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## An Examination of Serial Arguing and Marital Satisfaction in Premarital Cohabitors and Direct Marriers

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AN EXAMINATION OF SERIAL ARGUING  
AND MARITAL SATISFACTION IN PREMARTIAL  
COHABITERS AND DIRECT MARRIERS

by

RACHEL REYMAN  
B.S. Syracuse University, 2014

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Nicholson School of Communication  
in the College of Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2016

## **ABSTRACT**

Negative communication behaviors that occur prior to marriage often continue into marriage without proper intervention (i.e. marriage counseling). One such communication behavior is the serial argument (i.e. an argument that occurs and reoccurs over time). The topics that married couples argue about offer a unique insight to the health of one's relationship. The present study examined differences between 124 individuals, 93 who cohabited with their spouse prior to marriage and 31 who did not, in both the topics and frequency of serial arguments and overall marital satisfaction. The results indicated that there was no difference in frequency (number of topics, within each topic, overall frequency) of serial arguments between both groups. However, individuals who did not live with their spouse prior to marriage experienced lower levels of marital satisfaction when engaged in conflict regarding certain topics than did premarital cohabiters.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank my committee members for their enduring patience and assistance through the thesis process. Dr. Weger, you have been immeasurably helpful in offering your advice and unconditional support through the times when I have needed it most. Dr. Neuberger, you have always provided me with the truth, and have been real with me even when it is difficult. Dr. Hastings, you always give me a safe place to come when I need advice, and you always give helpful and insightful feedback. You have all three been an integral part of my graduate experience, and your support has helped me grow into a better person and scholar. Thank you for everything you have done and continue to do for me, words cannot adequately express my gratitude.

I would also like to thank Kirsten Seitz. Your unwavering support, pep talks, and open-door policy have been incredibly helpful to my growth as a graduate student. You always say what I need to hear, and it is beyond appreciated.

Finally, thank you to my friends and family who have been an incredible support system for me. Thank you to my fiancé, Austin, who has dealt with me throughout the most difficult of circumstances during this process. To my parents, thank you for always talking me down when I need it most. Lastly, to my cohort, we have been through so much together. Erica, Billy, Riley, Danielle, and Matt, thank you for always being there to commiserate with me through the difficulties of thesis writing and the overall graduate experience. You have each pushed me to be better in different ways, and I owe more than I can say to each of you.

Thank you to everyone who has supported me, without each one of you, this research would not have been possible.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS**

- DM** Direct Marriers
- NSFG** National Survey of Family Growth
- PMC** Premarital Cohabitors
- QMI** Quality of Marriage Index

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

In the United States, nearly 20% of all marriages end in divorce by their fifth year, with approximately 48% ending by their twentieth year (NSFG, 2012). With divorce being as prevalent as it is, it is no surprise that marriage rates have rapidly declined over the last several decades as well. In 2012, 50.5% of the United States adult population was married, which is in stark contrast to the peak of marriages in 1960 in which 72.2% of the adult population was married (Pew Research Center, 2012). As marriage rates have declined, couples have taken to cohabiting with their romantic partner before marriage much more frequently. Nearly 55% of young women had cohabited with a romantic partner by the age of 25 between the years of 2006 and 2010, compared to 52% of young women in 2002, and only 46% in 1995 (National Health Statistics Report, 2013). Furthermore, nearly 70% of couples intending to marry will cohabit with their partner before doing so (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). It is necessary to understand the effects of this dramatic shift in the progression of relationships on marital outcomes and satisfaction.

Couples report experiencing negative marital consequences with this shift in normativity regarding premarital cohabitation. Married couples who premaritally cohabited generally experience a more dramatic decline in satisfaction and perception of marital quality than direct marriers (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Cohen & Kleinbaum, 2002; Rhoades et. al., 2009; Stanley et al., 2004). Additionally, spouses who cohabit before marriage experience more negative problem solving behaviors than those who did not (Cohen & Kleinbaum, 2002). Research has shown that how spouses interact with each other when encountering an issue predicts both marital

satisfaction and the probability of early divorce (Cohen & Kleinbaum, 2002; Cramer, 2002; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; McGonagle, Kessler, & Gotlib, 1993). Negative conflict behaviors that occur early in their relationship, prior to marriage, will continue to occur in marriage without intervention (Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000; Huston et al., 1999; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993).

Couples who are unable to resolve their arguments amicably will have lower marital satisfaction and will experience more arguments overall (Roloff & Johnson, 2002). Additionally, because these arguments are not being resolved, couples will also experience a greater recurrence of the same arguments (Benoit & Benoit, 1987; Cohen & Kleinbaum, 2002). The occurrence and subsequent recurrence of arguments are known as serial arguments (Trapp & Hoff, 1985). Examining the topics and prevalence of serial arguments in a marriage is important in understanding the occurrence of marital dissolution and dissatisfaction as it relates to premarital cohabitation. This paper will first analyze the past literature on cohabitation, then the enduring dynamics model, and finally will discuss serial arguing and topics of conflict.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Cohabitation

Conceptually, premarital cohabitation refers to at least two unmarried romantic partners living together in the same residence. The operational definition of cohabitation has been inconsistent throughout the communication literature. Initially, researchers defined cohabitation as living with someone of the opposite sex, which was operationalized as eating, sleeping, or socializing in the same residence (Jacques & Chason, 1979; Peterman, Ridley, & Anderson, 1974). This was later qualified further as sharing a bedroom with an individual of the opposite sex for at least four nights a week for at least three consecutive months (Demaris & Leslie, 1984; Macklin, 1972). Researchers reverted back to using an open definition when female respondents were asked over the course of several studies whether they lived together with a man, married or unmarried (Bennett, Blanc, & Bloom, 1988), as a measure of cohabitation. Some researchers have allowed the respondents to determine for themselves what constitutes cohabitation (Demaris & Rao, 1992). These discrepancies may have led to some inconsistencies in this area of research over time. The definition that will be used for the present study will be: having a sexual and/or romantic relationship while sharing the same usual address with your partner (Kuperberg, 2014).

#### *Why do couples cohabit?*

Over the last fifty years, the progression of the average relationship has changed significantly from initiation to dissolution. The inclusion of cohabitation as a precursor or replacement to marriage started to be commonplace in the 1970's and has continued as a more normative expectation for relationships since. Since the 1990's, there has been a rapid growth in the number of cohabiting relationships. Only 46% of young women had cohabited with a

romantic partner by the age of 25 in 1995, 52% of women in 2002, and nearly 55% of young women had cohabited with a partner between the years of 2006 and 2010 (National Health Statistics Report, 2013). In 2010 researchers concluded, “15% of women aged 15–44 had cohabited but never married, 23% had married but not cohabited, 28% had cohabited and then married, and 7% had married and then cohabited sometime after the marriage dissolved” (Goodwin, Mosher, & Chandra, 2010, p.11). Scholars expect that most young adults will live with a romantic partner outside of marriage at some point, and that the norm today is that romantic partners will live together before getting married (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Goodwin, Mosher, & Chandra, 2010; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2012; Willetts, 2006). Thus, cohabitation with a partner is now a standard expectation of the average romantic relationship.

Although some people enter cohabitation as a trial for marriage, cohabiting relationships appear to be more, rather than less, stable and satisfying arrangements than marriages that occur after cohabitation. Willetts (2006) suggests that cohabiting unions tend to offer similar benefits to romantic partners as marriage, but marriages are significantly more difficult to dissolve. Thus, cohabitation can be seen as a viable alternative to marriage with similar partner experiences and expectations (Brown & Booth, 1996; Musick & Bumpass, 2012). Long-term cohabiters who have no plans to marry will experience similar levels of relational happiness, satisfaction, and instability as married couples (Brown, 2003). However, the longer a couple cohabits without marriage, the more perceived instability they will experience (Brown, 2003). Half of all cohabiting unions wind up in marriage or dissolve within 2 years, while 90% end after 5 years of cohabitation (Brown, 2003; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). Marriages have been shown to last longer than long-term cohabitation with a partner (McRae, 1997). Understanding how the reasons

couples enter a cohabiting relationship correlates with overall relationship satisfaction is a necessary addition to the current literature.

### *Cohabitation as Trial Marriage*

Some couples cohabit as a way to test marital compatibility. Cohabitation is similar to marriage as partners share a home, make important financial decisions together, and usually experience sexual intimacy (McRae, 1997). Partners who cohabit prior to marriage will have a better understanding of how their partner will behave during marriage and will get a more precise estimate of their match quality (Kulu & Boyle, 2010). Inevitably, some couples will not marry after determining their incompatibility during this experience (McRae, 1997). Thus, people sometimes engage in cohabitation because they believe it will help them gauge future marital success.

### **Enduring Dynamics**

The literature reviewed above exposes a difference between societal assumptions and the reality of cohabitation. Common sense tells people that cohabitation before marriage can keep them from entering a marriage that is doomed to fail. Yet, when people cohabit prior to marriage, they tend to divorce at a higher rates and experience lower levels of marital satisfaction than people who do not cohabit before getting married. One potential explanation for this difference can be found in the enduring dynamics model. The enduring dynamics model of marital change suggests that behaviors that occur in a relationship prior to marriage will continue to be a problem throughout marriage without proper intervention (i.e. marriage counseling or therapy) (Caughlin et al., 2000; Huston et al., 1999; Markman et al., 1993). Negative communication behaviors that occur in dating relationships do not disappear once a couple has married. That is, if couples experience poor conflict management skills throughout courtship, they will continue to

struggle with conflict management throughout their marriage (Huston, 1994; Huston et al., 1991; Markman et al., 1993). More frequent conflict within a relationship has been shown to correlate with lower overall relational satisfaction (McGonagle et. al, 1993). Therefore, examining how movement from cohabitation to marriage potentially impacts marital satisfaction through the lens of the enduring dynamic of negative conflict behaviors is needed.

### *Sliding vs. Deciding as an Enduring Dynamic*

In the examination of premarital cohabitation and the enduring dynamics model, one phenomenon that researchers have studied is known as sliding versus deciding dynamic (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Couples will transition from courtship to cohabiting with a romantic partner without discussing the implications of that move, or they “slide” into the cohabitation (Sibley, Kimmes, & Schmidt, 2015; Stanley et al., 2006). Couples might opt to move in with their partner because it is just “the next step”, or they feel it is a good economic decision, without discussing how this transition influences their relationship (Murrow & Shi, 2010). Couples who engage in clear decision making in the transition to cohabitation from courtship experience lower rates of cheating (Owen, Rhoades, & Stanley, 2013; Sibley et al., 2015), higher relational satisfaction (Owen et al., 2013; Sibley et al., 2015), less stress, and better relationship functioning (Owen et. al., 2013).

Cohabitation, as opposed to maintaining separate residences, often adds barriers to ending a relationship. Investments such as combining household items and making major purchases together add an additional burden on the dissolution of cohabiting relationships. Avoiding the prospect of hunting for a new residence and the division of these merged assets might incentivize remaining in a relationship that otherwise would have terminated (Stanley, et al., 2006). Couples might view separating as more work than getting married, might feel

marriage is the next logic step in their relationship, or might face pressure from their social network to “make it official.” Additionally, couples who cohabit without a clear plan to marry place themselves at risk for future vulnerabilities during arguments due to the potential for feeling a lack of commitment to one another or the potential for future relational development (Stanley et al., 2006). Thus, examining the enduring effects of sliding into premarital cohabitation is necessary.

### *Cohabitation, Marital Stability, and Dissolution*

As cohabitation has become more prevalent and normative in society, the relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital dissatisfaction has diminished (Manning & Cohen, 2012; Ortyl, 2013; Reinhold, 2012). This might be because cohabitation is no longer limited to couples that are naturally at higher risk for divorce (Reinhold, 2012). Premarital cohabitation has been shown to have an association with marital dissolution and dissatisfaction only in countries that have a very low rate of premarital cohabitation or very high rates of premarital cohabitation (Liefbroer & Edith, 2006). Couples who are committed to the relationship before cohabiting experienced similar levels of marital satisfaction as those who did not cohabit before marriage (Manning & Cohen, 2012). Both men and women who were not engaged before cohabitation experienced similar levels of marital dissolution to men and women who never cohabited before marriage (Manning & Cohen, 2012; Stanley, Rhoades, Amato, Markman, & Johnson, 2010). However, these studies did not take into account that cohabitation is much like a marriage in that it is a major commitment.

Being engaged at the onset of cohabitation decreases the risk of marital instability (Manning & Cohen, 2012). For women, being engaged and cohabiting before marriage drastically reduces the risk of marital dissolution (Manning & Cohen, 2012). Examining the



potential lasting effects incurred by premarital cohabitation is prudent. One enduring dynamic that might impact satisfaction and stability of a relationship as it transitions from cohabitation to marriage is the serial argument.

### **Serial Arguments**

Little research identifying specific negative communication dynamics that endure across unmarried cohabitation to marriage have been studied. In my thesis, I propose that serial arguing is one relationship dynamic that might endure across cohabitation and marriage. A serial conflict or argument is one that occurs and recurs in the daily lives of a couple (Trapp & Hoff, 1985). These conflicts either go unresolved entirely or are resolved unsatisfactorily after the first episode (Johnson & Roloff, 2000). One study of 50 courting couples found that 32% of respondent's arguments ended without resolution, while another 16% of arguments ended with one partner walking away or withdrawing from conflict and refusing to discuss the issue any further (Lloyd, 1987). Relationships that experience repeated conflict tend to be less satisfying than those that do not (Roloff & Johnson, 2002). Additionally, an argument topic that couples experience difficulty in resolving will negatively impact relational satisfaction more than more easily resolved conflicts (Sanford, 2003).

The perceived resolvability of an argument is negatively related to relational quality (Johnson & Roloff, 1998). The inability to resolve conflict in romantic relationships is correlated with negative conflict style, more frequent conflict, and lower relational satisfaction (Cramer, 2000; 2002). Relational satisfaction is most negatively affected by conflict that is either unresolved or has not been resolved satisfactorily (Cramer, 2002). Marital arguing could be one contributing factor to overall marital instability (Mcgonagle, Kessler, & Gottlib, 1993; Roloff & Johnson, 2002). Couples who have a healthy attitude about arguing, or feel that conflict is

resolvable, tend to have a more satisfying relationship (Crohan, 1992). The inability to resolve conflict can therefore lead to negative relational outcomes.

### *Perceived Resolvability and Conflict Style*

One reason that an argument might recur is that it was not properly resolved the first time. Partners will feel dissatisfied with their relationship when the perceived resolvability of arguments is low and recur over time, ultimately leading to disengagement from that relationship (Roloff & Johnson, 2002). Bevan, Finan, and Kaminsky (2008) examined how certain conflict tactics employed during serial argument episodes affect the perceived resolvability of the serial argument. Employing an integrative communicative conflict tactic, in which one partner attempts to negotiate with the other with a mutual concern (Ohbechi & Tedeschi, 1997) during the serial argument, led to a higher perception of resolvability for that argument (Bevan et al., 2007). Partners who engage in a distributive conflict tactic, in which they try to assert their own request (Ohbechi & Tedeschi, 1997) in engaging in a serial argument are less likely to achieve the perception of resolvability or positive goals (Bevan et al., 2007). Partners engaging in an avoidant conflict tactic, in which partners shift the topic of argument (Canary, Cunningham, & Cody, 1988), tended to do so when they had a lower perception of resolvability.

When relationship partners employ aversive conflict tactics, the result is often lower relational satisfaction. Hostile conflict strategies serve as a significant stressor in relationships (Liu & Roloff, 2016). However, when partners enter conflict with the intention to resolve the conflict, they tend to listen more carefully and also report perceiving lower levels of hostility from the other partner (Liu & Roloff, 2015). Thus, perceived resolvability plays an important role in subsequent relational satisfaction stemming from episodes of serial arguments.

### *Topics of Arguments in Romantic Relationships*

Some researchers have analyzed topics of conflict and their effect on relational satisfaction. In examining the frequency of conflict, Bevan, Hefner, and Love (2014) found that the most frequently occurring serial argument topic among couples was problematic behaviors or personality conflict, followed by jealousy, communication, quality time, and sexual/intimacy issues. These argument topics occur both serially and nonserially. In examining newlywed couples' arguments, Kurdek (1994) found that conflict topics included power, social issues, personal flaws, distrust, intimacy, and personal distance. The most frequent conflict areas and the most damaging to relational satisfaction were arguments about power and intimacy (Kurdek, 1994; Roloff & Johnson, 2002). Cionea and Hampel (2016), examined whether topic and disagreement types of serial arguments regarding personal, professional, or public issues differed in the goals, tactics, or outcomes of an argument. Respondents indicated that while serial arguments about personal topics and behaviors were more likely to occur than the latter two, engaging in arguments regarding public topics and ideas were less threatening and were handled with more civility.

The most comprehensive study examining the topics of serial arguments in romantic relationships was conducted by Bevan et al. (2014). The researchers directed participants to describe an argument they experience with their spouse either serially or non-serially. This allowed the researchers to develop a scale for analyzing the topics of serial arguments experienced by romantic partners. The scale indicated 11 topics of serial arguments and an option to input any additional arguments that do not fit into the existing scale: "(a) problematic behaviors/personality, including annoying actions stemming from a partner's personality; (b) relatives, such as parents, in-laws, and stepchildren; (c) children/parenting, focusing on the

couple's own children; (d) how to spend leisure or quality time; (e) chores/daily routines such as household activities or family responsibilities; (f) communication, including how the partners communicate with and engage in conflict with one another, as well as issues of physical distance; (g) money; (h) intimacy/sex, involving physical and psychological closeness and commitment issues; (i) third-party jealousy, including arguments regarding infidelity, trust, and/or insecurity about third-party friends or romantic rivals; (j) major life changes, such as important decisions regarding careers and moving far away; (k) social issues regarding such topics as politics, religion, and/or social-ideological matters; and (l) other topics" (Bevan et al., 2014, p.351).

Serial arguments are an important dynamic in relationships. A more thorough examination of the topics of serial arguments experienced in marriages certainly needs to occur. I propose this research project in order to understand the role of the topics of serial arguments as an enduring dynamic in the lives of married couples. Serial arguing is a negative communication behavior that many couples experience. It is possible that serial arguments first occur in cohabitation and continue into marriage and worsen without outside intervention, as explained by the enduring dynamics model. When partners move from courtship to cohabitation, the new proximity to their partner and any of their undesirable behaviors lends itself to encountering arguments that occur and recur. The occurrence of these arguments then leads to the potential for couples to experience lower marital satisfaction.

Since premarital cohabitation correlates with lower overall marital satisfaction, it is possible that the dynamic of serial arguing is what is causing the satisfaction difference between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers. It is also possible that there is a difference in how frequently these groups are arguing. If premarital cohabiters engage in more frequent serial arguing than direct marriers, this might account for the lower reported levels of marital

satisfaction. Bevan et al. (2014) examined the occurrence of certain serial argument topics, but not their frequency or their correlation with marital satisfaction. Since arguing about certain topics negatively correlates with lower marital satisfaction in all relationships, it is possible that premarital cohabiters and direct marriers differ in the topics that they argue about and, thus experience differing marital satisfaction. The present study seeks to examine the differences between the serial argument behaviors experienced by both of these groups to better understand this phenomenon.

### **Research Questions**

Since premarital cohabitation has been linked to lower levels of marital satisfaction (Brown, 2003; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989), and what individuals argue about is also linked to lower levels of marital satisfaction (Cionea and Hampel, 2016; Kurdek, 1994; Roloff & Johnson, 2002), it is possible that premarital cohabiters argue about different, more damaging topics than direct marriers. Thus, asking about this relationship might shed light on the difference in satisfaction between both groups.

RQ<sub>1</sub>: Do direct marriers engage in the serial arguments about the same topics as premarital cohabiters?

Additionally, individuals who engage in frequent, recurring arguments also tend to experience lower levels of satisfaction in their relationship (Roloff & Johnson, 2002). If serial arguing is an enduring relationship dynamic, it seems possible that premarital cohabiters will engage in a serial arguments about a greater number of topics than direct married couples. This dynamic might also explain this discrepancy in marital satisfaction between both premarital cohabiters and direct marriers.

RQ<sub>2</sub>: Do premarital cohabiters engage in serial arguments across a wider range of topics than direct marriers?

Beyond arguing about a larger number of topics, it is possible that premarital cohabiters will argue engage in more frequent serial arguments than direct married couples across all topics. More frequent serial arguments overall might explain differences in satisfaction and stability across couple types. It is also possible that, even if they each couple types argues about the same topics, that premarital cohabiters and direct married couples argue more or less frequently about each specific topic. Therefore, I ask the following research questions:

RQ<sub>3</sub>: Do premarital cohabiters differ in the overall frequency of serial arguments from direct marriers?

RQ<sub>4</sub>: Do premarital cohabiters differ in the frequency of specific topics of serial arguments than direct marriers?

Finally, it is possible that the frequency of serially arguing about some topics correlates with marital satisfaction differently from other topics. Kurdek (1994) explains that arguing non-serially about certain topics correlates with lower marital satisfaction, but it has not yet been examined in a serial argument context. Further, Johnson, Averbek, Kelley, and Liu (2011) find that nonserial arguing about social issues such as politics and religion have a less detrimental effect on relationship satisfaction than arguing about more personal issues like personality, household chores, and so forth. It is also possible that the correlations between serial argument frequency for each topic and relationship satisfaction may differ across premarital cohabiters and direct married couples. For example, it is possible that if dealing with household chores became a serial argument during nonmarital cohabitation, the fact that they are still arguing about this

topic once they are married could be more dissatisfying than it is to people who began cohabitation after marriage. Thus, I ask:

RQ<sub>5a</sub>: Do specific serial argument topics associate with lower marital satisfaction?

RQ<sub>5b</sub>: Does the association between specific serial argument topic frequency and relationship satisfaction differ between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers?

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **Procedure**

The present study began by receiving IRB consent to conduct this research. In order to gain the desired volume of data, both convenience and snowball sampling were utilized.

Recruitment posts were strategically placed on online marriage advice forums (e.g. Talk About Marriage) and relationship research websites (e.g. Science of Relationships). Subsequent recruitment posts were made to social media (e.g.. Facebook) and shared by participants.

Participants voluntarily completed the survey online after providing their explicit consent. The constructs that were measured through this survey include individual and relationship demographics, marital satisfaction, and topics of serial arguments.

### **Participants**

Participants (N=124) were currently married and ranged from 19-61 years of age (M=34.4, SD=8.49). The participants mostly self-identified as women (74.2%), with 21.8% as men, and .8% as “other.” Participants were predominantly White/Caucasian (80.6%), but 6.5% self-identified Hispanic/Latino, 3.2% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 2.4% as Black/African American, 1.6% as Middle Eastern, .8% as Native American, and 2.4% as “other.” Participants identified as Straight (87.9%), Bisexual (6.5%), Gay (1.6%), and “other” (1.6%). I married individuals of all sexual orientations because research suggests that relationship dynamics predicting divorce or dissolution are similar across sexual preference (Kurdek, 1994).

### **Relationship Demographics**

Of the married participants (N=124), 93 participants indicated they had cohabited prior to marriage while 31 had not. While the direct married group is much smaller than the premarital cohabiter group, it is satisfactory to conduct statistical tests on this group since it meets the n=30



threshold established by the central limits theorem. Of the participants who lived together before getting married, 24 participants indicated they were engaged at the onset of cohabitation while 69 were not. The length of marriages were predominantly longer than 8 years (55.6%), with 7.3% at 7 years, 9.7% at 6 years, 7.3% at 5 years, 8.9% at 4 years, 4.8% at 3 years, 3.2% at 2 years, 2.4% at 1 year, and .8% at less than a year long. Overwhelmingly, participants considered their relationship to be monogamous (94.4%), with .8% identifying as consensually non-monogamous, and 1.6% as “other.” The majority of participants have only been married to their current partner (89.5%), while 10.5% indicated that they had been married before.

## **Measures**

Participants completed an online survey measuring demographic information, relationship demographics, marital satisfaction, topics of serial arguments, and frequency of serial arguments. Individual items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with larger numbers indicating higher levels of agreement with that item.

*Exclusionary Items:* Participants were asked to identify whether or not they are currently in a relationship as well as the current status of that relationship (i.e., single, dating and not living together, dating and living together, engaged and living apart, engaged and living together, married). If participants answered that they are not currently in a relationship, or that they are presently not married, they were directed to a separate survey where they answered questions about a past relationship, or their current not married relationship, and their results were not used for the present study.

*Relationship Demographics:* Eleven items were used to examine the past and present conditions of a participant’s current relationship. Participants were asked questions regarding the

length of their relationship, if they cohabited before marrying, if they or their partner had been married before, if they currently live together, and how long they cohabited before marrying.

*Marital Satisfaction:* Items were used to measure participant's current marital satisfaction using the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI) (Norton, 1983), which is a 6-item scale. The QMI measures an individual's perceived satisfaction in their relationship. Participants were instructed to select the level to which they agree with statements including, "We have a good relationship," and, "I really feel like part of a team with my partner." Participants were also instructed to rate the degree of happiness derived from their relationship on a 5-point scale. Based on instructions for using the scale, items were converted to z-scores and then averaged across items. As suggested by past research, the scale's reliability was found to meet conventional standards,  $\alpha = .94$ ,  $M = 0$ ,  $SD = .88$ . In order to create a more interpretable mean and standard deviation score for reporting purposes that references the item scale points, I also computed the mean across items without standardization to better describe the sample in terms of their location on the original. Using this method, the mean was 4.45 and the  $SD$  was 0.78.

*Topics of Serial Arguments:* 12 items were used to assess the frequency of the occurrence of arguments about specific serial argument topics. This scale was adapted from Bevan et al.'s (2014) topics of serial argument questionnaire. Items were presented to participants in a matrix with the option to select the frequency with which partner's argue about each topic. Topics that participants were asked to quantify include problematic behaviors/personality (either theirs or their romantic partner's), relatives (such as parents or in-laws), children/parenting, how they spend their leisure or quality time, how they negotiate chores or daily routines, communication with one another (including how they deal with distance if they are in a long-distant relationship), money, commitment/intimacy (either emotional or sexual), jealousy or trusting one

another when it comes to potential romantic rivals, major life changes (such as plans after graduation, taking a new job, or moving to a new area), social issues (such as politics or religion), and other with an option for participants to explain.

Several scales were created to analyze the serial argument topics for the present study. Overall serial argument frequency was constructed by summing all of the serial argument frequency items ( $\alpha=.784$ ,  $M=23.96$ ,  $SD=6.87$ ). In order to compute the total topics scale in analyzing how many topics an individual reported arguing about, responses were categorized into two categories for each topic: Yes, I argued about this topic, or no, I did not argue about this topic. If the participant indicated that they never argue about a topic, they were categorized into the no category for that topic and were assigned a 0. If they indicated that they argue from very infrequently to very frequently for a topic, they were categorized into the yes category for that topic and were assigned a 1. Then, all of the yes/no items was summed together to create the total topics scale ( $M=6.99$ ,  $SD=2.63$ )

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

### Premarital Cohabitation and Topics of Serial Arguments

The first research question asks if topics of serial arguments differ between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers. Each serial argument topic was divided into two categories: yes, respondents said they argued about this topic, or no, respondents indicated they do not argue about this topic. These categories were compared with premarital cohabitation history using a z test of the difference between proportions from two populations for each serial argument topic. This test compares the proportion of participants that indicated they argued about a topic to the participants that indicated they did not argue about that topic across both groups. There was no significant difference between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers within any of the serial argument topics except for a small difference on the topic of leisure time activities. The z-score comparisons can be seen in Table 1. Details of the tests follow.

#### *Relatives*

There was no significant difference between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers in whether or not they engaged in serial arguments about relatives ( $z=.672, p=.251$ ). Of the premarital cohabiters, 76.1% of participants said that they had argued about relatives with their spouse, while 23.9% said that they did not. Of the direct marriers, 71% said that they had argued about relatives with their spouse, while 29% said that they did not.

#### *Parenting*

There was no significant difference between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers in whether or not they engaged in serial arguments about parenting or issues regarding their children ( $z = -.742, p=.229$ ). Of the premarital cohabiters, 60.2% of participants said that they had argued about parenting with their spouse, while 39.8% said that they did not. Of the direct

marriers, 67.7% said that they had argued about parenting with their spouse, while 32.3% said that they had not.

#### *Domestic Labor*

There was no significant difference between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers in whether or not they engaged in serial arguments about chores and household related responsibilities ( $z = 1.169, p = .121$ ). Of the premarital cohabiters, 86% of participants said that they had argued about household related responsibilities with their spouse, while 14% said that they did not. Of the direct marriers, 77.4% said that they had argued about household related responsibilities with their spouse, while 22.6% said that they did not.

#### *Problematic Behaviors/Personality Conflicts*

There was no significant difference between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers in whether or not they engaged in serial arguments about their partner's problematic behaviors or personality conflicts ( $z = .395, p = .345$ ). Of the premarital cohabiters, 83.7% of participants said that they had argued about problematic behaviors or personality conflicts with their spouse, while 16.3% said that they did not. Of the direct marriers, 80.6% said that they had argued about problematic behaviors or personality conflicts with their spouse, while 19.4% said that they did not.

#### *Jealousy*

There was no significant difference between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers in whether or not they engaged in serial arguments about jealousy with their partner ( $z = .327, p = .370$ ). Of the premarital cohabiters, 67.7% of participants said that they did not argue about jealousy with their spouse, while 32.3% said that they had. Of the direct marriers, 64.5% said that they did not argue about jealousy with their spouse, while 35.5% said that they had.

### *Leisure/Quality Time*

There was a significant difference between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers in whether or not they engaged in serial arguments about how they spend their leisure or quality time with their spouse ( $z = 1.653, p=.049$ ). Of the premarital cohabiters, 71% of participants said that they had argued about leisure or quality time with their spouse, while 29% said that they did not. Of the direct marriers, 54.8% said that they had argued about leisure or quality time with their spouse, while 45.2% said that they did not.

### *Commitment/Intimacy*

There was no significant difference between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers in whether or not they engaged in serial arguments about commitment or intimacy with their spouse ( $z = .327, p=.370$ ). Of the premarital cohabiters, 67.7% of participants said that they had argued about commitment or intimacy with their spouse, while 32.3% said that they did not. Of the direct marriers, 64.5% said that they had argued about commitment or intimacy with their spouse, while 35.5% said that they did not.

### *Social Issues*

There was no significant difference between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers in whether or not they engaged in serial arguments about social issues with their spouse ( $z = .971, p=.166$ ). Of the premarital cohabiters, 60.2% of participants said that they did not argue about social issues with their spouse, while 39.8% said that they had. Of the direct marriers, 50% said that they did not argue about social issues with their spouse, while 50% said that they had.

### *Major Life Changes*

There was no significant difference between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers in whether or not they engaged in serial arguments about major life changes with their spouse ( $z =$

.728,  $p=.233$ ). Of the premarital cohabiters, 59.1% of participants said that they had argued about major life changes with their spouse, while 40.9% said that they did not. Of the direct marriers, 51.6% said that they had argued about major life changes with their spouse, while 48.4% said that they did not.

### *Communication*

There was no significant difference between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers in whether or not they engaged in serial arguments about communication with their spouse ( $z = .330$ ,  $p=.370$ ). Of the premarital cohabiters, 58.2% of participants said that they had argued about communication with their spouse, while 41.8% said that they did not. Of the direct marriers, 54.8% said that they had argued about communication with their spouse, while 45.2% said that they did not.

### *Money/Finance*

There was no significant difference between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers in whether or not they engaged in serial arguments about money or finances with their spouse ( $z = .000$ ,  $p=1.00$ ). Of the premarital cohabiters, 74.2% of participants said that they had argued about money or finances with their spouse, while 25.8% said that they did not. Of the direct marriers, 74.2% said that they had argued about money or finances with their spouse, while 25.8% said that they did not.

*Table 1: Percentage of Premarital Cohabitors and Direct Marrieds Who Engage in Serial Arguments about Each Topic and Results of z-tests*

	PMC		DM		z	p
	Yes%	No%	Yes%	No%		
Relatives	76.1%	23.9%	71.0%	29.0%	0.672	.251
Children/Parenting	60.2%	39.8%	67.7%	32.3%	-0.742	.229
Domestic Labor	86.0%	14.0%	77.4%	22.6%	1.169	.121
Problematic Behaviors/ Personality Conflicts	83.7%	16.3%	80.6%	19.4%	.395	.345
Jealousy	67.7%	32.3%	64.5%	35.5%	.327	.370
Leisure/Quality Time	71.0%	29.0%	54.8%	45.2%	1.653	.049
Commitment/Intimacy	67.7%	32.3%	64.5%	35.5%	.327	.370
Social Issues	60.2%	32.3%	50.0%	50.0%	.971	.166
Major Life Changes	59.1%	40.9%	51.6%	48.4%	.728	.233
Communication	58.2%	41.8%	54.8%	45.2%	.330	.370
Money/Finances	74.2%	25.8%	74.2%	25.8%	.000	1.00

### **Premarital Cohabitation and Amount of Serial Argument Topics**

Research question two asks whether premarital cohabiters engage in serial arguments across more topics than direct marriers. A scale “total topics” was computed by adding the yes/no serial argument categories together. In order to compare how many topics respondents argued about on average between both premarital cohabiters and direct marriers, an independent samples t-test was conducted. There was not a significant difference between premarital cohabiters ( $M=7.05$ ;  $SD=2.45$ ) and direct marriers ( $M=6.80$ ;  $SD=3.12$ );  $t(122)=.452$ ,  $p=.652$ .

### **Premarital Cohabitation and Frequency of Serial Arguing**

Research question three asks whether premarital cohabiters engage in more frequent serial arguing than direct marriers. A scale was created that was comprised of the overall frequency of conflict across all topics of serial arguments. In order to examine the difference in overall conflict frequency between both direct marriers and premarital cohabiters, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The results indicated that there was not a significant



difference between premarital cohabiters ( $M = 23.45$ ,  $SD = 6.61$ ) and direct marriers ( $M = 23.65$ ,  $SD = 7.49$ ) in the overall frequency of conflict in their relationships;  $t(122) = -.128$ ,  $p = .747$ .

### **Premarital Cohabitation and Frequency within Serial Argument Topics**

Research question four asks whether individuals who cohabited before marriage have higher frequencies within each topic of serial argument than individuals who did not cohabit before marriage. An independent samples t-test was conducted comparing premarital cohabiters and direct marriers and their reported frequency of arguments within each topic. There was not a significant difference in reported frequency within each topic between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers, except in the jealousy category. The frequencies can be seen in Table 2.

*Relatives:* There was not a significant difference ( $t(121) = -.084$ ,  $p = .396$ ) in respondent's self-reported frequency of arguments between premarital cohabiters ( $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) and direct marriers ( $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) regarding relatives.

*Parenting:* There was not a significant difference ( $t(122) = 1.69$ ,  $p = 1.00$ ) in respondent's self-reported frequency of arguments between premarital cohabiters ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) and direct marriers ( $M = 2.16$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) regarding parenting or children.

*Domestic Labor:* There was not a significant difference ( $t(122) = .368$ ,  $p = .372$ ) in respondent's self-reported frequency of arguments between premarital cohabiters ( $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) and direct marriers ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 1.226$ ) regarding chores and household responsibilities.

*Problematic Behaviors/Personality Conflicts:* There was not a significant difference ( $t(121) = -.607$ ,  $p = .140$ ) in respondent's self-reported frequency of arguments between premarital cohabiters ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) and direct marriers ( $M = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) regarding problematic behaviors or personality conflicts.

*Jealousy:* There was a significant difference ( $t(122) = -1.530, p = .002$ ) in respondent's self-reported frequency of arguments between premarital cohabiters ( $M = 1.54, SD = .951$ ) and direct marriers ( $M = 1.87, SD = 1.31$ ) regarding jealousy.

*Leisure/Quality Time:* There was not a significant difference ( $t(122) = .508, p = .205$ ) in respondent's self-reported frequency of arguments between premarital cohabiters ( $M = 2.11, SD = .949$ ) and direct marriers ( $M = 2.00, SD = 1.21$ ) regarding how they spend their leisure or quality time.

*Commitment/Intimacy:* There was not a significant difference ( $t(122) = .288, p = .960$ ) in respondent's self-reported frequency of arguments between premarital cohabiters ( $M = 2.19, SD = 1.07$ ) and direct marriers ( $M = 2.13, SD = 1.12$ ) regarding commitment or intimacy.

*Social Issues:* There was not a significant difference ( $t(121) = -1.372, p = .164$ ) in respondent's self-reported frequency of arguments between premarital cohabiters ( $M = 1.54, SD = .745$ ) and direct marriers ( $M = 1.77, SD = .935$ ) regarding social issues.

*Major Life Changes:* There was not a significant difference ( $t(122) = .054, p = .310$ ) in respondent's self-reported frequency of arguments between premarital cohabiters ( $M = 1.88, SD = .907$ ) and direct marriers ( $M = 1.87, SD = 1.09$ ) regarding major life choices.

*Communication:* There was not a significant difference ( $t(120) = .689, p = .541$ ) in respondent's self-reported frequency of arguments between premarital cohabiters ( $M = 2.02, SD = 1.09$ ) and direct marriers ( $M = 1.87, SD = .957$ ) regarding communication.

*Money/Finance:* There was not a significant difference ( $t(122) = .439, p = .402$ ) in respondent's self-reported frequency of arguments between premarital cohabiters ( $M = 2.46, SD = 1.21$ ) and direct marriers ( $M = 2.35, SD = 1.08$ ) regarding money and finance.

*Table 2: Frequency of Serial Arguments Across Topics for Premarital Cohabitors and Direct Married Couples*

	PMC		DM		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Relatives	2.27	1.03	2.29	1.16	-0.08	.93
Children/Parenting	2.20	1.29	2.16	1.00	0.17	.87
Domestic Labor	2.73	1.10	2.65	1.23	0.37	.71
Problematic Behaviors/ Personality Conflicts	2.60	1.08	2.74	1.32	-0.61	.55
Jealousy	1.54	.951	1.87	1.31	-1.53	.12
Leisure/Quality Time	2.11	.949	2.00	1.21	0.51	.61
Commitment/Intimacy	2.19	1.07	2.13	1.12	0.29	.77
Social Issues	1.54	.745	1.77	.935	-1.37	.17
Major Life Changes	1.88	.907	1.87	1.09	0.05	.96
Communication	2.02	1.09	1.87	.957	0.69	.49
Money/Finances	2.46	1.21	2.35	1.08	0.44	.66

### **Serial Argument Topics and Satisfaction**

Research question five asks whether arguing about specific topics in all married relationships correlates with lower marital satisfaction. A bivariate correlation was conducted to assess the relationship between marital satisfaction and each serial argument topic. The results showed that the most significant negative relationship was present between arguing about problematic behaviors and personality conflicts ( $r=-.439$ ), followed by arguing about communication issues ( $r=-.430$ ), and commitment/intimacy ( $r=-.417$ ). The least significant relationship was between arguing about relatives ( $r=-.145$ ), major life changes ( $r=-.149$ ), and social issues ( $r=-.144$ ). See Table 2. The correlations between satisfaction and each serial argument topic can be seen in Table 3, and the complete correlation matrices can be seen in Tables 4, 5, and 6.

*Relatives:* There was a negative correlation between arguing about relatives and marital satisfaction,  $r=-.145$ ,  $p=.055$ .

*Parenting:* There was a significant negative correlation between arguing about children or parenting and marital satisfaction,  $r=-.343, p<.001$ .

*Domestic Labor:* There was a significant negative relationship between arguing about chores or household responsibilities and marital satisfaction,  $r=-.260, p=.002$ .

*Problematic Behaviors/Personality Conflicts:* There was a significant negative relationship between arguing about problematic behaviors or personality conflicts and marital satisfaction,  $r=-.439, p<.001$ .

*Jealousy:* There was a significant negative relationship between arguing about jealousy and marital satisfaction,  $r=-.323, p<.001$ .

*Leisure/Quality Time:* There was a significant negative relationship between arguing about leisure or quality time and marital satisfaction,  $r=-.282, p=.001$ .

*Commitment/Intimacy:* There was a significant negative relationship between arguing about commitment or intimacy and marital satisfaction,  $r=-.417, p=.001$ .

*Social Issues:* There was a significant negative relationship between arguing about social issues and marital satisfaction,  $r=-.144, p=.056$ .

*Major Life Changes:* There was a significant negative relationship between arguing about major life changes and marital satisfaction,  $r=-.149, p=.050$ .

*Communication:* There was a significant negative relationship between arguing about communication and marital satisfaction,  $r=-.430, p<.001$ .

*Money/Finance:* There was a significant negative relationship between arguing about money or finance and marital satisfaction,  $r=-.242, p=.003$ .

### **Serial Argument Topics, Satisfaction, and Premarital Cohabitation**

The second part of question five asks whether premarital cohabitation influences whether conflict surrounding specific serial argument topics correlates with lower marital satisfaction in different ways for direct married and premarital cohabiters. The sample was split into the two groups and bivariate correlations were conducted to analyze the relationship between specific serial argument topics and overall marital satisfaction in both premarital cohabiters and direct marriers. To test the statistical difference between the correlations from independent populations, Fisher's  $r$  to  $z$  transformation was used. Table 2 reports the  $z$  statistics and  $p$  values for each test.

*Relatives:* In premarital cohabiters, there was a negative correlation between arguing about relatives and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.109$ ,  $p = .150$ . In direct marriers, there was a negative correlation between arguing about relatives and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.268$ ,  $p = .073$ . Thus, there was a stronger negative relationship between arguing about relatives and marital satisfaction in direct marriers than premarital cohabiters, but neither was statistically significant.

*Parenting:* In premarital cohabiters, there was a significant negative correlation between arguing about children or parenting and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.376$ ,  $p < .001$ . In direct marriers, there was a negative correlation between arguing about parenting and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.186$ ,  $p = .158$ . Thus, there was a stronger statistically significant negative correlation between arguing about children or parenting and marital satisfaction in premarital cohabiters than in direct marriers.

*Domestic Labor:* In premarital cohabiters, there was a significant negative relationship between arguing about chores or household responsibilities and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.272$ ,  $p = .004$ . In direct marriers, there was a negative correlation between arguing about domestic labor and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.232$ ,  $p = .105$ . Thus, there was a stronger statistically significant

relationship between arguing about chores or household responsibilities in premarital cohabiters than in direct marriers.

*Problematic Behaviors/Personality Conflicts:* In premarital cohabiters, there was a significant negative relationship between arguing about problematic behaviors or personality conflicts and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.396, p < .001$ . In direct marriers, there was a significant negative correlation between arguing about problematic behaviors or personality conflicts and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.598, p < .001$ . Thus, there was a stronger negative relationship between arguing about problematic behaviors or personality conflicts and marital satisfaction in direct marriers than in premarital cohabiters.

*Jealousy:* In premarital cohabiters, there was a significant negative relationship between arguing about jealousy and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.363, p < .001$ . In direct marriers, there was a negative correlation between arguing about jealousy and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.250, p = .087$ . Thus, there was a stronger statistically significant negative relationship between arguing about jealousy and marital satisfaction in premarital cohabiters than in direct marriers.

*Leisure/Quality Time:* In premarital cohabiters, there was a significant negative relationship between arguing about leisure or quality time and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.280, p = .003$ . In direct marriers, there was a significant negative correlation between arguing about leisure or quality time and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.314, p = .043$ . Thus, there was a stronger statistically significant negative relationship between arguing about leisure or quality time and marital satisfaction in premarital cohabiters than in direct marriers.

*Commitment/Intimacy:* In premarital cohabiters, there was a significant negative relationship between arguing about commitment or intimacy and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.374, p < .001$ . In direct marriers, there was a significant negative correlation between arguing about

commitment or intimacy and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.583, p < .001$ . Thus, there was a stronger statistically significant negative relationship between arguing about commitment or intimacy and marital satisfaction in direct marriers than in premarital cohabiters.

*Social Issues:* In premarital cohabiters, there was a significant negative relationship between arguing about social issues and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.022, p = .417$ . In direct marriers, there was a significant negative correlation between arguing about social issues and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.521, p < .001$ . Thus, there was a stronger and statistically significant negative relationship between arguing about social issues and marital satisfaction in direct marriers than in premarital cohabiters.

*Major Life Changes:* In premarital cohabiters, there was a negative relationship between arguing about major life changes and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.126, p = .115$ . In direct marriers, there was a negative correlation between arguing about major life changes and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.226, p = .110$ . Thus, there was a stronger statistically significant relationship between arguing about major life changes and marital satisfaction in direct marriers than in premarital cohabiters. However, neither relationship was statistically significant.

*Communication:* In premarital cohabiters, there was a significant negative relationship between arguing about communication and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.511, p < .001$ . In direct marriers, there was a negative correlation between arguing about communication and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.123, p = .255$ . Thus, there was a stronger statistically significant relationship between arguing about communication and marital satisfaction in premarital cohabiters than in direct marriers.

*Money/Finance:* In premarital cohabiters, there was a significant negative relationship between arguing about money or finance and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.257, p = .006$ . In direct

marriers, there was a negative correlation between arguing about money or finance and marital satisfaction,  $r = -.181$ ,  $p = .165$ . Thus, there was a stronger statistically significant relationship between arguing about communication and marital satisfaction in premarital cohabiters than in direct marriers.

*Table 3: Correlation between Topics of Serial Arguments and Marital Satisfaction by Premarital Cohabitation*

	Overall	PMC	DM		
Topic	$n = 121$	$n = 90$	$n = 31$	$z$	$p$
Relatives	-.145	-.109	-.268	0.08	.22
Children/Parenting	-.343***	-.376***	-.186	-0.95	.17
Domestic Labor	-.260**	-.272**	-.232	-0.02	.42
Problematic Behaviors/ Personality Conflicts	-.439***	-.396***	-.598***	1.25	.10
Jealousy	-.323***	-.363***	-.250	-0.57	.28
Leisure/Quality Time	-.282***	-.280**	-.314*	0.17	.43
Commitment/Intimacy	-.417***	-.374***	-.583***	1.26	.10
Social Issues	-.144	-.022	-.521***	2.56	.01
Major Life Changes	-.149*	-.126	-.226	0.48	.31
Communication	-.430***	-.511***	-.123	-2.03	.02
Money/Finances	-.242**	-.257**	-.181	-0.37	.35
Overall frequency	-.283***	-.277***	-.325	-0.24	.41

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$



## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

### **Summary of Results and Implications**

This study sought to examine differences in serial arguing between couples who cohabited prior to marriage and couples who did not cohabit prior to marriage by seeking the answers to six research questions. Serial arguing is a negative communication behavior that impacts romantic relationships. This behavior is an enduring dynamic, meaning that it begins premaritally and continues into marriage, potentially putting that marriage at risk for future dissatisfaction and dissolution. Thus, it is important to examine the differences of serial argument behaviors in both premarital cohabiters and direct marriers. This chapter will review each research question and results.

The first research question asked whether premarital cohabitation history influenced what people argue about in marriage. After running a z test of the difference between proportions from two populations for each topic, the results suggested that participants argued about each of these topics, regardless of premarital cohabitation status. There was only a single topic in which the difference was statistically significant, and that was when individuals indicated arguing about how they spend their leisure time. A significantly larger percentage of premarital cohabiters said that they argued about this topic with their spouse. One potential explanation direct marriers are less likely to argue about leisure time is that there is a novelty to living together. Premarital cohabiters might struggle with creating exciting or novel activities that break through the monotony of established routines. Throughout the other serial argument topics, the percentage of respondents who indicated that they had or had not argued about that that topic was similar in both groups. This could potentially mean that premarital cohabitation does not necessarily impact what couples will argue about once married. However, it is possible that the differences

between the two groups were not significant because of the small size of the sample, especially in direct marriers.

The second research question asked if premarital cohabiters engage in more topics of conflict on average with their spouse than direct marriers. Test results indicated that premarital cohabiters engaged in conflict about seven topics on average with their spouse while direct marriers engaged in conflict about six topics on average. Similarly to how premarital cohabitation does not seem to impact what topics couples are prone to argue about, it does not seem to impact how many topics couples argue about.

The third research question asked if premarital cohabiters engage in more frequent conflict overall than direct marriers. The results indicated that there was no difference in how often couples argue overall. So, premarital cohabiters and direct marriers seem to argue a similar amount in general. Thus, it can be speculated that premarital cohabitation does not seem to impact how often individuals will argue with their spouse.

The fourth research question asked if premarital cohabiters will argue more often about each topic than direct marriers. Again, the results indicated that there was no difference in how often premarital cohabiters and direct marriers argued about each topic. While there seems to be a difference in how conflict impacts marital satisfaction, there was not a difference in the frequency of these arguments. This suggests that the frequency of serial arguments might not be what ultimately leads to marital dissatisfaction.

Research question five asked whether or not arguing about specific topics correlated with lower marital satisfaction. After running a bivariate correlation, ten of the eleven argument topics were significantly negatively related to marital satisfaction. The strongest negative relationship between conflict and marital satisfaction occurred when married couples argued about

problematic behaviors or personality conflicts, followed by arguing about communication issues, and commitment or intimacy. This supports the findings by Kurdek (1994) who indicated that arguing about power dynamics and intimacy were the most damaging to overall marital satisfaction.

The second part of research question five asked whether premarital cohabitation history impacted which topics affected marital satisfaction the most. After conducting individual bivariate correlations for both premarital cohabiters and direct marriers, ten of the eleven argument topics significantly differed in the level of association with marital satisfaction between both groups. Premarital cohabiters experienced lower overall marital satisfaction when arguing about parenting, household labor or chores, jealousy, how they spend their leisure or quality time, communication, and money or finance than direct marriers. Direct marriers experienced lower overall marital satisfaction when arguing about problematic behaviors or personal conflicts, commitment or intimacy, and social issues than premarital cohabiters. For direct marriers, arguing about these topics coincided with much lower marital satisfaction than the argument topics that impacted marital satisfaction for premarital cohabiters.

It is possible that this discrepancy in the relationship between arguing about certain topics and marital satisfaction between both groups is in part due to the type of relationship the partners are in. Direct marriers tend to hold more traditional values and tend to be more religious (DeMaris, 1984). Individuals without religious affiliations tend to cohabit premaritally at rates that are 50% higher than their religious counterparts (Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992). Traditionals tend to accept conventional gender roles and expectations in the household (Williamson & Fitzpatrick, 1985). These expectations set standards for the behavior of partners within the household, which in turn might lead to less conflict about things such as division of

household labor, finances, or parenting. However, when the couple does not agree on certain ideals such as social issues, this might be an unexpected strain on the relationship that might lead a partner to feel much less satisfied.

Overall, these results were not necessarily what I had anticipated. While it is clear that there is a difference in how arguments experienced by premarital cohabiters and direct marriers impacts marital satisfaction, there is not enough evidence to support the theory that serial arguments are the enduring dynamic that causes the discrepancy in marital satisfaction. Essentially, the strongest correlations between serial arguing and marital satisfaction were in direct marriers. While more of the topics correlated a bit more strongly in premarital cohabiters, it is possible that this discrepancy is more pronounced in this sample because there were nearly three times as many premarital cohabiters as there were direct marriers. Additionally, many of the tests indicated very close to statistically significant results, but because the direct marriers were such a small group, the results did not reach significance when it might have otherwise.

It is possible that because the sample was comprised of individuals from long standing marriages, we did not adequately target those who would be most affected by this phenomenon, those who are early in their marriage. The married couples in this study also indicated that they were overall happy with their marriage, rating their happiness a 4.4 out of 5. It is possible that these couples are too satisfied with their relationship to really get at the heart of this enduring dynamic model of marital change. However, it is possible that the reason for the lack of results in this study stems from the more normative nature of premarital cohabitation. It is possible that the difference between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers is diminishing. Additionally, this study shows that premarital cohabitation does serve an important function in assessing marital compatibility.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

Although the present research has offered valuable insight into the differences between premarital cohabiters and direct marriers with regard to serial arguing and marital satisfaction, there were several limitations that need to be addressed. First, this was a relatively small sample at 124 participants. Additionally, the majority of participants were white, straight, and female. The sample was also lopsided with 75% of participants being premarital cohabiters and only 25% being direct marriers, which may have skewed the results. While this is close to reflecting the overall representation of the population, with 70% of individuals looking to marry premaritally cohabiting (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004) and 75% of the sample being premarital cohabiters, increasing the number of participants in both categories will allow for stronger, more reliable results. Finally, there may have been an issue of social desirability in asking participants to respond to questions about their marital satisfaction, happiness, and conflicts that may have impacted how participants responded to these questions.

There are several items I could have included in my survey that would have allowed further examination of the data in this study. First, I would have been interested to see whether relationship length correlated with both marital satisfaction and the topics individuals reported arguing about. Unfortunately, the way I asked this question limited the scope of my data analysis. I would have also liked to know about the participants' parents' marital history, because that has been shown to influence children's success in marriage and their marital outcomes. I would have liked to know about the traditionalism, religiosity, and expectations of gender roles in the relationship. All of these constructs could influence the topics individuals argue about as

well as the perception of conflict in a relationship. I believe that since I did not ask these demographic questions, I am not able to analyze my data to its fullest extent.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal studies of relationships. Measuring current topics of arguments can only suggest so much when there is nothing to compare it to from the past. Additionally, comparing cohabiting couples who aren't currently engaged to couples who are courting might give an added insight into the pre-marriage, post-marriage conflict comparisons. Limiting the sample to early marriers might also target the enduring dynamic element to serial arguing as, typically, marriages that experience the effects of negative conflict behaviors will be early divorcers, and the sample for the present study was predominantly comprised of individuals married for over eight years. This research would also benefit from finding more direct marriers. It was an exceptionally difficult task to find direct marriers, but they are an integral group for this research. My final suggestion for future research would be to examine traditionalism's role in marital expectations, serial arguing, and marital satisfaction. Analyzing the overall expectations of the marriage and its relation to what individuals serially argue about would be a novel approach to this research.

## **APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**  
**FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Rachel Reymann**

Date: **February 05, 2016**

Dear Researcher:

On 02/05/2016, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination  
Project Title: Comparison of Cohabiting and Married Couples' Topics of Serial Arguments and Relational Satisfaction  
Investigator: Rachel Reymann  
IRB Number: SBE-16-11938  
Funding Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kanielle Chay" followed by a horizontal line.

IRB Coordinator



## **APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVED SURVEY**

## Exclusionary Items

1. Are you currently involved in a romantic/sexual relationship with another person?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
2. What is your relationship status? (If you are currently involved in multiple relationships, please choose one and use the same relationship for the remainder of the survey)
  - a. Single
  - b. Seeing each other but without a commitment
  - c. Friends with benefits
  - d. Committed dating but not engaged
  - e. Engaged
  - f. Married
  - g. Separated
3. We use the word "Cohabitation" to mean that both partners live full time at the same address. Given this definition, are you currently cohabiting with your partner?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
4. We are also interested in how long you've been involved in this relationship.

Click the bubble that best represents the length of your current relationship.	Less than 1 year	1 year	2 years	3 years	4 years	5 years	6 years	7 years	8+ years
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## Demographics

1. What is your age in years? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your partner's age in years? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your ethnicity?
  - a. White/Caucasian
  - b. Black/African American
  - c. Asian/Pacific Islander
  - d. Middle Eastern
  - e. Native American
  - f. Hispanic/Latino
  - g. Other \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your partner's ethnicity?
  - a. White/Caucasian
  - b. Black/African American
  - c. Asian/Pacific Islander
  - d. Middle Eastern

- e. Native American
  - f. Hispanic/Latino
  - g. Other \_\_\_\_\_
5. Please select the gender you identify as
    - a. Man
    - b. Woman
    - c. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  6. Please select the gender your partner identifies as
    - a. Man
    - b. Woman
    - c. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  7. What is your sexual orientation
    - a. Straight
    - b. Gay
    - c. Lesbian
    - d. Bisexual
    - e. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  8. What is your partner's sexual orientation?
    - a. Straight
    - b. Gay
    - c. Lesbian
    - d. Bisexual
    - e. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  9. What type of partnership do you have?
    - a. Monogamous
    - b. Consensually Nonmonogamous \_\_\_\_\_
    - c. Other \_\_\_\_\_

### **Relationship Demographics**

1. Have you ever been married to a person other than your current partner?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
2. If you are currently married, did you live with your partner before getting married?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
3. Were you engaged at the start of your cohabitation?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
4. Approximately how long have you and your partner lived together?
  - a. 0-6 months
  - b. 7-12 months
  - c. 1-2 years
  - d. 2+ years
5. How long have you been married?
  - a. 0-6 months

- b. 7-12 months
  - c. 1-2 years
  - d. 2+ years
6. If you are currently cohabiting with your partner, do you have plans to get married in the future?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. I am already married

## Topics of Serial Arguments

Bevan, J. L., Hefner, V., & Love, A. (2014). An exploration of topics, conflict styles, and rumination in romantic nonserial and serial arguments. *Southern Communication Journal*, 79(4), 347-360. doi:10.1080/1041794X.2014.918645

1. Please choose the frequency of each topic below that best describes an ongoing argument that has occurred between yourself and your current romantic partner.

	We do not serially argue about this topic	Very infrequentl y				Very frequently
Relatives, such as parents or in-laws	0	1	2	3	4	5
Children/parenting	0	1	2	3	4	5
How you negotiate chores or daily routines	0	1	2	3	4	5
Problematic behaviors/ Personality conflicts	0	1	2	3	4	5
Jealousy or trusting one another when it comes to potential romantic rivals	0	1	2	3	4	5
How you spend your leisure or quality time	0	1	2	3	4	5
Commitment/intimacy, either emotional or sexual	0	1	2	3	4	5
Social issues, such as politics or religion	0	1	2	3	4	5
Major life changes, such as your plans after graduation, taking a new job, or moving to a new area	0	1	2	3	4	5

Communication with one another, including how you deal with distance if you are in a long-distance relationship	0	1	2	3	4	5
Money/Finances	0	1	2	3	4	5
Other, please describe	0	1	2	3	4	5

### Quality Marriage Index (QMI)

Norton, R. (1983). Measuring marital quality: A critical look at the dependent variable. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 45, 141-151.

	I do not agree at all				I completely agree
We have a good relationship	1	2	3	4	5
My relationship with my partner is very stable.	1	2	3	4	5
Our relationship is strong.	1	2	3	4	5
My relationship with my partner makes me happy.	1	2	3	4	5
I really feel like part of a team with my partner	1	2	3	4	5

- Circle the point that best describes the degree of happiness in your marriage. The middle point ('happy') represents the degree of happiness most get from relationship.

Very Unhappy		Happy		Totally Perfect
1	2	3	4	5

## **APPENDIX C: ALL MARRIAGES CORRELATION MATRIX**

*Table 4: Correlations among Relationship Satisfaction and Serial Argument Topics for the Entire Sample*

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Satisfaction	1											
2. Relatives	-.118	1										
3. Children/parenting	-.344**	.286**	1									
4. Domestic Labor	-.235**	.271**	.254**	1								
5. Problematic behaviors/personality	-.421**	.252**	.360**	.390**	1							
6. Jealousy	-.301**	.080	.190*	.221**	.388**	1						
7. Leisure time	-.243**	.268**	.295**	.298**	.362**	.271**	1					
8. Commitment/intimacy	-.400**	.236**	.277**	.426**	.439**	.318**	.374**	1				
9. Social issues	-.134	.147	.111	.075	.107	-.055	.197*	.089	1			
10. Major life changes	-.170*	.180*	.139	.172*	.218**	.067	.246**	.252**	.338**	1		
11. Communication	-.431**	.170*	.405**	.294**	.421**	.401**	.248**	.391**	.006	.327**	1	
12. Money/finances	-.241**	.242**	.416**	.342**	.295**	.304**	.412**	.388**	.117	.345**	.450**	1

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

## **APPENDIX D: PMC CORRELATION MATRIX**



Table 5: Correlations among Relationship Satisfaction and Serial Argument Topics in PMCs

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Relationship Satisfaction	1											
2. Relatives	-.093	1										
3. Children/parenting	-.364**	.295**	1									
4. Domestic Labor	-.241**	.235*	.232*	1								
5. Problematic behaviors/ Personality conflicts	-.369**	.344**	.402**	.411**	1							
6. Jealousy	-.354**	.131	.229*	.266**	.374**	1						
7. Leisure/ Quality time	-.264**	.170	.337**	.331**	.382**	.333**	1					
8. Commitment/intimacy	-.349**	.219*	.248**	.455**	.389**	.379**	.377**	1				
9. Social issues	.003	.035	.031	-.034	-.039	-.152	.209*	.004	1			
10. Major life changes	-.136	.129	.077	.088	.146	.062	.280**	.193*	.224*	1		
11. Communication	-.495**	.218*	.453**	.348**	.491**	.427**	.386**	.470**	-.084	.352**	1	
12. Money/Finances	-.248**	.176*	.391**	.291**	.292**	.329**	.466**	.401**	-.013	.307**	.495**	1

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

## **APPENDIX E: DM CORRELATION MATRIX**

*Table 6: Correlations among Relationship Satisfaction and Serial Argument Topics in DMs*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Satisfaction	1											
2. Relatives	-.210	1										
3. Children/parenting	-.241	.273	1									
4. Domestic Labor	-.226	.356*	.346*	1								
5. Problematic behaviors/personality	-.626**	.051	.260	.355*	1							
6. Jealousy	-.204	-.018	.118	.157	.405*	1						
7. Leisure time	-.196	.474**	.192	.224	.335*	.189	1					
8. Commitment/intimacy	-.602**	.279	.397*	.351*	.567**	.217	.369*	1				
9. Social issues	-.587**	.394*	.385*	.333*	.387*	.064	.189	.303	1			
10. Major life changes	-.293	.295	.356*	.364*	.372*	.082	.177	.398*	.583**	1		
11. Communication	-.171	.035	.196	.130	.264	.412*	-.115	.141	.281	.272	1	
12. Money/finances	-.212	.446**	.529**	.500**	.324*	.292	.280	.347*	.510**	.465**	.271	1

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

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