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Editor's Notebook

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*“So goodbye, goodbye
I’m going to leave you now and here’s the reason why
You like to sleep with the window opened
And I keep the window closed
So goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.”*

“You’re Kind”

Words and music by Paul Simon

It’s probably a good thing that Paul lived with this particular girlfriend long enough to discover the tragic flaw in their relationship. The alternative is horrible to imagine. On the strength of her kindness (“You’re good, so good, you introduced me to your neighborhood”) and generosity (“Seems like I never had so many friends before”) Paul marries the woman, only to discover on the first night of their honeymoon the truth of her bizarre sleeping habits.

We’ve been worried about bad marriages for a long time now, and I don’t just mean at the individual level. Over the last century divorce rates in America have increased sharply. In 1915 the rate was just 1 per thousand members of the population. By 1950, just after World War II ended, the rate was 2.6 per thousand Americans and by 1980 it was 5.3 per thousand. It has actually been declining since (along with marriage rates) and is now at about 3.6 per thousand Americans. But that figure is not very heartening when you realize that since the 1980’s for every hundred marriages that take place in America, there are approximately fifty divorces. This yields the infamous fifty percent divorce rate that people often cite. (By contrast, in 1915 the American divorce rate was just 10 percent.)

Cohabitation, living with a person out of wedlock, became a favored American strategy for dealing with the risks of failed marriages. Thanks to cohabitation, a post-World War II phenomenon in the United States (it was culturally *verboten*

before then) we increasingly have been able to “try out” a relationship before making commitments. It seems logical that if you test-drive the car you are more likely to avoid a lemon, so to speak. The trouble is that according to the last forty years of social research on the topic, cohabiting doesn’t work, at least not the way we thought it would.



Beginning in the 1980’s, with divorce rates having doubled over the previous twenty-five years, and cohabitation widely practiced in America, social scientists began serious study of the phenomenon. What they found went directly opposite their hypotheses. Cohabitation was found to be negatively associated with both marital stability and quality. People who reported that they had lived together out of marriage were found to have shorter and worse marriages than did those who had not lived together out of wedlock. These findings so ran counter to common sense that early studies were repeated with differing samples and measures of the variables expecting to find that

the first findings were merely the consequence of weird methodological errors. They weren’t. Study after study reaffirmed the negative relationship between cohabitation and marital success.

When findings run counter to both common sense and the practices of the general population we generally try to figure out why. So studies of cohabitation have controlled for confounding variables for the relationship. Did these findings occur because the subjects were too young to know their own minds? As it turns out no, since the relationship was found among older subjects as well. Perhaps the ethnicity of the subjects mattered? No. Educational level? Not really. Maybe the subjects had been people with inadequate experience of marriage. Again, no. In fact, in August 2010 a study published in the well-respected *Journal of Marriage and the Family* found that cohabitation after a failed first marriage and in preparation for remarriage had even higher associations with failed and unhappy second marriages than for first marriages.

So, what’s the deal? After thirty years of research into the matter, more recent studies have concluded that people’s attitudes towards marriage are the key issue. Cohabitation reveals a contingent view of marriage, as in “If we get along, we’ll get married.” The practice of cohabitation selects for this contingent view and, therefore, is associated with marital unhappiness and dissolution when the challenges of married life appear. Those who do not see marriage as contingent, tend not to cohabit. When they say “for better or worse,” they apparently mean it. The times have changed to the extent that in my parent’s generation, even unhappy marriages tended not to end in divorce. My parents often told me that if they had gotten married in the 1960’s their marriage would not have lasted five years. I wouldn’t have been born. For better or worse, indeed.