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Cohabitation and Relationship Quality in Dating and Engaged Couples

Peter J. Larson & David H. Olson

We recently selected a sample of 35,684 premarital couples who took the PREPARE/ENRICH Customized inventory in the last six months. These couples came from all 50 states and represented a wide range of ages and ethnicities.

In this sample, 3,336 of the couples categorized themselves as “dating” and were not engaged to be married. Of this dating group, 714 or 21% were living together. We looked at their relationship quality (using our Couple Typology system) and compared it to the 2622 dating couples who were not living together.

In comparing dating couples living together versus apart, the differences were dramatic. Only 21% of the dating couples who are living together were Vitalized, compared with 51% of the dating couples who were not living together. Even more telling, 48% of the cohabiting daters were in the Conflicted range, compared with only 16% of those who were not living together. Vitalized couples score high across a whole range of categories (communication, conflict, finances, etc.), while Conflicted couples have low scores in most areas of their relationship. Our longitudinal studies show that premarital couples who are Conflicted are much more likely to divorce or separate.

Of 32,348 engaged couples studied, 44% were cohabiting. About half (51%) of cohabiting engaged couples were Vitalized compared to 60% of the non cohabiting engaged couples who were Vitalized, a 9% difference. The engaged cohabiters also had more than double the percentage of Conflicted couples at 13% compared to just 5% for the engaged couples who were not living together.

Couple Type	Dating Cohabiting (n=714)	Dating Living Apart (n=2622)	Engaged Cohabiting (n=14,309)	Engaged Living Apart (n=18,039)
Vitalized	21%	51%	51%	60%
Harmonious	10%	4%	16%	6%
Conventional	21%	29%	20%	29%
Conflicted	48%	16%	13%	5%

These results suggest that living together without plans to marry is a dramatically different type of relationship, with lower satisfaction and a higher risk of break up or eventual divorce should these couples choose to marry. But the results are also consistent with our previous findings that suggest all premarital couples who cohabit, with or without wedding plans, have poorer relationship quality and are not as satisfied as premarital couples living apart. The engaged cohabiters are also at a higher risk of future separation or divorce due to their increased percentage of Conflicted couples.

For more on Couple Types and longitudinal studies by David Olson and Blaine Fowers, see the research section of www.prepare-enrich.com