

## Pre-engagement Cohabitation and Gender Asymmetry in Marital Commitment

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The authors longitudinally examined couples' ( $N = 197$ ) dedication (interpersonal commitment) levels on the basis of their premarital cohabitation history. Findings suggested that men who cohabited with their spouse before engagement were less dedicated than men who cohabited only after engagement or not at all before marriage. Furthermore, these husbands were less dedicated to their wives than their wives were to them. Hierarchical linear modeling showed that such asymmetries were apparent before marriage and through the early years of marriage. Relationship adjustment and religiousness were related to dedication but did not account for the findings. The authors suggest that couples considering cohabitation before engagement could benefit from discussions about commitment and expectations about marriage.

*Keywords:* premarital, cohabitation, commitment, marriage, gender differences

Living with one's partner before marriage is becoming increasingly common; well over half of couples in the United States cohabit before marriage (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Premarital cohabitation is associated with a higher rate of divorce in many Western countries (DeMaris & Rao, 1992; Kiernan, 2002), and research has begun to decipher why this so-called *cohabitation effect* occurs. Studies have shown that premarital cohabitation is linked to many relationship risk factors for divorce, including more negative (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002) and fewer positive (Kline et al., 2004) marital interactions, lower levels of marital quality (Brown, 2004; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Stanley et al., 2004), higher rates of wife infidelity (Forste & Tanfer, 1996), and more physical violence (Brownridge & Halli, 2000; Kline et al., 2004).

As Stanley et al. (2004) noted, few studies on the cohabitation effect have explored relationship commitment explicitly. The present study does so, examining commitment in the form of dedication. Theories of commitment (e.g., Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Rusbult & Buunk,

1993; Stanley & Markman, 1992) make a distinction between forces that encourage individuals to form and maintain close relationships and forces that increase the costs of leaving. In Stanley and Markman's (1992) terms, these constructs are dedication and constraint commitment, respectively. *Dedication* refers to intrinsic interpersonal commitment and is characterized by a sense of working as a team or as a "we" (i.e., couple identity), a desire for a long-term future together, a readiness to give one's partner or the relationship high priority, and a willingness to make personal sacrifices for the good of one's partner or relationship. *Constraint commitment* refers to external pressures for relationship continuance, such as financial considerations (e.g., difficulty supporting oneself without the partner), the perceived low quality of alternative partners or lifestyles, values about divorce, and the difficulty of terminating the relationship. Constraints are believed to help explain why some unhappy couples stay together and, through a process of inertia, why some cohabiting unions, even high-risk unions, develop into marriages (Stanley, 2002; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). In particular, the logic behind this theory of inertia is that the growing weight of constraints associated with living together encourages some cohabiting couples to marry, although those same couples would not have married if the partners had been living apart. It would be interesting to examine whether constraint commitment helps predict which cohabiting couples marry, but the present sample does not allow for testing that questions because all of the couples were already engaged when the study began. The reasoning about inertia is important to the development of predictions we tested in the present work about dedication and cohabitation history.

Broadly speaking, dedication has not been a focus of research on premarital cohabitation. Stanley et al. (2004) noted that the predominant focus with regard to commit-

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ment in this literature has been on commitment to the institution of marriage rather than on dedication between partners (e.g., Ciabattari, 2004). A few studies have examined constructs consistent with low dedication. In particular, premarital cohabitation has been found to be associated with higher perceived likelihood of separation (Stafford, Kline, & Rankin, 2004) and with higher rates of marital infidelity (Forste & Tanfer, 1996).

In the most direct test of the cohabitation effect using theories of commitment, Stanley et al. (2004) found that married men who had cohabited premaritally with their spouse were less dedicated than men who had not. There was not a significant difference in dedication for women on the basis of premarital cohabitation history. Stanley et al. (2004) speculated that if one were to measure dedication in a sample of couples rather than individuals, one would find that among those who cohabited before marriage, husbands would be less dedicated than their wives. The present study tests whether husbands and wives differ in level of dedication as a function of cohabitation history and whether such asymmetries persist from before marriage into the first few years of marriage.

Why should husbands who cohabited before engagement be any less dedicated than their wives? Let us first comment on why commitment differences between men and women in general might exist. Popular consensus—as could be easily noted in the plethora of related women's and men's magazine articles, Dear Abby letters, and self-help books—is that men and women have different views of many aspects of relationships. Research supports this notion in some regards. For example, research on sexual behavior indicates that men are more interested in casual sex than women are (Clark & Hatfield, 1989; see also Okami & Shackelford, 2001), and there are clear differences in the personal qualities to which men versus women are attracted (Buunk, Dijkstra, Fetchenhauer, & Kenrick, 2002). Often, such gender differences are explained by psychobiological theory, which suggests that some of men's choices in relationships stem from a motivation to father children with multiple partners, whereas women are motivated by a desire to be supported during childbearing and rearing (e.g., Buss, 1994). The theory and research on gender differences—along with Nock's (1998) research showing that marriage is accompanied by important transformations in men's lives in terms of identity, social networks, and responsible behavior—leads us to speculate that, at least at earlier ages and earlier stages of relationships, men might be more resistant to commitment than women (Stanley, 2002; Stanley et al., 2004; see also Whitehead & Popenoe, 2002).

If men are somewhat more likely than women to resist commitment, why would gender differences in dedication be related to cohabitation history? Many couples report that living together “just happened” (Lindsay, 2000) and that they more or less slid into cohabitation (Manning & Smock, 2005). We suspect that couples who slide into cohabitation might also slide into marriage, without making what would be considered a clear, mutual, and unconstrained decision to marry. As we have described, increased constraint commitment and social pressure to marry might encourage couples

to slide into marriage (i.e., inertia theory). Thus, we believe that sliding reluctantly into marriage might be more likely among men who cohabit prior to marriage because of the combination of two crucial factors: men's greater resistance to commitment, and the increased probability of marriage under conditions of some constraint. This combination may compromise a clear, unconstrained decision about marriage, which would otherwise foster the positive transformations in identity that seem to accompany marriage for men (Nock, 1998).

If this reasoning holds, which couples are at greatest risk for having a male partner with low dedication? We believe the risk is greatest for couples who begin cohabiting before making a clear, mutual decision to marry. The least ambiguous measure of such a decision is engagement status. This distinction is important because couples who are engaged before cohabiting or who do not cohabit prior to marriage are not subject to inertia; they will not lose as many options before they make a decision about marriage (Stanley et al., 2006).

Indeed, studies do suggest that marriage plans play a significant role in understanding the cohabitation effect more generally. Brown and Booth (1996) and Brown (2004) found no significant differences in relationship quality between married individuals and cohabiters who reported definite plans to marry or thought they would eventually marry their partner. Using a more specific definition of marriage plans, Kline et al. (2004) examined the timing of cohabitation in relation to when couples became engaged. They found that recently married couples who had started cohabiting before engagement had lower relationship quality and more negative marital interactions than those who cohabited only after engagement or not until marriage, with no differences between the latter two groups. The couples who had cohabited prior to engagement also scored lower on a measure of dedication than those who had not, but this study had important limitations with regard to examining dedication; it did not examine asymmetry, nor did it follow couples past the 1st year of marriage.

Thus, the present study is an important contribution to the field because it is the first to examine differences in dedication between paired husbands and wives and to longitudinally examine the trajectories of such asymmetries from premarriage through the early years of marriage. Our first research question is, Does gender moderate the association between premarital cohabitation history and dedication? We predict that men who cohabit before engagement will be less dedicated than men who do not cohabit until after engagement or after marriage and will be less dedicated than their wives. We do not expect gender differences in dedication levels between couples who cohabit only after engagement and those who cohabit only after marriage. Furthermore, we expect these differences to be apparent both before marriage and during the early years of marriage. In other words, we examine whether the transition into marriage makes such asymmetry dissolve or whether, instead, this difference lingers as a potential risk factor.

If our hypotheses are to be supported, it is important to show that the gender differences exist even when we control

for relationship adjustment and religiousness. On the basis of earlier research, we know that those who live together before marriage, and particularly before engagement, have lower levels of relationship adjustment (e.g., Kamp Dush et al., 2003; Kline et al., 2004). Thus, we want to test whether the measure of dedication captures something more than the broad construct of relationship adjustment, thereby testing whether any asymmetries in dedication can be explained by adjustment. Additionally, it has been shown that those who cohabit before marriage are less religious than those who do not (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992). We therefore want to test whether any associations among cohabitation, dedication, and gender remain significant when we control for religiousness. Thus, our second research question is, Does gender moderate the association between premarital cohabitation history and dedication when we control for relationship adjustment and religiousness?

## Method

### Participants

The present study is part of an ongoing project on the efficacy of relationship education that was detailed elsewhere (see Stanley et al., 2001). In brief, 306 couples were initially recruited through the religious organizations where they planned to marry. They were randomly assigned to complete one of three types of premarital training. For the present study, couples who did not provide data after marriage ( $n = 76$ ); who married before the premarriage assessment (Time 1;  $n = 14$ ); who were missing Time 1 data ( $n = 10$ ); or who did not give dates of engagement, cohabitation, or marriage ( $n = 9$ ) were excluded. The final sample comprised 197 couples.<sup>1</sup> It was 86.3% White, 4.1% African American, and 7.1% Hispanic or Latino; 2.5% identified themselves as "multicultural" or as some other race or ethnicity. The sample was 31.4% Catholic, 50.0% Protestant, and 3.9% other; 14.7% reported no religious affiliation. At Time 1, participants ranged in age from 18 to 53 years ( $M = 26.87$ ,  $SD = 5.36$ ), with a median education level of 16 years and a median personal income level of \$20,000–\$29,999 annually. Couples had been dating, on average, 3.05 years ( $SD = 2.04$ , range = 0.17–10.5 years) when they came in for Time 1. As of the last assessment point included in this article, couples had been married, on average, 3.82 years ( $SD = 1.85$ , range = 0.04–6.98 years).

### Procedure

Couples were assessed on a variety of measures before they were married and prior to any premarital training (Time 1). They were assessed again soon after any premarital training (Time 2; typically 2 to 10 weeks after Time 1;  $Mdn = 7.71$  weeks) and yearly thereafter (Time 3–Time 7). During each assessment, partners completed questionnaires individually on computer or by paper and pencil and engaged in two videotaped discussions (not analyzed in this article). Couples were paid \$40–\$100, depending on the time point.

In the present study, couples completed at least two and up to seven assessments ( $Mdn = 4$ ). The number of assessments varied because couples were recruited at various points in time (1995–2002), so not all couples were at the same time point. In addition, 10 of the couples in these analyses have divorced and are therefore

no longer participating. Also, some couples have missed one or more assessments, typically because of time constraints, but they are not considered dropped from the study. All study procedures were approved by a university institutional review board, and each individual taking part in the study provided written informed consent for participation in a study of marital development and the longitudinal effects of premarital training.

### Measures

*Demographic information.* We used a demographics questionnaire to gather descriptive information (e.g., age, race, income, education, and presence of children). Participants were also asked for the length of the relationship, the date of their engagement, and the date they moved in together. From these dates, we calculated whether the couple had cohabited before or after engagement. Also, we measured religiousness with the question, "All things considered, how religious would you say that you are?" Scores ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very religious*).

*Dedication.* We used the 14-item Dedication scale from the revised Commitment Inventory to measure dedication (Stanley & Markman, 1992). The Dedication scale has shown acceptable levels of internal consistency across a range of samples, and various forms of this measure (shorter, longer, same number of items as the one used in this study) have demonstrated theoretically consistent findings in a

<sup>1</sup> It is worth commenting on why so many couples did not provide data after marriage. Some of these couples likely broke up before marriage (at least 5 did that we know of), 5 couples experienced the death of one partner, and 12 couples divorced before providing postmarriage data. These 22 couples were dropped from study participation. In addition, 7 couples are still actively participating in the larger study but had not yet married at the time of these analyses. Many of the couples who did not provide data after marriage never returned to the study after Time 1 ( $n = 32$ ), which possibly indicates low interest in participation in a longitudinal study. Many of these 32 couples ( $n = 15$ ) asked explicitly that they not be contacted again, and the others have not been reachable since Time 1. It could be that these couples had low interest in the study because of the recruitment process: Couples were not recruited directly; instead, leaders at the religious organization informed them of the study. This process means that couples did not have contact with our study staff until Time 1, which might have reduced their investment in the study. In addition, they might have been individuals who would typically decline participation in couples research but who completed Time 1 on the suggestion of their religious organization. We conducted analyses comparing the excluded couples with those who were included to the extent possible. A multivariate analysis of variance with Time 1 indexes of age, religiousness, dedication, and relationship adjustment scores as dependent variables indicated significant differences,  $F(4, 280) = 4.31$ ,  $p < .01$ . In particular, differences on age and religiousness were nonsignificant, but those couples who were included had significantly higher dedication ( $M = 6.38$ ,  $SD = 0.43$ ) and relationship adjustment scores ( $M = 128.94$ ,  $SD = 14.80$ ) than those who were excluded (dedication:  $M = 6.19$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ; relationship adjustment:  $M = 125.40$ ,  $SD = 17.59$ ). These differences are no surprise given that some of the excluded couples broke up or divorced before they even made it back in for follow-ups. Not having the excluded couples available for the analyses presented in this article appears to have restricted the range of scores, particularly on dedication and, to a lesser extent, on relationship adjustment. If anything, it seems as though excluding these couples would attenuate the strength of the findings.

variety of studies (e.g., Adams & Jones, 1997; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Each item is rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Example items are, "My relationship with my partner is clearly part of my future life plans," "I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of 'us' and 'we' than 'me' and 'him/her,'" and, "It makes me feel good to sacrifice for my partner." As a measure of internal consistency, we used Cronbach's coefficient alpha. The average alpha across time points was .76 ( $SD = .09$ ) for women and .76 for men ( $SD = .06$ ). Scores (i.e., the mean of all items) could range from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicative of more dedication. Across all time points, scores in this study ranged from 2.21 to 7.00 ( $M = 6.33$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ).

*Relationship adjustment.* The Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) is a widely used measure of relationship adjustment with acceptable validity as well as the ability to discriminate between distressed and nondistressed couples (Crane, Allgood, Larson, & Griffin, 1990). Although this measure historically has demonstrated high levels of reliability, average alphas across time points were lower in this study (i.e.,  $M = .69$ ,  $SD = .04$  for women;  $M = .65$ ,  $SD = .09$  for men). Sample characteristics (i.e., ceiling effects in a study of relatively happy couples) probably constrained the reliability estimates. Scores ranged from 35.23 to 158.00 ( $M = 125.20$ ,  $SD = 17.80$ ).<sup>2</sup>

## Results

Preliminary chi-square analyses and analyses of variance indicated that there were no initial differences between those who cohabited before engagement and those who cohabited after engagement with regard to form of premarital training, presence of children, length of relationship, ethnicity, personal income, or level of education ( $ps > .10$ ). However, those who cohabited before engagement ( $M = 28.13$ ,  $SD = 5.74$ ) were, on average, older than those who cohabited only after engagement ( $M = 26.05$ ,  $SD = 4.95$ ),  $F(1, 391) = 14.49$ ,  $p < .001$ . Furthermore, those who cohabited before engagement were less religious ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ), on average, than those who cohabited only after engagement ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ),  $F(1, 388) = 10.91$ ,  $p < .01$ .

We tested the hypotheses using multilevel or hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) and the HLM 5.02 software (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, & Congdon, 2000). We chose HLM because it handles data from multiple time points exceptionally well, even when time points are not equal in number across cases or equally spaced (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Additionally, it models within-couple variation and allowed us to track trajectories of dedication levels over time. Although some researchers have recommended a two-level model for HLM with couple-level data (e.g., Raudenbush, Brennan, & Barnett, 1995), Atkins (2005) suggested that in situations in which the slopes and intercepts for partners within a couple are highly correlated, a three-level model should be used in which Level 1 reflects time-variant individual characteristics (e.g., dedication scores at various time points), Level 2 reflects time-invariant individual characteristics (e.g., gender), and Level 3 reflects time-invariant couple characteristics (e.g., whether the couple cohabited before engagement). Partner slopes and intercepts were highly correlated in this data set (i.e.,  $rs > .90$  in many cases); therefore, we chose the three-level design.

To examine the first research question (i.e., Does gender moderate the association between premarital cohabitation history and dedication?), we used the following model.<sup>3</sup>

$$\text{Level 1: } Y_{tij} = \pi_{0ij} + \pi_{1ij}(\text{Time})_{tij} + \varepsilon_{tij}. \quad (1)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Level 2: } \pi_{0ij} &= \beta_{00j} + \beta_{01j}(\text{Gender}) + r_{0ij} \\ \pi_{1ij} &= \beta_{10j} + \beta_{11j}(\text{Gender}). \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Level 3: } \beta_{00j} &= \gamma_{000} + \gamma_{001}(\text{Cohabitation History}) + u_{00j} \\ \beta_{01j} &= \gamma_{010} + \gamma_{011}(\text{Cohabitation History}) \\ \beta_{10j} &= \gamma_{100} + \gamma_{101}(\text{Cohabitation History}) \\ \beta_{11j} &= \gamma_{110} + \gamma_{111}(\text{Cohabitation History}). \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

In these equations,  $t$  indexes time (in weeks) since the premarriage assessment,  $i$  indexes partners within a couple, and  $j$  indexes couples. There are three separate error terms, all of which are assumed to be normally distributed:  $\varepsilon_{tij}$  is the residual error term,  $r_{0ij}$  is a random intercept term at the individual level, and  $u_{00j}$  is a random intercept term at the couple level. Cohabitation history was a dummy-coded variable (0 = did not cohabit before engagement, 1 = did cohabit before engagement), as was gender (0 = male, 1 = female). The time variable was grand-mean centered, so that the intercept term could be interpreted as the average dedication score across all available assessment points (including Times 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 when available).

The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 1.<sup>4</sup> The first line in the table indicates that the intercept (average dedication score over time) was significantly different from zero, with all other variables in the model controlled. The second line is vastly more interesting and indicates that

<sup>2</sup> Because of the format of the MAT, some participants apparently mistook the first item for part of the instructions and therefore did not complete it. We used a regression imputation method based on participants' scores on MAT items (determined by factor analyses) to estimate these missing Item 1 data. This correction applied to 124 (7.8%) out of a total of 1,585 MAT scores.

<sup>3</sup> A model that included the quadratic term (time<sup>2</sup>) at Level 1 was first tested. The quadratic term was nonsignificant, indicating no significant increase or decrease in rate of change in dedication over time. Thus, this term was removed from analyses presented in this article. The results for fixed effects were highly similar with and without the quadratic term.

<sup>4</sup> Given the skewness of the dependent variable in this model, we were concerned about whether the assumption that the residuals are normally distributed was met. Plots of the residuals indicated mild skewness. Therefore, we ran the model using a logarithmic transformation of dedication scores as the dependent variable. The results of this analysis were highly similar to the results without transformation of the dependent variable; therefore, we present the results without the transformation. Given the concerns about the assumption of normality, all results presented are based on estimates with robust standard errors. In addition, there were three dedication scores that were identified as outliers in this data set (more than five standard deviations from the mean). The analysis for this model was conducted with and without these scores, and there were no meaningful differences in results. Therefore, we present results with these scores included.

Table 1  
*Summary of Hierarchical Linear Modeling Analyses With Dedication as the  
 Dependent Variable*

Line	Fixed effect	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
1	Intercept	6.3752	0.0331	192.19	195	<.001
2	Cohabitation history	-0.2235	0.0657	-3.40	195	.001
3	Gender	-0.0073	0.0404	-0.18	387	.86
4	Cohabitation History × Gender	0.1709	0.0704	2.43	387	.02
5	Time (slope)	-0.0003	0.0002	-1.81	1629	.07
6	Cohabitation History × Time	0.0001	0.0004	-0.27	1629	.79
7	Gender × Time	-0.0004	0.0003	-1.61	1629	.11
8	Cohabitation History × Gender × Time	0.0003	0.0004	0.80	1629	.43
Random effect		Variance component	<i>SD</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
9	$r_{0ij}$	.06	.24	630.46	191	<.001
10	$u_{00j}$	.18	.42	372.27	195	<.001
11	$\epsilon_{tij}$	.05	.22			

*Note.* Time was grand-mean centered. *B* = unstandardized regression coefficient; *SE* = standard error of the regression coefficient.

cohabitation history was significantly related to the intercept (i.e., dedication scores over time), with those couples who lived together before engagement having reported lower dedication scores. Basically, this line indicates that there was a main effect of cohabitation history for dedication scores averaged across time. The third line indicates that there was not a significant main effect for gender on dedication scores averaged across time. However, given the presence of the significant cross-level interaction (Gender × Cohabitation History), these main effects must be interpreted with caution.

This cross-level interaction (Line 4 in Table 1) is the direct test of the main hypothesis of this article. The interaction term was significant, supporting our hypothesis that gender would moderate the association between cohabitation history and dedication. Because of the dummy-coding systems used at Levels 2 and 3 (i.e., 0 = male, 1 = female; 0 = after-engagement or no premarital cohabitation, 1 = before-engagement cohabitation), this interaction demonstrates that men who lived with their partner before engagement ( $M = 6.14$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) were significantly less dedicated than men who did not live with their partner until after engagement ( $M = 6.39$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ; Cohen's  $d = 0.45$ ). Furthermore, the interaction indicates that men who lived with their partner before engagement were significantly less dedicated than their female partner ( $M = 6.32$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ; Cohen's  $d = 0.33$ ). The mean level of dedication averaged across all available assessments for women who lived with their partner only after engagement was 6.37 ( $SD = 0.57$ ). The fixed effect labeled *Time* presented in the table indicates that there was a marginally significant decrease in dedication over time (fifth line). The results indicate that neither gender nor cohabitation history was significantly related to changes in dedication over time (Lines 6 and 7). Furthermore, there was no significant interaction between gender and cohabitation history with regard to changes in dedication over time (Line 8). These fixed effects are particularly important because they indicate little change in

intercept differences over time. That is, this difference (between men who cohabited before engagement and men who did not) does not appear to decrease significantly with time. Moreover, the within-couple difference in dedication for those who cohabited before engagement does not appear to decrease with time. Random effects are also presented in Table 1. Lines 9 and 10 indicate that there was significant variance left over (after all variables in the model were accounted for) between individuals and between couples in terms of their intercepts (dedication scores averaged across time).

One way of capturing the meaning of these analyses is to consider the percentage of couples in which the wife had a higher level of dedication than the husband. When we averaged across all available time points, in 44.9% of couples who cohabited before engagement, the wife had a dedication score that was at least one half of a standard deviation above her husband's score. The same was true for only 31.9% of those who cohabited only after engagement.

To test the second research question, regarding covariates, we ran two separate analyses. First, to test whether gender moderated the association between cohabitation history and dedication over time when we controlled for relationship adjustment, we added MAT scores (grand-mean centered) to Equation 1. The results indicated that MAT scores over time covaried significantly with dedication scores over time when we controlled for all other variables in the model ( $B = 0.02$ ,  $t(1553) = 16.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As a measure of strength of association, we calculated the average Pearson correlation between these two constructs; across time and gender,  $r = .48$ . The main effect for cohabitation history on dedication scores over time remained significant when we controlled for MAT scores ( $B = -0.18$ ,  $t(195) = -3.29$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As we predicted, the cross-level interaction between gender and cohabitation history remained significant when we controlled for relationship adjustment ( $B = 0.16$ ,  $t(387) = 2.44$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In the

interest of space, we do not present these analyses in tabular form.

One might also wonder whether within-couple differences in relationship adjustment could account for within-couple differences in dedication over time. Simply controlling for relationship adjustment, as we did, would not address this question specifically, so we tested for asymmetries in relationship adjustment over time. If there were differences between husbands and wives on relationship adjustment, it would be plausible that within-couple differences in relationship adjustment could account for within-couple differences in dedication, and testing this would be necessary. HLM analyses revealed no significant Cohabitation History  $\times$  Time interaction ( $p > .40$ ) when relationship adjustment (rather than dedication) was entered as the dependent variable. Thus, there were no significant within-couple differences in relationship adjustment on the basis of cohabitation history and therefore no way that such asymmetries could account for asymmetries in dedication.

For the second part of the second research question, we ran an analysis in which we added Time 1 religiousness scores to Equation 2. The results indicated that religiousness was a significant predictor of dedication scores over time when we controlled for other variables in the model ( $B = 0.03$ ),  $t(386) = 2.52$ ,  $p < .05$ . The main effect for cohabitation history on dedication scores over time remained significant when we controlled for religiousness ( $B = -0.21$ ),  $t(195) = -3.61$ ,  $p = .001$ . Moreover, the cross-level interaction between gender and cohabitation history remained significant when we controlled for religiousness ( $B = 0.17$ ),  $t(386) = 2.60$ ,  $p < .05$ .<sup>5</sup> In the interest of space, we do not present these analyses in tabular form. Because there was an age difference on the basis of cohabitation history, we also checked whether we would obtain our major findings when controlling for age. The results were not affected by the addition of age as a covariate.

## Discussion

The new and provocative finding presented in this article is that pre-engagement cohabitation may be associated with marriages wherein the husband is less dedicated than his wife. As predicted, we found that gender moderated the relation between premarital cohabitation history and the level of dedication between spouses both before marriage and during the early years of marriage. Consistent with previous research (i.e., Stanley et al., 2004), men who cohabited before engagement were also less dedicated than men who had not cohabited before engagement.

These findings are robust, such that they remained significant even when we controlled for relationship adjustment and a simple measure of religiousness. Religiousness is perhaps the strongest selection variable related to premarital cohabitation (e.g., Lillard, Brien, & Waite, 1995; Stanley et al., 2004; Woods & Emery, 2002), and it did not seem to account for asymmetry in dedication. In addition, it is remarkable that the findings held up even when we controlled for relationship adjustment, a construct that otherwise accounts for a great deal of variance in couple func-

tioning because it measures so many relationship dynamics (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). These findings are consistent with the theory that there is something about the experience of cohabitation that causes the cohabitation effect (Brown & Booth, 1996; Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Kamp Dush et al., 2003). On the basis of our findings, that "something" seems related to whether cohabitation began before or after engagement.

Our findings also lend credence to the notion that men and women may view and experience commitment differently, at least during cohabitation. In particular, we suspect that women might be more likely than men to interpret cohabitation as a step toward marriage or as an indication of increased commitment. The fact that many people seem to slide into cohabitation rather than making clear, mutual decisions about it (Manning & Smock, 2005) could exacerbate the tendency for couples to fail to identify differing expectations about commitment and the relationship's future.

Our clinical impression is that some cohabiting women believe that if they can coax a reluctant partner into marriage, marriage will change him, making him more committed. These data do not suggest a strong basis for such a hope. As Stanley et al. (2004) suggested, it might be helpful for women to pay careful attention to men's levels of dedication. Discussions about commitment, the meaning of cohabitation, and the relationship's future (particularly with regard to marital intentions) could be very useful to couples wondering whether cohabitation is a good decision. Additionally, clinicians and those delivering prevention programs may want to assess dedication and potential differences in dedication between partners, because such differences might not diminish as a cohabiting relationship progresses into marriage. Addressing such differences early might provide some buffer against any long-term negative effects. It is important for future research to examine how such asymmetries might be associated with poor marital outcomes. Future research might also directly explore how such asymmetries could influence other areas of marital and family life. For example, do differential levels of dedication between partners in marriage translate into differential levels of commitment to children or to one's marriage when times are tough?

In addition to these important conceptual implications, this article highlights the methodological importance of couple-level data in this field. Few studies regarding cohabitation have used data from both partners, yet couple-level data are practically necessary to test gender differences and to fully assess couple dynamics with regard to this important stage in relationship development. As we have shown,

<sup>5</sup> In addition to this simple measure of religiousness, we had items that pertained to extrinsic and intrinsic religiousness (on the basis of Allport & Ross's, 1967, work). We had also measured religious involvement in terms of frequency of attendance at religious services and events. Thus, at the suggestion of an anonymous reviewer, we examined intrinsic, extrinsic, and religious attendance as covariates in our main analyses. Controlling for these variables did not make a difference in the results.

when data are collected from both partners, researchers are able to test gender differences in more meaningful ways. With individual-level data, one can test whether men differ from women in general, but one cannot test whether men differ, on average, from their own female partner, as was possible in the current study. HLM is a highly useful statistical tool to this end because within-couple variation can be captured.

There are limitations to the present study. Our single-item measure of religiousness was a weakness. Far richer theories and measures of this construct exist (e.g., Mahoney et al., 1999), and research on cohabitation could benefit from their application. Most important, the sample was not wholly representative. The sample was taken from a study of premarital intervention, and the intervention could have affected the findings. These couples might be more aware of relationship dynamics than other couples, and the intervention could have decreased changes in dedication over time, likely muting our findings. Additionally, this was a sample of couples who were married through a church or synagogue, which indicates that they might be more religious than the general population. Although national estimates for young couples are likely lower, we know that of people living in the southern and midwestern United States, 78% married through a religious organization (Stanley et al., 2006). We expect that our findings would hold for a less religious sample, but this should be tested in future research. With regard to race and ethnicity, the sample, although reasonably representative of the metropolitan area from which it was drawn, was primarily White and middle class. It is possible that the processes we have examined could operate differently in other cultural or economic status groups.

In conclusion, this research informs our understanding of why premarital cohabitation is linked with poor marital outcomes. The findings suggest that for couples who live together before engagement, an asymmetry may exist between men's and women's levels of dedication that does not go away after marriage.

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