

Divorce fears widespread among young couples

Cornell University

With the share of married adults at an all-time low in the United States, new research by demographers at Cornell and the University of Central Oklahoma offers clues about what's preventing young adults from tying the knot.

Through qualitative interviews with 122 cohabiting men and women, ages 18-36, researchers found widespread apprehension about divorce -- even in those with no personal experience of divorce. More than two-thirds of respondents worried about their ability to form enduring marriages and feared facing the potential social, legal, emotional and economic consequences of a failed marriage, reports a new study published in the December issue of the journal *Family Relations* (60:5).

"Today's young adults express a great deal of concern about their ability to 'succeed' at marriage, and many who are living together question whether their relationships really differ that much from the state-sanctioned version," said Sharon Sassler, associate professor of policy analysis and management in the College of Human Ecology and director of the research project.

Co-authors on the study, "The Specter of Divorce: Views From Working- and Middle-Class Cohabitators," were lead author Amanda J. Miller, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Central Oklahoma, and Dela Kusi-Appouh, a Cornell doctoral student in the field of development sociology.

The authors interviewed 61 cohabiting couples in and around Columbus, Ohio, who had been living with their partners for at least three months. They classified respondents as either working or middle class based on educational attainment, occupational status and annual income. The researchers sought to understand the individuals' attitudes toward marriage, including how it differed from cohabitation and why or why not they hoped to someday marry.

Roughly 67 percent of the interviewees expressed concern about divorce. Most frequently mentioned was a desire to "do it right" and marry only once, to the ideal partner, leading some to view cohabitation as a "test-drive" before making "the ultimate commitment." The belief that marriage was difficult to exit was mentioned nearly as frequently, with examples of how divorce caused emotional pain, social embarrassment, child custody concerns, and legal and financial problems.

Respondents also suggested that the rewards of marriage were not worth the risk of a potential breakup. They cited high divorce rates -- including the popular myth that one in two marriages fail -- as a cautionary tale, with some saying that because of those odds they hesitated to marry and to "fix something that was not broken."

The researchers also detected important social class distinctions in cohabitators' attitudes about marriage and divorce. Middle-class subjects spoke more favorably

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about marriage and were more likely to view living together as a step toward wedding than their working-class counterparts. Less-educated women disproportionately expressed doubts about marriage as a "trap," fearing it would be hard to exit if things went wrong or that it would lead to additional domestic responsibilities but few benefits. Working-class cohabitators were more apt to view marriage as "just a piece of paper."

Sassler noted that while many of the couples interviewed are likely to eventually marry, "the broad diffusion of such anxiety further challenges the institution of marriage."

The authors hope that their findings can help premarital counselors to better tailor their lessons to ease fears of divorce and to target the specific needs of various socio-economic classes.

Ted Boscia is assistant director of communications for the College of Human Ecology.

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