

He says, she says: Men and women view living together very differently

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(PhysOrg.com) -- More couples are living together than ever before, but the reasons men give for cohabiting—and the concerns they express about it—differ markedly from women's, a new study shows.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Family Issues*, is based on in-depth personal interviews and focus group sessions with 192 young people in their late twenties. Approximately half the participants were men, half were [women](#), and there were approximately equal numbers of white, Black, and Hispanic participants.

Topics included positive and negative aspects of cohabitation, reasons couples might decide to move in together rather than date or marry, reasons not to cohabit, and the kinds of changes that might occur when a couple first moves in together.

"Men and women expressed very different expectations for cohabiting relationships," said Pamela Smock, a sociologist who directs the University of Michigan Population Studies Center, part of the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR). "We found that responses varied by gender much more than they did by race or ethnicity, suggesting a substantial gender gap in the perceived role of cohabitation in the union formation process."

Smock conducted the study with Penelope Huang of the University of California Hastings College of the Law, Wendy Manning of Bowling Green State University, and Cara Bergstrom-Lynch of East Connecticut

State University. The research was supported by grants from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Overall, three key reasons for living together emerged: wanting to spend more time with one's partner, wanting to share life's financial burdens, and wanting to test compatibility. But the way men and women talked about these three broad reasons was very different.

Women volunteered "love" as a reason to live together three times as often as men did, while men cited "sex" as a reason to live together four times as often as women did.

Both men and women saw cohabitation as a temporary state in which to gauge compatibility, but major gender differences emerged in the underlying goals of living together. Women saw it as a transitional arrangement preceding marriage, while men tended to see it as a convenient, low-risk way to see if a relationship had longer-term potential, using terms like "test drive" to describe the arrangement.

But the strongest gender differences emerged in the perceived disadvantages of cohabitation. Women believed that living together meant less commitment and legitimacy than marriage, while [men](#) saw the greatest disadvantage as a limitation on their freedom.

Despite the gender mismatches in motives and expectations, Smock notes that young adults appear to see cohabitation as an expected part of life. "Ultimately, the clearest message was that living together is very much taken for granted. As a result, the upward climb in the proportion of young adults who cohabit is likely to continue for some time," she said.

Provided by University of Michigan

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