

Cohabitation and Test-drive Relationships

"I think we should live together before we get married to see if we are compatible."

How many times have we heard that line? But many of the current assumptions about living together are incorrect.

Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher wrote *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially*.^{8} It not only makes the case for marriage, it also challenges contemporary assumptions about cohabitation.

The thesis of the book is simple. Back in the 1950s, the rules were clear: first love, next marriage, and only then the baby carriage. But the social "tsunami" of the 1960s that struck changed everything. The Pill, the sexual revolution, gay pride, feminism, mothers in the workplace, no-fault divorce, and the rise of illegitimate births changed our views of marriage and family. The authors marshal the evidence to show that marriage is a good thing. As the subtitle says, married people are happier, healthier and better off financially.

Nevertheless, the conventional wisdom is that you should "try before you buy." In fact, one of the oft-repeated questions justifying living together is: "You wouldn't buy a car without a test drive would you?" The problem with such questions and slogans is they dehumanize the other person. If I decide not to buy a car (or a pair of shoes or whatever the inanimate object), the car doesn't feel rejected. When you test-drive your car, you don't pack your personal luggage in the trunk. And rejecting a car model doesn't bring emotional baggage into the next test-driving experience. The car doesn't need psychological counseling so that it can trust the next car buyer. Frankly, test-driving a relationship is only positive if you are the driver.

Research has shown that those who cohabit tend to view marriage negatively because it involved the assumption of new responsibilities that contrasted with their former freedoms. On the other hand, those marrying through the conventional route of dating and courtship did not feel constrained by marriage, but liberated by marriage.^{9}

Consider the contrast. A couple living together has nearly everything marriage has to offer (including sex) but few commitments or responsibilities. So, cohabiting people feel trapped when they enter marriage. They must assume huge new responsibilities while getting nothing they didn't already have.

Couples entering marriage through dating and courtship experience just the opposite, especially if they maintain their sexual purity. Marriage is the culmination of their relationship and provides the full depth of a relationship they have long anticipated.

This is not to say that cohabitation guarantees marital failure nor that marriage through the conventional route guarantees marital success. There are exceptions to this rule, but a couple who live together before marriage stack the odds against themselves and their future marriage.

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