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# COHABITATION NATION

Come live with me and be my love,  
And we will some new pleasures prove  
Of golden sands and crystal brooks  
With silken line, and silver hooks  
There's nothing that I wouldn't do  
If you would be my POSSLQ.

You live with me, and I with you,  
And you will be my POSSLQ.  
I'll be your friend and so much more;  
That's what a POSSLQ is for.

And everything we will confess;  
Yes, even to the IRS.  
Some day on what we both may earn,  
Perhaps we'll file a joint return.  
You'll share my pad, my taxes, joint.  
You'll share my life, up to a point!  
And that you'll be so glad to do,  
Because you'll be my POSSLQ.<sup>1</sup>

## COULD YOU BE A POSSLQ?

AS A NEW FORM OF SEXUAL and domestic relationship started to take hold in Western cultures in the 1970s, the US Census Bureau coined a new term—POSSLQ (pronounced *poss-el-cue*)—to speak of Persons of Opposite Sex Sharing Living Quarters. So the famously bow-tied *CBS Sunday Morning* commentator Charles Osgood penned this tongue-in-cheek poem. The curious new term described a large and growing segment of conjugal couplehood.

Osgood zeroed in on the primary unique factor of cohabiting relationships—their conditional nature: “You’ll share my life, *up to a point!* And that you’ll be so glad to do.” This is what cohabitation is—a domestic and sexual living arrangement quite different from what a man and woman do when they marry.

But is there any significant difference between the two, besides that one is a legal commitment and the other merely a personal agreement? Does it really matter how couples establish and arrange their relationships? Doesn’t it just come down to personal preference and what seems to suit the couple? Isn’t it really the couple’s love that makes the relationship?

These are questions all couples should consider—whether they think they might ever cohabit or not. Finding good answers to them helps us understand the nature of domestic and sexual relationships—something most of us find ourselves entering into.

*The Ring Makes All the Difference* is a careful, practical look at what we know about couples who choose to live together outside of marriage—and how this knowledge can help create current and future relationships that are as healthy, fulfilling, and long-lasting as possible. *Isn’t that what most of us are after?*

The good news is that the psychological and social sciences know a great deal about cohabiting relationships, given that we have seen large and socially diverse populations entering such relationships since the late 1960s. For this is what the social sciences need to conduct their research and reach reliable conclusions: (1) large, diverse populations to observe and (2) many decades to observe them.

It would be difficult to overstate how dramatically cohabiting relationships have grown in most Western nations, including the United States. When it comes to the ways men and women today start and organize their domestic lives, cohabitation is the faraway winner in terms of sheer numerical growth. In family formation trends over the past four decades, the increase of unmarried cohabitation has no close rival:

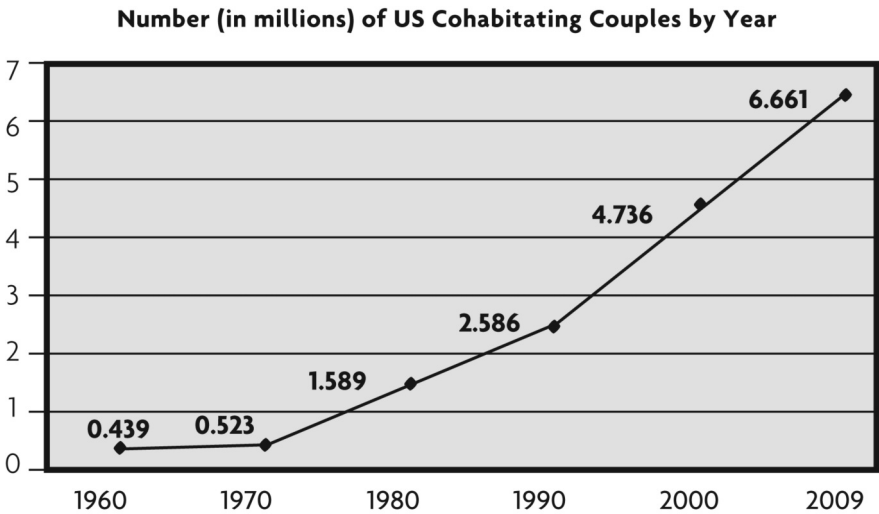
- ◆ Since 1960, the number of cohabiting couples in the US has increased fifteen-fold.<sup>2</sup>
- ◆ This growth has been particularly dramatic over the past two decades, with the percentage of cohabiting couples increasing about 50 percent since the mid-1990s and more than doubling in real numbers over these years.<sup>3</sup>
- ◆ Today, more than 60 percent of all marriages are preceded by some form of cohabitation. Second marriages are even more likely to be preceded by either partner having lived with someone without a wedding first.<sup>4</sup>

But not all young couples are cohabiting at the same rates. There are important class distinctions. The National Marriage Project reported in 2010 that among women in the twenty-five to forty-four age range, 75 percent of those who never completed high school have cohabited, compared to 50 percent of college graduates. Cohabitation is also more common among those who are less religious than their peers, those who have been divorced, and those who have experienced parental divorce, fatherlessness, or high levels of marital discord during childhood.<sup>5</sup>

POSSLQs are spreading like wildfire. On the next page you will find a chart that plots the remarkable growth trend of cohabitation in the United States since 1960.

## BABIES BEFORE WEDDING BELLS

Having interviewed many young adult women over the past decade, I have talked with more than a few who had babies out of wedlock. These are not just young teens or early twentysomething women who got



pregnant by accident. Many are women in their later twenties, thirties, and even early forties who got pregnant intentionally because they found their biological clocks ticking faster than their wedding bells were ringing.

As one successful professional woman living in Seattle, Washington—working as a professor of literature at a noted university—explained to me, she always wanted to get married and have children in the traditional way, but a husband never materialized. She didn't want to miss out on her dream of having children, so she built her motherhood on the prospects of in vitro fertilization. She was not happy it turned out this way, but she is overjoyed with her two-year-old daughter. It is a world she never expected. And she is not alone. The data shows she is a part of a quickly growing demographic.

Unmarried childbearing is cohabitation's closest competitor in terms of growth in the United States. But this has been greatly increased by cohabitation itself, as of all women who give birth outside marriage:

- ◆ 56 percent aged 20 to 24,
- ◆ 52 percent aged 25 to 28,
- ◆ 59 percent aged 30 to 34

have births in nonmarital cohabiting relations.<sup>6</sup> And births to single

mothers are greatest among women in their mid- to later twenties, thirties, and even early forties—rather than among teens and young twenties.

This dramatic growth of unmarried childbearing among adult women is largely due to women choosing to have babies with men who are good enough as live-in partners—good enough, they sense, to be baby-daddies, but not good enough to be marriage material. You probably have friends who are there—or have been there.

## HOW DID COHABITATION START?

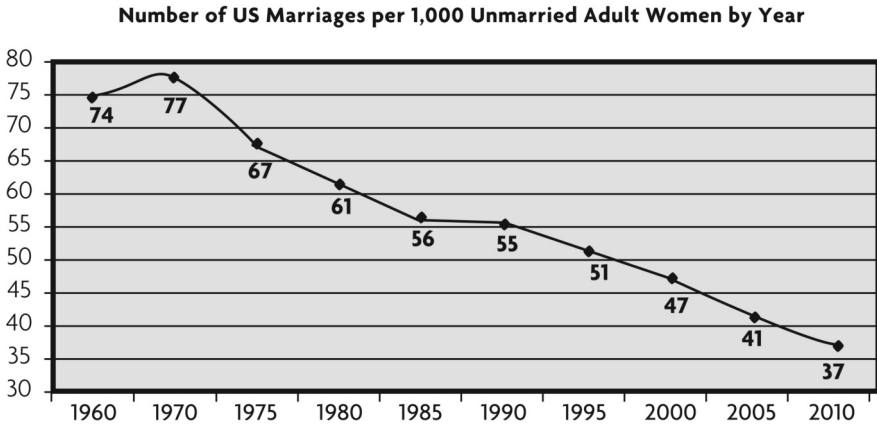
While cohabitation didn't start out this way, living together has seen explosive growth as boys fail or refuse to become men—while still getting what they want from their female peers who desire husbands: companionship, regular sex, and someone to cook and clean for them. We will look in chapter 7 at how women fare in the cohabitation deal compared to their boyfriends.

The cohabitation trend started decades ago, primarily in the Scandinavian countries, spreading across central and northwestern Europe, then to Canada and the United States. Australia and New Zealand have also seen sharp increases over the past twenty years. Of course, this means that marriage rates in these nations have been dropping.

This is because, “There has been little increase in recent times in the propensity of young people to desire to ‘become couples,’” says groundbreaking family sociologist David Popenoe.<sup>7</sup> The desire to be a part of a couple has always been high, for a basic human desire is to share our lives and ourselves with an opposite sex partner. But in past decades more couples have been making the choice for cohabitation rather than marriage. The chart on the next page records the recent decline of marriage in the United States.

## COHABITATION HAS A LONG HISTORY

While we have seen an explosion of cohabitation in the United States, the concept is not new. It has always been a small part of our culture, since



colonial days. This was primarily true because of the nature of the colonies themselves, rather than people’s attitudes.

Many couples lived together—forming home and family outside of legal marriage—not because they didn’t believe marriage was important or desirable, but because ministers and magistrates were in short supply in some colonial and postrevolutionary outposts. Others—even if they were not formally married—considered themselves very much married and were viewed that way by their families and neighbors. This is where the concept of “common-law” marriages arose—when a couple considered themselves wedded and showed themselves this way to the larger community, even if they did not have an official ceremony or marriage certificate. These were also called “informal marriages.” All that many jurisdictions required for such marriages was a testimony to the exchange of vows—from the couple and possibly family or friends—and then sexual consummation of the union.

In the decades before and after the American Revolution, “significant numbers of marriages were private or departed in significant ways from church sanctioned marriage patterns,” says sociological historian Arland Thornton.<sup>8</sup> One clergyman, John Miller, traveling through the New York colonies in the late 1600s complained that so “many couples live together without ever being married in any manner of way.”<sup>9</sup> But still these numbers remained relatively low. Recent research shows that for people born before 1928 and reaching early adulthood before World War II, the cohab-

iting rate was just 2 percent.<sup>10</sup> The kind of cohabitation we saw arise in Western cultures in the 1960s has a very different nature. Rather than lack of officials to perform official commitments, the large and growing numbers of couples living together today has been motivated by two different views of marriage: one high and one low.

## THE LOW VIEW OF MARRIAGE

This view was responsible for launching cohabitation as a growing domestic arrangement out of the 1960s sexual revolution. It was motivated by the opinion that legal marriage was an unnecessary—or even stifling—formality that would only spoil the passionate, “pure” love of a young couple.

These cohabitators saw themselves as revolutionaries, explaining their actions with the decree that “love will keep us together” as the popular song proclaimed. Other cohabitators boasted, “We don’t need a piece of paper from city hall to make our love meaningful.” If they stayed together just because some legal form said they must, what kind of love would that be?

Some people really believed this. Others saw it as a high-minded justification for not having to commit, to keep their options open, to not have to grow up so quickly. This perspective took a low view of marriage because it reduced marriage to just the legal contract, merely a “piece of paper.” In this view, what really mattered was the couple’s love.

With its romantic, idealistic appeal, this view caught on with young people throughout the ’70s and ’80s. But during this time, young people still reported to scholars that marriage and family were their most important life goals—and that gaining a spouse and having children were very important in living a happy, fulfilling life.

They believed this, even while they were cohabiting in growing numbers. It is not the first time that young adults would exhibit an inconsistency between what they said they believed and what they actually did. It is, perhaps, one of the perks of being young.



## THE HIGH VIEW OF MARRIAGE

Another, more recent view surprisingly takes a high view of marriage. *How could a high view of marriage prompt couples to cohabit?* Let me explain.

The cohabitators of the '90s and the first decade of the twenty-first century do not have the earlier “who needs a piece of paper?” attitude. They are not motivated by the idea that cohabitation is a purer, nobler relationship than marriage. Instead, they have a crippling fear of failure in what they are so desperately looking for. And what they are looking for is largely what they were denied by their parents' lives.

### *Fear*

Gen Xers, and those coming after them, saw their parents divorce in record numbers. And guess what? Unlike what so many of their parents were told, they didn't see this as a powerful, healthy, liberating event.<sup>11</sup> Most speak of their parents' divorce as a deeply painful and defining event in their lives. Devastating. Many call it dramatically “scarring” and the end of their childhood.

The individual and collective pain of their generation would be difficult to exaggerate. Generations tend to be shaped by what they were denied. The generation raised during the Depression became remarkably prosperous. The generation raised in the family solidity of the '40s and '50s ushered in the experimentation and family upheaval of the '60s and '70s. These are not coincidences.

Young people today deeply desire marriage because of the family breakdown brought by their parents' experimentation. A new sophisticated report from the Pew Research Center on the state of marriage in America reports Millennials have “the strongest desire to marry” of any generation alive today.<sup>12</sup> This is not just happenstance. And they desperately don't want to muck up the carpet of marriage with their relational anxiety, dysfunction, or the bad relational mojo they inherited from their parents. They very much want to get it right. They feel they *must* get it right. Therefore, cohabiting, they figure, may be the best they can do—and it provides an easy exit if either partner sabotages the relationship.

As one young African-American woman who works as a theater set designer in the Atlanta area told me, “When we see the statistics, we are scared witless at the possibility of failing at what we want so badly: marriage. So it makes it hard for us to make the plunge.”

### *As a Placeholder*

She was a nice girl from a good Christian home. She knew right from wrong, but she also knew she wanted to start her own life free from her parents’ model. She hadn’t yet found “Mr. Right.” But she had met a nice young man at school whom she thought could be a good partner to help her navigate the pressure-ridden, sometimes lonely college years. They moved in together and lived as a couple through her freshman and sophomore years. Her parents were not happy with the arrangement, but she didn’t let that bother her. She was an adult and could make her own decisions. At least that’s how she worked it out in her mind.

Not all young couples today are motivated by a fear of failure. Others desire a domestic partnership, but haven’t found that special one to whom they want to make a life commitment. So for the time being, they cohabit as a relational placeholder. And they figure it might serve as a good training ground for marriage.

Scholars at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan report that fewer than one-fourth of first-time cohabitators today have no interest in ever marrying, nor see cohabitation as a possible testing ground for future marriage. The other three-fourths have some plans for marriage and see their current relationship as a step toward that. As recently as the late 1980s, only half of cohabitators said their relationship was some sort of preparation for marriage.<sup>13</sup> This is a dramatic shift. Who would have thought that today’s cohabitators are highly marriage minded?

Most cohabitators today have the intention, if not the strong desire, to marry someday. They see their relationship as one that may help move them in that direction. And young adults are very likely (62 percent) to believe that “living together with someone before marriage is a good way to avoid an eventual divorce.”<sup>14</sup>

## CAN COHABITATION FULFILL ITS PROMISE?

So here is one of the most important questions we seek to answer in this book:

*How likely is it that living together before marriage will help you reach your goal of a happy, thriving, and fulfilling relationship leading to marriage?*

How fulfilling is cohabitation? This is an important question, given how valuable young people say marriage is to them. According to what they say, they would like one day to be happily married, having found a good mate to share their life with, raise a gaggle of beautiful children together, and grow old with each other, hand in hand, life entwined with life.

PEOPLE today don't  
*have to wonder how*  
*living together might work out,*  
*for we can learn from the experiences*  
*of those who have already tried it.*

Couples who are considering moving in together should ask themselves this question because there are strong and reliable answers they can gain from the experience of millions of cohabitators who have already gone down that road.

People today don't have to wonder how living together might work out, for we can learn from the experiences of those who have already tried it.

In these pages you won't hear the voices of parents or pastors giving their advice about what *they* think is right. You will learn from what the world's leading social scientists have discovered through careful research,

studying and observing those who have cohabited before marriage in various situations over the past four decades. They have tested their findings and submitted them to the review of their professional peers. Their findings have been published in scholarly journals and are now carefully catalogued here for your benefit.

You don't need a graduate degree in sociology to understand what they have found. I have taken care to explain it for you in plain language.

This book is written for you to smooth the way in finding the smart answers you need. It is my desire that you have the insight you need to make wise decisions so you can create the healthiest, happiest, most fulfilling relationships available—so you can be wise in following both your *heart* and your *head* in this important life decision.

## QUESTIONS *for Couples*

1. What are you looking for in life regarding your own family relationships?
2. Do you have a high or a low view of marriage? What about your partner?
3. If you are considering cohabitation, honestly list your personal reasons for choosing this option. What are the relational benefits you believe it will achieve for you?
4. What are your fears or concerns about entering a cohabiting relationship?
5. People are products of their heritage. What is the marriage story of your family of origin? What kind of marital history, success or failure, did your parents have? What about your partner? What was the marital history of your grandparents? What about your partner's grandparents?

6. How do you think the generational history of marriage in your family has affected your attitudes toward marriage? How has it done so in positive ways and in negative ways?
7. How do you think your partner's attitudes toward marriage have been affected by his or her family's marital history? (Have your partner answer the same question for you—and discuss this between you. This can be very helpful.)

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Should We Live Together?" A report of the National Marriage Project, University of Virginia, 2002. The twenty-four-page report can be found at:  
<http://www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/pdfs/swlt2.pdf>

## NOTES

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6. W. Bradford Wilcox, "The Evolution of Divorce," *National Affairs*, autumn 2009, 7; Lisa Mincieli et al., "The Relationship Context of Births Outside of Marriage: The Rise of Cohabitation," *Child Trends Research Brief*, May 2007, figure 4, 3.
7. Popenoe, 2008, 3.
8. Thornton et al., 2007, 42.
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