The Effect of Premarital Cohabitation on Quality of Relationship and Marital Stability of Married People in Southwest Nigeria

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Abstract
Cohabitation in marriage is an integral incident of consortium which traditionally describes conjugal right to live together as husband and wife with all the incidents that flow from it. Premarital cohabitation is however an alteration in marital relationship that is prevalent among the unmarried young adults of the modern time. Based on logical reasoning, premarital cohabitation hypothesizes that living together before marriage provides an opportunity for intending couples to try compatibility prior marriage thereby reducing the probability of divorce. This study hence examined the effect of premarital cohabitation on quality relationship and marital stability of married people in Southwest Nigeria. Survey design approach was used which employed Marital Relationship Quality Inventory and Marital Stability Assessment scale for data collection. The target population was married individuals. Data was analysed by using student t-test. Results from the study show that the married people who did not cohabit before marriage have more quality marital relationship and stability than those that did. Appropriate enrichment programmes and therapeutic strategies that will educate young adults on profitable modes of premarital behaviours were thus suggested.

Background literature
By the fact of marriage and from legal perspectives, the spouses owe each other a number of duties, which are collectively referred to as consortium (Nwogugu, 2001). Consortium in marriage is an integral part of conjugal relationship. Each spouse has the right to other’s consortium (Scrutton, 1932). It is both a social and legal right for spouses to demand this duty from each other. The obligation to cohabit, therefore, is a primary incident of consortium. Traditionally, consortium in marriage describes the right to live together as husband and wife with all the incidents that flow from the relationship. But we are living through a period of radical change today with its great demands on conjugal relationships that is been felt than ever before. The influence of the modern time appears obvious on every aspect of marriage and the family life. Modifications of conventional cultures in marriage institution continue to be evident in both premarital and post marriage relationships of the couples towards the end of the last century.

An alteration in marital relationship pattern that parallels the rise in divorce rate is cohabitation of unmarried couples that is rampant in urban industrial cities of the world. Budinski and Trovato (2005) affirm that in most industrialized countries the growing legitimization of cohabitation has made it almost an expected stage in the marriage process. Since 1970s to date, marriages have changed a great deal perhaps; the most spectacular changes have been the rise in the divorce rate and in the proportion of couples living together before they marry (De Vaus, Qu & Brow, 2003; Mattox, 1998). Between 1975 and 1995, the number of high school seniors agreeing that “it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along,” went up from thirty-five percent to fifty-nine percent (Popenoe, 1999 cited in Cited in Change, 2003). Over the same period, rates of
The cohabitation of the unmarried couple sharing a household have greatly increased and, perhaps as a consequence, the average age at which people are getting married has risen significantly (Karney, Beckett, Collins & Shaw, 2007). Cohabitation results in two independent people, almost like roommates, who have sex, instead of a commitment to one another for the rest of their lives (Rena, 2006). The trend of cohabitation, therefore, witnessed a drastic change towards the last decades of the twentieth century as marriages began to be preceded by it. According to Campbell (2008), marriages frequently started to be supplanted by cohabitation that often ends in divorce in one-third of the time, and where three-quarters of the breakups are always requested by the woman. In recent times, the young adults seem to begin to consider premarital cohabitation as a substitute to marriage.

Premarital cohabitation, also known as trial marriage, has now become a common phenomenon in the modern time. Rating this practice as a major threat to marriage and family life, Kate (2010) breathes a ray of hope by asserting that today’s society is not broken yet, despite scaremongering statistics about increases in the rate of cohabitation over marriage, and of divorce. This assertion is consisted with Budinski and Trovato (2005) that view its growing prevalence as, in part, a phase in the ongoing social transformation of the Western family; preceded by declining marriage and fertility rates, postponement of marriage and increasing divorce rates. Conceptualized as more of premarital rather than post marital duty in recent times, cohabitation is a pre-marriage behaviour where intending/courting couples live together as if they were married, in order to try the relationship whether it will eventually fit for marriage or not. In the words of Glezer (1991), premarital cohabitation is an informal marriage, a de-facto relationship, living together or ‘shaking up’; choose whatever term you like to describe what in Western societies has been a growing phenomenon more than two decades ago. According to Ogunsola (2004) it is a situation where unmarried people live together like husband and wife to test their compatibility before the actual marriage. Many components of marriage are thus noticeable among cohabiting partners; which include sharing of homes, responding to some matrimonial duties, engaging in intimate sexual relationship, sharing of economic resources, and sometimes bearing of children.

This new trend of cohabitation in marriage institution has been described in various ways in literature. Bruderl et al (1999) consider it to be a postulation that puts into action the ancient maxim, “look before you leap”, prior to the marriage consummation. It is commonly believed among cohabiters that mechanism opens doors of opportunities for proper adjustments among intending couples for quality marital relationship and stability of their dream. Ofoegbu (2002) also describes the practice as a situation where a man and a woman, without being customarily or officially married, live together and share all or some of the benefits of marital relationship. Premarital cohabitation is thereby conceptualized as sharing in the legal and social rights of consortium which is customarily meant for the married people. This is consistent with Cheeseman (2002) that refers to cohabitation as a practice in which a man and a woman dwell together in the same place in the manner as husband and wife before the actual marriage. Premarital cohabitation, which Bruderl, et al (1999) wittingly refer to as a well-known “trial marriage”, has now become the rule of the day in many countries of the world. Citing Blossfed (1995) and Kopp (1994); Bruder et al (1999) affirm that one in two couples from more recent marriage in Germany cohorts lived together before marrying. But then, researchers often speculate that cohabitation has harmful effects because it teaches a couple they can have the
benefits of marriage without full commitment, which in turn fosters a type of independence that is not compatible with a healthy marriage (Rena, 2006). Since trial marriage does not impose legal duties on both parties as obtainable in a legal marriage, the lack of commitment to conjugal responsibilities is a major setback to this modern practice. The obligations that attend a legal marriage do not naturally exist in cohabitation and so, the rights and contract principles of valid marriage may not arise under the practice of trial marriage (Ogunsola, 2004). The couples who are not really comfortable with or ready to enter an enduring marital relationship often consider cohabitation to be a viable alternative.

Nigerians are relatively conservative when it comes to the need to extol cultural values on marriage. The non-static process of acculturation occasioned by the influx of the Western culture, however, appears to exerting its powerful influence on marriage cultures in Africa. Soyinka (1979) reports the model patterns of sexual behaviour in Africa, especially, among Nigerian university students and where premarital cohabitation was found to be common. According to Scott (2006) cited by Alo and Akinde (2010), the rise in premarital sex in Africa has resulted from a sexual revolution that came with Western culture. The National HIV/AIDS and Reproductive Health Survey of 2003 similarly observe premarital cohabitation as one of the factors engineering the illicit sexual behaviours of the Nigerian respondents that participated in the study. According to this report, cohabitation has been identified as a practice whereby intending couples live together under the auspice of trial marriage without marriage commitments. As a matter of facts, premarital cohabitation has been observed and reported as a common phenomenon among Nigerian University undergraduates (Alo, 2008; Alo & Akinde, 2010). Ogunsola (2004) similarly notices that in Oyo State of Nigeria, some of the couples investigated lived together before marriage to try if they were compatible. Premarital cohabitation, therefore, is one of the cultural dilemmas in Nigerian society that Nwagwu (2009) affirms marriage is facing. Consequently, it has now become an open reality that some Nigerian bachelors and spinsters agree for premarital cohabitation to check up how compatible they are before the actual marriage consummation.

The paradoxical inconsistency of premarital cohabitation has generated a great deal of theoretical discussions in research literature. Cohabitation hypotheses are, therefore, based on some logical reasoning. One of the most common assumptions sustaining this modern practice is that living together before marriage provides a good opportunity for intending couples to see if they are truly compatible prior to tying the nuptial chord to reduce the probability of future breakup. According to Bruderl et al (1999), trial marriage hypothesis is widely accepted to maintain that premarital cohabitation reduces the risk of divorce because the partners can test if they are compatible. Arguing from family economy theoretical foundation, Budinski and Trovato (2005) assert that economists are interested in cohabitation and marriage because the question of why individuals enter and leave committed relationships has large welfare implications both on the individual and societal level. Bruderl et al (1999) also assert that premarital cohabitation can be described more precisely with the help of arguments from family economics, citing Becker (1991) to support the claim. In this postulation, family economists believe that reliable information on a partner can only be gained for manifest characteristics such as education and appearance and that lack of such information and the “mismatches” inherent from it are the primary cause for divorce (Bruderl et al, 1999). Premarital cohabitation hence provides the intending couples with the necessary information that should terminate the conjugal relationship
between cohabiters before marriage. Budinski and Trovato (2005) further argued that since cohabiters have a more precise estimate of their match quality, there should be fewer bad surprises during marriage. When expectations are based on this theoretical argument, it is considered that premarital cohabitation should lead to a more stable marriage.

The inconsistent results from premarital cohabitation practice however have attracted researchers’ postulations. A frequent argument on this concerns self-selection as the alternative pathways to marriage that is often common among couples that have more unconventional backgrounds, attitudes and values (Weston, Qu & de Vaus, 2003; de Van, Qu & Brown, 2003). Going by the term “selectivity thesis” that some researchers append to it, the cohabiters are generally a select group of individuals possessing characteristics that are not conducive to a stable relationship (DeMaris & Rao, 1992; Lillard, Brien & Linda, 1995; Budinski & Trovato, 2005). In premarital cohabitation relationship, therefore, personal characteristics that influence choice of marriage pathway, more often than not, influence risks of marital separation too. For example, it has been suggested that cohabitation selects individuals who have a weaker commitment to the institution of marriage and tend to be less committed to marriage and more tolerant of divorce (Lillard et al. 1995; cited in Weston et al, 2003), and generally express less positive attitudes about their relationship as compared to married couples (Nock 1995; Thomson & Ugo 1992). It has consequently been observed that instead for cohabitation to enhance the stability of marriage, the reverse is always the case in many countries of the world.

Researchers have consistently discovered that there is no benefit in cohabitation. Research findings over and over again indicate that couples who cohabit before marriage have a 50 percent higher divorce rate than those who do not (Rena, 2006). Many studies have shown that the couples who cohabit before marriage face greater chances of divorcing than the couples who do not cohabit before marriage (Amato & Booth, 1997; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004; Raybum, 2005). Ogunsola (2004) in his study on premarital behaviours as determinant of marital stability observes that premarital cohabitation has no positive effect on marital stability of the couples in Oyo State, Nigeria. Further findings indicate that cohabiters also tend to experience lower marital satisfaction than the non-cohabiters (Brown & Booth, 1996; 2003; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Raybum, 2005). In some cases however, couples tend to opt for premarital cohabitation in order to delay marriage when they perceive threat of poorer relational stability and satisfaction in their courting days. When these cohabiters eventually married, they may have had an inferior relationship compared to the couples who did not consider premarital cohabitation necessary, causing the decline in marital stability and satisfaction (Raybum, 2005).

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant effect of cohabitation on quality of marital relationship of the married people who lived together before marriage and those who did not.

2. There is no significant effect of cohabitation on marital stability of the married people who lived together before marriage and those who did not.

Methodology

The study adopted survey research design using an ex-post facto type. This design usually collects data after the event or phenomenon under investigation has taken place and is therefore referred to as ex-post facto research design. In the course of this study, the researcher
had no control over the variables of interest and could not manipulate them.

**Population**
The target population for this study was the married people in the Southwest Nigeria. Southwest Nigeria comprises six states which are Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, Osun and Ekiti.

**Sample and Sampling Procedure**
The subjects for the study were randomly selected from the Southwest Nigeria using multistage random sampling technique. This sampling technique enabled the researcher to combine helpful sampling methods in a variety of useful ways that better assisted in addressing the sampling needs in this study in an effective manner. In the process, three states were randomly selected from where six senatorial districts (two from each state) were chosen for the study. Furthermore, five Local Government Councils were selected from each of the six Senatorial Districts to make up thirty Local Government Councils used for this study. During the survey exercise, therefore, the researcher was able to cover 30 out of 55 Local Governments (54.55%) within the six Senatorial Districts that made up the sampled population. In all, 5,400 instruments aimed at collecting data from 2,700 males and 2,700 females were distributed to the respondents from where 3,824 questionnaires were retrieved for data analysis.

**Instrumentation**
Two validated research instruments were used to collect data from the respondents. The instruments are:

i. Marital relationship quality was measured by using 50 items Marital Relationship Quality Inventory (MRQI). MRQI consists of six sections with validated sub-scale sections B to F. Section A was designed to collect data on demographic characteristics of the respondents while Sections B, C, D, and F are sub-scales that gathered data on marital relationship quality indices. MRQI has an internal consistency reliability of 0.97.

ii. Marital stability of the married individuals was measured using 22 items Marital Stability Assessment Scale (MSAS). It has internal consistency reliability 0.86.

**Data Collection and Analysis**
Data was collected from 3,627 married individuals in Southwest Nigeria comprising of 1850 males respondents (51%) and 1777 female respondents (49%). The data was analysed by the use of student t-test to establish the mean differences of the independent variables in the study.

**Result**
Results from the study are presented vis-à-vis the hypothesis as follows.

**Hypothesis One**: There is no significant effect of cohabitation on quality of marital relationship of the married people who lived together before marriage and those who did not.

**Table 1: Effects of Cohabitation on Quality of Marital Relationship**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohabitation</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>P_value</th>
<th>Remark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Practiced before Marriage</td>
<td>3123</td>
<td>143.37</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practiced before Marriage</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>137.14</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>3625</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Sign.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Result from table 1 shows that $t$-observed indicating the effect of cohabitation on quality of marital relationship is 5.87; $p<0.05$. Since $P_{\text{value}}$ is less than 0.05, then the null hypothesis one is therefore rejected, meaning that there is significant effect of cohabitation on quality of marital relationship. The result further shows that the married people who did not cohabit before their marriages have better quality marital relationship than those that did.

**Hypothesis Two:** There is no significant effect of cohabitation on marital stability of the married people who lived together before marriage and those who did not

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohabitation</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$P_{\text{value}}$</th>
<th>Remark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Practiced before Marriage</td>
<td>3114</td>
<td>82.60</td>
<td>19.75</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>3822</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>Sign.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practiced before Marriage</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>80.66</td>
<td>19.14</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Result from table 2 shows that $t$-observed indicating the effect of cohabitation on marital stability is 2.08; $p<0.05$. Since $P_{\text{value}}$ is less than 0.05 significant level, then the null hypothesis two is therefore rejected. This finding means that there is significant effect of cohabitation on marital stability. The result further shows that the married people who did not cohabit before their marriages have a more stable marital relationship than those that did.

**Discussions**

The assumption that there is no significant effect of cohabitation on quality of marital relationship and stability of the married people who lived together before marriage and those who did not was rejected as the observed differences were found to be statistically significant. The common assumption that living together before marriage provides a good opportunity for intending couples to promote proper marital adjustment for healthy relationship is hence refuted by this study. Findings from the study also fall in line with the assertion of Rena (2006) that cohabitation, though thought not to be harmful, often fosters a type of independence that is not compatible with a healthy marriage. Results from the study indicate that the married people who did not live together before marriage have more quality relationship and better stability in their marriages than those who cohabitated before marriage. The result hence runs contrary to Bruderl et al (1999), Budinski and Trovato’s (2005) assertion that since premarital cohabitation provides information which allows for a more precise estimate of match quality with the prospective spouse, there should be fewer bad surprises during marriage. As a result of these findings, premarital cohabitation that postulates an improved quality relationship before marriage is, therefore, nullified and observed to be negating to healthy and enduring marriages.

One other assumption that is sustaining this modern practice that centers on seeing if the intending couple is truly compatible prior to the wedding ceremony to reduce the probability of future breakup and increase marital stability is invalidated by this study. Result from the study has consequently shown that instead for cohabitation to enhance the stability of marriage, the reverse is the case in Southwest Nigeria. This is in corroboration with the observation of Bruderl et al (1999) that available studies unanimously agree that marriages with a prior history of cohabitation show a higher risk of divorce than those in which the partners did not live together before marriage. Although, it is quite logical to expect that cohabitation would provide opportunities for proper screening among the courting couples to avoid marriage with unsuitable
matches; Weston et al (2003) however affirm that results from research studies often suggests those who cohabit a higher risk of divorce than those who marry without first cohabiting.

**Implications of the findings**
The search for healthy and stable family relationship is evident in the significant position that is given to marriage and the family life in social research efforts in the last two decades. Although, most marriages are often traumatized when the joy and comfort expected from conjugal relationship is lacking; the adverse effects of non-marital cohabitation on quality of relationship and marital stability observed in this study indicate the ineffectiveness of trial marriage. Results from the study reveals that indirect marriages is becoming a practice in Nigeria society as fourteen percent of the married individuals sampled in the study applied the principles of trial marriage. The profitable expectation of the young adults that are commonly involved in the practice that has been consistently faulted by research findings show that premarital cohabitation is not the solution to marital relationship problems. Findings that indicate that people with direct marriages experience better quality of relationship and marital stability than those with premarital cohabitation advocate opting for the former when planning to enter the institution of marriage. Moreover, the problems created during premarital cohabitation on communication and division of finances may continue to linger into marriage life of the couples, creating an instability and dissatisfaction in their marital relationship.

No doubt, the rise in premarital cohabitation in the modern times has seriously weakened the institution of marriage and strongly contributed, to a large extent, to the increase in unwed births and lone-parent families. This suggests that many more children are being reared in single families that do not involve the two biological parents. The situation appears inimical to adequate development of such children that cannot benefit from the economic and emotional investments of their natural parents that are living together in conjugal harmony to raise them. This post a serious problem to the future of such children as empirical evidence has consistently shown that individuals fare best both in childhood and in later life when they are brought up in a healthy home where both parents are involved in their upbringing.

This study outcome, therefore, suggests that marriage counsellors, parents, religious leaders and all other people who are involved in helping the youngsters on their marriage plans should notice the shortcomings of premarital cohabitation. Nigerian government should consider the benefits derivable from healthy and stable marriages from direct marriages and collaborate with researchers and marriage counsellors to organize programmes to educate the young adults and assist them in their preparation for wholesome families. If premarital cohabitation is preparing young adults for a fragile and weak marital relationship, it is of high necessity that the government works with other stakeholders to promote healthy and stable marriages of her people. Thus, in facilitating healthy and stable family relationship, appropriate enrichment programmes and therapeutic strategies that will educate young adults on profitable modes of premarital behaviours will be quite essential.
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