumulation (Wilmoth and Koso, 2001), and this effect is particularly evident when women reach retirement age. In this respect, marriage is also functional for men and should continue to be so, especially now that most wives are employed and one third actually earn as much as or more than their husbands. Thus, financially, marriage is advantageous to both genders, but even more so for women.

Overall, the fact that, on some issues (particularly the division of household labour and faithfulness), women are often at a disadvantage in marriage does not mean that it is no longer functional for a majority of them. Above all, it means that marriage could become even more functional for women than it is now, with the help of some changes in our values in terms of gender roles, for instance—and with the help of increased governmental investment in child care centres.

For children

In a previous section, we saw that the research provides many negative consequences of parental cohabitation for children. The opposite occurs for children whose parents are married. As well, elsewhere, I have reviewed the impact on children of divorce and of living in one-parent families (Ambert, 2005c, 2002a, b). The conclusion from these various reviews is that children benefit unequivocally from their parents' marriage (Waite and Gallagher, 2000). Above all, they have the lowest poverty rate and most avoid the deleterious consequences of poverty. Children are far better off on all dimensions when they live with their original two parents—provided that these parents are reasonably warm and monitoring and do not engage in conjugal abuse and conflict in front of their offspring (Amato, 2004).
Actually, children who experience a conflicted parental marriage or cohabitation are at a disadvantage compared to children living with a well-balanced single parent (Jekielek, 1998). However, on the whole, very conflicted marriages do not last long in our society because of the availability of divorce. But even among couples who divorce, at best one third had highly conflicted marriages. Therefore, a relatively small proportion of marriages are detrimental to children and a relatively small proportion of divorces are beneficial to them (Amato and Booth, 1997). Furthermore, conflict aside, even when parents do not judge their marriage to be the happiest, children still benefit from it. What is important to children above all else is the care they receive from their parents—not whether their parents are madly in love with each other. The latter is an adult perspective!

Children benefit in the area of health. For instance, infant mortality is lower in married families, and this demographic advantage is even found in Scandinavian countries where there is less poverty among single mothers and more cohabitation than in the U.S. and Canada (Bennett et al., 1994; Oyen et al., 1997). Children also benefit in terms of economic security, school achievement, affective and emotional stability, leisure activities, prosocial behaviour, and later on as adults, in terms of employment (Cooksey et al., 1997).

In a society with a nuclear rather than an extended family system, children who have two married parents, whether natural or adopted, whether of the same or opposite sex, are at an advantage because they have two rather than one person invested in their well-being, responsible for them, and acting as authority figures. Children in married families tend to be better supervised than others (Fischer, 1993). Two parents also provide a greater repertoire of behaviours, attitudes, and knowledge from which children can draw on and learn.

Within the framework of James Coleman’s (1988) theory, two married parents constitute a greater source of social capital that then translates into more human capital for children. With two parents, children have an alternative when the other has less time, is ill, or preoccupied. Two parents can also provide moral support to each other in their coparental duties and this benefits children (Grossbard-Schechtman, 1993). These advantages of having two parents apply more to married than cohabiting two-parent families.

Children who begin life with their married parents are far less likely to live within a different family structure in the future than those who began life within a parental cohabitation or with a single mother (Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004). Indeed, children born to married parents spend, on average, 84% of their childhood (ages 0 to 16) within a two-parent married family, (Bumpass and Lu, 2002). On average, only 4% of their time will be spent in a cohabitation family and 13% in a one-parent family. In contrast, children who are born into a cohabitation will spend only 45% of their childhood in a married family, 28% in a cohabitational one, and 26% in a one-parent family.

These figures also mean that children who begin life in a married family experience fewer parental marital transitions: Two in three will remain with their parents. In contrast, children who begin life in a cohabitational family are more likely to experience their parents’ separation and may also experience more re-partnering than do children of divorce. More research is needed on childhood life course by parents’ marital status, including cohabitations, however brief some may be. Indications are that even grandparental divorce reverberates down the generations (Schwartz and Finley, 2005).
For society

Inasmuch as the institution of marriage contributes to the emotional stability and overall well-being of adults and children, it becomes a very functional institution for society. It produces a great deal of social capital and serves as an agency of social control (Laub et al., 1998). Children in married two-parent families acquire more human capital (Coleman, 1988): On average, they drop out of school less, get more education, are less often on welfare than children with only one resident parent or a cohabiting parent (McLoyd, 1998). They are less likely to become delinquent and adult criminals than children with single or cohabiting parents. Later on, they contribute more in taxes than children who are not raised within the context of a parental marriage.

From a societal point of view, marriage contributes to the successful socialization of citizens, which does not mean however that a majority of children in other forms of family are less adequately socialized. It means that proportionally more children from married families are. From this perspective alone, the legalization of marriage for same-sex couples who have children and are committed to each other should be beneficial rather than detrimental to society (Ambert, 2005b). The legalization of these unions should contribute to their stability and to better outcomes for their children (Bell and Weinberg, 1978).

“A married couple is a small, all-encompassing health and welfare agency staffed with volunteers. Marriage lowers health care costs, welfare outlays, police and penal institution expenditures. It reduces costs related to alcohol abuse, drug addiction, and STDs. Later on in life, it prevents the hospitalization of many elderly persons who suffer from severe mental and physical disabilities, as they are cared for by their spouses, particularly their wives. Moreover, as married individuals who have children become more vested in their neighbourhood and schools, they contribute to the stability and betterment of their area and of the educational system” (Ambert, 2001:139).

CONCLUSIONS

In this conclusion, we review two topics: the question of equivalency and issues of morality and religion.

So, are marriage and cohabitation equivalent?

Many people have come to believe that marriage is merely a matter of lifestyle choice and has few overall consequences or advantages over cohabitation. The two are equivalent. The research literature does not support this view at this point. Rather, studies indicate that marriage, particularly a good and equitable one, carries many benefits for the spouses. It is above all highly beneficial to children, whether it is equitable or not between the parents.

Among those who adhere to the equivalency of various types of family structure for children's well-being, there is a school of thought whose proponents argue that what is important for children's outcomes and well-being is not family structure (one versus two parents, marriage versus cohabitation), but healthy family processes. The research certainly supports the notion that healthy family dynamics are important predictors of children's positive outcomes regardless of their parents' marital status. But the fact remains that healthy family dynamics are more likely to occur in two-parent families of the married type, as are positive child outcomes. The reason is that, on average, these families experience more stability, fewer stressors, and a greater level of long-term commitment on the part of the adults involved.
However functional and rewarding cohabitation is for many adults, its benefits have yet to be substantiated by research. This is especially so for children and for society at large. Interestingly enough, cohabitation may be more functional and equitable for older adults who have already been married at least once. Yet, currently, older adults are least likely to enter into such relationships because of matters of morality and also because of the imbalance in the sex ratio: at older ages, fewer men are available.

Overall, it can be advanced that cohabitation will be a good substitute for marriage only when it becomes as committed, faithful, and stable a relationship. Were such a point to be reached, both forms of conjugal unions would be equivalent. Under such circumstances, however, cohabitation as a lifestyle option would largely disappear and, except from a religious perspective, there would be no distinction between the two types of union.

Another indicator of the lack of equivalency of cohabitation with marriage resides in the fact that, in many countries same-sex couples are seeking the right to be married. Obviously, they do not believe that cohabitation or even a registered partnership is as beneficial as marriage. Many such couples call these options “second best” (Ambert, 2005b).

**Issues of morality and religion**

The issue of morality is an important consideration. As illustrated in one of the student quotes, many people cohabit somewhat against the grain of their own moral system and particularly that of their parents. In itself, this is not a comfortable situation. Furthermore, it can also be argued that, inasmuch as cohabitations tend to be unstable, particularly among impoverished mothers who are single, they present to the younger generation a model of relationships that emphasizes expediency, sexuality, and lack of commitment.

This model of relationship in itself makes a moral statement. A parallel here can be drawn with parents who divorce after a relatively good to very good marriage. Their children are more likely to divorce later on than the children of parents who had to divorce because of severe conflict (Amato and DeBoer, 2001). In the latter case, the necessity of divorce may be obvious to the children; in the former case, the message that filters down is one of lack of commitment to marriage as an institution. Thus, the choices that parents make in their relationships (singlehood, cohabitation, marriage, divorce) are examples for their children and their children’s peers. **Conjugal and procreative choices constitute moral lessons for the next generation.**

The religious perspective should not be dismissed in this analysis because a substantial proportion of the world population is deeply religious. Furthermore, new immigrants of other faiths (Hindu and Muslim, as examples) have a strong religious preference for marriage as opposed to cohabitation—even though they allow divorce. Unfortunately, it is also true that, in many religions, marriage is a male-dominated institution.
To conclude

The evidence at this point does not indicate that young women gain as much from cohabitation as from marriage, unless their partner is committed to marry them if they so want. The “sexual revolution” should not be taken as synonymous with “women’s liberation” and women’s best interest. While there is some good in the sexual revolution, it has not completely eliminated the double standard. It still has benefited males more than females in the sense that it has made more women available to men sexually—and cohabitation has been one avenue through which this has occurred. Indeed, as we have seen earlier, despite the apparent popularity of cohabitation among young people, women are less interested than men in this lifestyle (Milan, 2003). As well my observations tell me that too many women are heartbroken as a result of having experienced the dissolution of their cohabitation. Terminating a dating relationship seems less traumatic. Furthermore, on average, cohabitation also carries risks for a mother who is single. For instance, her partner may not be committed to her children and one can wonder what happens to them when the union breaks up?

When mothers and fathers have pre-teens and teenagers, repeated episodes of cohabitation are problematic on many fronts. In my fieldwork, I have encountered many mothers whose children were fully aware of their sex lives and who prematurely followed their example, at times with unfortunate results (pregnancies, STDs, loss of interest in school, accompanied delinquency, and disengagement from family life). “If you’re doing it, you have no right to tell me I can’t,” was a reply some of these mothers received when trying to monitor their adolescents’ dating. Furthermore, we know that an insecure union places a woman through a great deal of emotional turmoil, which then strains her parenting ability.

Overall, my concerns with cohabitation reside in its frequent lack of commitment on the part of at least one partner. Hence cohabitation is a more insecure and potentially hurtful situation than marriage is, even considering the current divorce rate. Were cohabitation to become more like marriage, I am certain that my opinion would change accordingly. As Smock (2004:871) points out, “Whether cohabitation becomes more like marriage or marriage more like cohabitation, something like marriage is here to stay.”

This being said, cohabitation as an option or an alternative is here to stay in western societies. From a sociological vantage point, far more research is needed on this topic, particularly in terms of potential gender-, age-, class-, and ethnicity-based dynamics, benefits, and disadvantages. Furthermore, some of this research has to examine cohabitation in and of itself as a relationship, a set of roles, a marker event in the life course, and a status within family systems and society. Other studies need to focus on cohabitational dissolution and re-partnering as well as the sequence and timing of related events in a person’s life cycle. Finally, we need to examine the role that children play in parental cohabitation as well as the effects of cohabitation on children’s daily lives from their perspective and with respect to long-term outcomes.

On the one hand, traditional questions about cohabitation need to be complemented by new questions that are less geared toward a comparison with marriage. On the other hand, the nature of the marital relationship is evolving as a result of changes in gender roles, the availability of options such as single parenting and cohabitation, as well as divorce as a solution. Thus, more up-to-date, in-depth or qualitative studies of married couples of various ethnic groups and social classes, including both spouses, are needed.
ENDNOTES

i Children born and living into cohabitational unions are also very frequent in France; in 2001, 3 marriage out of 10 were “legitimizing” children who had lived with their cohabiting parents (Doisneau, 2002). The term “legitimizing” is simply a cultural one because, legally, there are no illegitimate children in France.

ii The quotes in this paper largely come from analysis of semi-structured but open-ended autobiographies that students have been writing in some of my classes since 1974. The autobiographies are anonymous and students are aware that they will serve research purposes. Furthermore, students can choose between writing an autobiography or another type of paper of a less personal nature. By 2005, I had collected over 1,500 autobiographies ranging from 12 to 60 single-spaced pages. See Ambert (2005a:26-27) for a description of this research.

iii This quote is from my longitudinal study of divorced and remarried persons (Ambert, 1989).

iv This is often referred to as LAT or living-together apart (for review, see Ambert, 2005a).
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