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SOC 333

### The Test Drive Dilemma

You're looking to buy a new car. First, you decide what features and type you want, then check out your options, choose which one you like best, and take it for a test drive. That's a perfectly acceptable practice for choosing a vehicle; now does it work the same for choosing a marriage partner?

Today in America, there are over 12 million unmarried partners living together (ATMP). This practice has been on the rise in the past couple decades; because of how common and accepted it is becoming, it is worth taking a deeper look at it. This paper will examine the impact of cohabitation on marriage, how often it is used as a precursor to marriage or instead of marriage, and if it is used after a failed first marriage. The paper will look at statistics, opinions, and affects of cohabitation, and use all of these to come to a final decision on the acceptability and worth of cohabitation.

Cohabitation is viewed by many as a way to test compatibility without the commitment of marriage, thus it being known as the "test drive." The theory is that by living together and experiencing all the day to day occurrences of life, a couple is able decide if they can tolerate each other and would want to share every moment together without having to go through the hassle of a divorce if they discover they can't. This seems like a good idea because the divorce rate is so high today, with 50% of first marriages ending in divorce, and the rate only increasing with subsequent marriages (Olson & DeFrain, 436). However, studies have shown that couples who do live together before marrying are 46% more likely to divorce than couples who do not (The National Marriage Project). This same study also showed a higher chance of domestic

violence and abuse of any children involved in the relationship when cohabitation occurred. But as many have argued, it might not be the cohabitation itself that is causing greater divorce rates; it might be because the type of people willing to cohabit (which is the proper term, not *cohabitare*, a mistake many make according to Alternatives to Marriage Project) are more likely to not have strong religious views, so besides having no moral objections to living together also have no issue with divorce (ATMP). Many believe this may be the real reason for the inflated numbers, but The National Marriage Project discovered that “even when this ‘selection effect’ is carefully controlled statistically a negative effect of cohabitation on later marriage stability still remains. And no positive contribution of cohabitation to marriage has been ever been found.” The Project also proved that the relationships of couples living together are not as fulfilling or happy as those of married couples. A large reason for this is the insecurities that are caused by couples not being legally committed to one another, so either one could leave at any time. It is suggested by the National Marriage Project that the best possible circumstance in order to have a non-harmful cohabiting relationship is directly prior to an impending marriage, so there is a greater degree of commitment.

Besides being a way to test the waters without the commitment, there are some fairly legitimate reasons people would choose to cohabit instead of marry, according to the Alternatives to Marriage Project. The most convincing argument is because of losing financial assistance, such as a widow(er) losing the pension from the deceased spouse if they were to remarry. Financial reasons are the driving force between other decisions to cohabit, such as not having to pay two rents while dating, especially in college or when saving up for the wedding. Then there are the people who feel they will never be ready for the commitment of marriage, or know that the person they are currently with will not be their lifelong partner, but still want to

make the most of their time with them. These last couple reasons are more like excuses, and are certainly not morally sound.

Taking a look at cohabitation from a moral standpoint, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod has some strong views. They offer a straightforward explanation for their stand in opposition to cohabitation: "Simply stated, a couple that lives together as man and wife without being married is sinning," (LCMS). God told mankind in the Ten Commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," and in numerous Bible verses warns about being sexually immoral. This is not a case of the church being too narrow-minded and strict; it is just upholding God's clear command. The situation is a sticky one, as it has become a perfectly acceptable practice in the minds of many, non-Christian and Christian alike. The LCMS has suggestions for how the issue should be dealt with; it is important that it does not get overlooked just for the sake of not stepping on any toes. The pastor should first have a private talk with the offending couple, explaining to them that what they are doing goes against God's Law and will not be tolerated. If they refuse to change their ways, the church might have to implement some disciplinary measures. The congregation should pray for the couple, that God would work in their hearts and help them see their sin. The main goal is that the couple will indeed see their sin, but through that see their Savior and seek forgiveness.

Cohabitation's growing popularity is starting to be seen as a threat to marriage in today's society. The sacredness of marriage has already been mostly lost, with so many couples no longer holding to the "til death do us part" of their wedding vows. Now many more couples are deciding they don't need the vows in order to have the benefits. "Between 1970 and 2000, the number of unmarried couples living together increased 10-fold from 500,000 to 5.5 million couples (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003b.)" (Olson & DeFrain, 293), and the number of

unmarried people in the U.S. reached 93 million in 2007 (ATMP). This drastic increase shows a trend that, if it continues, could cause a major shift in how families in the U.S. function and are structured. The more couples that choose to not be married, the more chances there are that they will still choose to have a family, so those children will be raised in a less stable home with a greater chance of having a single parent at some point in their life. In 2000, statistics showed that 2 out of every 5 children would spend some point in their life living with their mother and her unmarried partner (Olson & DeFrain, 293). Also, without all the legal arrangements of a marriage, the issue of child custody can become a much bigger problem. As for what families make use of cohabitation, 54% have never been married, 37% have been divorced, and 9% are widowed (Olson & DeFrain, 293). In 2005, unmarried households became the majority, and due to the growing popularity, corporations and the government are starting to offer benefits that would give unmarried couples the same coverage as married (ATMP).

There are two real purposes to cohabitation, either as an alternative to marriage or a precursor. The statistics in 2003 were 60-75% of first marriages are preceded by cohabitation, and 80-85% of remarriages (Olson & DeFrain). According to the Alternatives to Marriage Project, 75% of couples living together do plan to get married, and "55% of different-sex cohabiters do marry within five years of moving in together. 40% break up within that same time period. About 10% remain in an unmarried relationship for five years or more." Various studies do suggest that the best use of cohabiting is when the couple definitely plans to get married, and the couples that only use it in this way do not have any change in marital success from those that do not cohabit. Cohabitation is also a typical choice for people who have already experienced a failed first marriage, as can be seen from the statistics. This is probably true because the sanctity of marriage seems less to them after the first time, so instead of taking what may be meaningless

vows and risking all the struggle of a divorce, it would be easier to just live with the other person in a less committed and involved way.

It is undeniable that cohabitation is a growing practice, and that society does not see a problem with that fact. It is good to understand some of the underlying causes for why it is happening; not just the basic reasons of testing compatibility, saving money, and not committing; but why people feel the need to live together. Olson and DeFrain offer some insight to psychological and cultural reasons for the growing phenomenon. For some, they need the security of having someone in their life, even if that person is not a fixed and permanent partner. This insecure relationship is still preferable to being alone. For others, cohabitation is a way to gain freedom; since it is still viewed as unacceptable by some, especially conservative older Americans, the children like to use it as a way to break free from their parents' rules and values. Both of these reasons can back fire, however; the people that need security often find themselves to be even more broken after their partner leaves, and the people who want to break free from what they see as just their parents' values often hold those enough themselves that they end up feeling guilty. Their partners can suffer due to these unsolved psychological issues as well (Olson & DeFrain, 294). Culturally, more couples are cohabiting due to the increased age of marriage, as more people want to start careers before settling down and having a family; and the early onset of puberty, as the age at which boys and girls start experiencing sexual feelings comes sooner and sooner, leaving them with more years of sexual desire to fight with while still leading a single life. This struggle is too much for many to deal with, and the easiest solution is living with someone (Olson & DeFrain, 294).

There are a few factors that will decrease a person's chance of living with someone, and not too surprisingly, these are thanks to the parents. As much as children want to break free from

their parents' influence, some things do stick with them, such as values and the example set by them. James Duke of Brigham Young University found that religion affects a person's likelihood to cohabit, and most people can thank their parents for whichever religious belief they hold to. Mormons are the least likely to cohabit, with a rate of 8.2%; then 20-24% for Protestants; 23% for Catholics; 32.5% for Jews; and 44.8% for those without a religion (Olson & DeFrain, 293). Also, whether or not a person's parents stayed together affects their chances of cohabiting, with a study on 20 year olds showing that coming from stable homes only 13% were living with someone, while those from divorced families cohabited at a rate of 30%. At age 26 the rate for stable homes jumped to 30% and the divorced families to 48% (Olson & DeFrain, 293). The older the children got the more likely they were to cohabit, since they were more and more removed from their parents' influence, but whether they had come from a stable home or not had an impact no matter which stage of their life they were at.

When looking at all the information gathered in this paper, a conclusion is that cohabitation is a growing trend in the U.S. today, but it is not a healthy one. Relationships are not as satisfying when a couple is only living together and not bound by marriage; people are not getting the support and fulfillment they need when living with someone outside of marriage; and children are negatively impacted in the long run when they do not come from a stable home. Unfortunately, the current trend will just keep breeding more of the same in the future, so steps need to be taken. The church can do its best to tell people that what they are doing is wrong, but people need to see for themselves that cohabitation is not the healthiest and best option for them. Change can be made, one couple at a time, and then the statistics can start reversing and America can regain the sanctity of marriage.

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