

# Practice May Not Make Perfect: Relationship Experience and Marital Success

by Scott Stanley and Galena Rhoades | March 17, 2016 8:00 am

In most areas of life, having more experience is good. Want to be great in your chosen field? Sustained experience is essential. Want to be great at a sport? There's no substitute for practice. And anyone who runs a business can tell you that their best employees are those who have been in the job long enough to have learned how to handle the normal well and the unexpected with wisdom.

While more experience is often beneficial in life, the story looks different when it comes to some types of experience before marriage. For example, in our *Before "I Do"* [1] report, we surveyed a national longitudinal sample of young adults about their love lives prior to marriage to examine factors associated with future marital quality. We found that having more sexual and cohabiting partners before marriage is associated with lower relationship quality once married. In particular, having only ever lived with or had sex with one's spouse was associated with higher marital quality. Our findings are consistent with other studies showing that cohabiting with more partners before marriage is associated with greater likelihood of divorce<sup>1</sup> and that a higher number of sexual partners before marriage is associated with lower marital quality and greater likelihood of divorce.<sup>2</sup> As we noted, what happens in Vegas may not always stay in Vegas. But why?

There are many reasons why having more romantic partners before marriage may put one at higher risk of difficulties in marriage. One of the most important explanations comes under the heading of what some call selection effects. For many people, an elevated risk of difficulties in marriage was present before they had their first relationship experience. Background characteristics such as parental divorce, low education, and economic disadvantage are associated both with having more sexual and cohabiting partners and also with lower marital quality and/or divorce.<sup>3</sup> So it may not be that having more sexual or cohabiting partners causes further risk because a lot of risk was already in motion. Selection is a big part of how relationships unfold, but is it the whole story? We believe that, in addition to selection, behavior matters and has plausible connections to marital outcomes. We are going to explain four reasons why having more relationship experience before tying the knot might make it harder to succeed in marriage.

## More Awareness of Alternatives

What could be wrong with having a lot of alternative romantic partners and knowing it? Maybe just this: Part of the essence of commitment is "making a choice to give up other choices."<sup>4</sup> Of course, committing to a choice does not make the alternatives disappear. That would be too easy. Part of the work of commitment in marriage is letting other options go and investing your energy in the one person you have chosen.<sup>5</sup> Alternatives compete with commitment.<sup>6</sup>

When a person has had many serious relationships prior to marriage, it may increase awareness of how many alternatives actually exist. Furthermore, in a world where people can conveniently monitor their ex-partners online, it is easy for an old flame to resurface.

Still, it seems reasonable to believe that, up to a point, learning about various partners and choosing the best one should make marriages *better*. Sociologists have long noted that there should be some ideal amount of searching that will result in optimal outcomes in marriage. Norval Glenn and his colleagues nicely described this theory in a 2010 article:

According to another view, which we call the length of search thesis, the longer a person searches for a mate and “circulates” on the marriage market (at least to a certain point), the greater is the probability of a good marital match when he/she marries.<sup>7</sup>

We are not arguing against an adequate search process. We are suggesting that having a lot of partners—and sharing serious relationship experiences with them like sex and cohabiting—can have the downside of raising awareness of alternatives in a way that makes it harder to foreclose them to make a marriage work. Also, realize that you can learn a lot about another person without going so deep that you lose options for your future.

### **Changed Expectations: The Perfect Sexual Lover (in Your Mind)**

Think about two different people: person Q and person M (not a Bond movie). For our thought experiment, imagine that these two people are nearly identical as to all sorts of factors related to success in marriage. That is to say, selection is not involved in what we are describing. But Q and M have one difference. Through the cosmic fate of where each lives and the people around them, Q ended up having 10 sexual partners before marriage, while M has only ever had sex with the person he/she married (whether M and his/her spouse waited until marriage does not affect our argument).

Q and M have been married to their respective mates for five years, now, and life has gotten harder, with children, work, and debt. For both couples, the sexual relationship has lost some edge. That’s no shock and not unusual. But in the midst of this phase of life, Q and M have that one difference that leads to Q being quite a bit less happy than M.

Q has vivid memories of 10 sexual partners. M does not. Once the comparisons begin—and this happens more when we’re a bit unhappy—we’re not all that fair in how we make them. Q remembers how great sex was with three of the 10 partners: exciting, pleasing, and thrilling. In fact, Q remembers specific, different, and pleasing memories with each of those three. In assessing sexual satisfaction five years into marriage, Q merges those three prior partners into one object who is, of course, not a real person. It’s a hybrid, perfect sexual lover. Satisfaction in all areas of life is partly a function of what we get compared to what we expected. Q expects a lot based on all that experience, easily forgetting that none of those three relationships had what it takes to go the distance. That doesn’t matter. That’s the comparison that feeds unhappiness in marriage, now.

If life presented you with such a simple choice, would you rather be trying to make your marriage work with Q’s history or M’s? We cannot assume what choice *you* would make, but we think our point is pretty clear.

### **More Experience Breaking It Off**

Cohabitation has characteristics that seem paradoxical. Living with a partner makes it harder to break up than dating, all other things being equal, and often now comes at a time in relationship development where people have not really chosen each other for the future.<sup>8</sup> And yet, cohabiting couples frequently break up, and they

are more likely than any other time in history not to end up marrying.<sup>9</sup>

These days, cohabitation has become more a part of the dating scene than a lead-up to marriage. Let's call the phenomenon *cohabidating*[2]. In this context, some people are getting a lot of experience at leaving serious relationships (or surviving being left). Just as with our prior point, that does not sound bad in one way—at least insofar as people are breaking off relationships that had no future. But it's also true that people tend to get good at things they have a lot of experience doing. People can get good at moving out and moving on.

How does that impact marriage? Some people probably so deeply learn that they can survive leaving a relationship when they are unhappy with it that they leave reasonably good marriages that would have given them and their children the best outcomes in life. They bail too quickly.

Obviously, many others leave very poor or even dangerous marriages only after a lot of agonizing and effort. We're not suggesting divorce is ever easy or that it is not sometimes the best course. But in a day and age when people get so much experience moving out and moving on, we think many may learn to do so too rapidly, and to their detriment.

## Babies

Sex has something to do with babies. Increasingly, cohabitation does also,<sup>10</sup> and a lot of couples have children even if they're not very committed to one another.<sup>11</sup> Having children from prior partners before settling down in marriage is associated with more challenges in finding a mate and making the relationship work, just as having children from one marriage has always made it harder to remarry successfully following divorce or a spouse's death.<sup>12</sup> Even having a child with your eventual spouse before you've fully decided to share your future is associated with more difficulties.

Societal shifts toward having more sexual and/or cohabiting partners before marriage means a lot more relationship experience, but when children are involved, it also means more people have constraints on whom they can attract, their economic options, and what traits a potential spouse must have. This is especially true for women, since they are more likely to invest a great deal of time in the care of their children. It may be crass to say, but there is a market for mate selection, and those who have a family already in tow have fewer options when trying to find the best partner for the future. Hence, this is one more way that having more relationship experience before marriage can impact the odds of having a happy and lasting marriage.

## Hope

Nothing we raised here dooms anyone to a life of being unloved. We are talking about relationship experiences that may impact one's odds of achieving the common goal of a lifelong marriage. If you are single and aspire to find long-lasting love in marriage, don't give up, even if you spent some serious time in Vegas. Just stop gambling, now. If you want to change the trajectory of your life, do two things: First, slow down your relationships.<sup>13</sup> There is a lot of evidence that this can help improve one's odds of lasting love. Second, start making decisions; don't let things slide when the choice before you could impact your future options for happiness in marriage.

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1. Lichter, D. T., Turner, R. N., Sassler, S. (2010). National estimates of the rise in serial cohabitation[3]. *Social Science Research*, 39, 754-765; Teachman, J. D. (2003). Premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, and

the risk of subsequent marital dissolution among women[4]. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65(2), 444-455.

2. Busby, D. M., Willoughby, B. J., & Carroll, J. S. (2013). Sowing wild oats: Valuable experience or a field full of weeds?[5] *Personal Relationships*, 20(4), 706-718; Olenick, I. (2000). Odds of spousal infidelity are influenced by social and demographic factors[6]. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 32(3), 148-149.

3. To read more about issues related to selection, I refer you to a couple of prior blog posts, here[7] and here[8].

4. Stanley, S. M. (2005). *The power of commitment*[9]. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

5. See, e.g., Rusbult, C. E., & Buunk, B. P. (1993) Commitment processes in close relationships: An interdependence analysis[10]. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 10, 175-204.

6. Thibaut, J. W., & Kelley, H. H. (1959). *The social psychology of groups*[11]. New York: Wiley. See also Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (1992). Assessing commitment in personal relationships[12]. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54, 595-608.

7. Citing Becker (1981), Levinger (1965), and South (1995): Glenn, N. D., Uecker, J. E., & Love, R. W. B. Jr. (2010). Later first marriage and marital success[13]. *Social Science Research*, 39, 787-800.

8. For more, see prior blog articles here[14] and here[15]. See also Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2012). The impact of the transition to cohabitation on relationship functioning: Cross-sectional and longitudinal findings[16]. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 26(3), 348 – 358.

9. Vespa, J. (2014). Historical trends in the marital intentions of one-time and serial cohabitators[17]. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 76, 207-217; Guzzo, K. B. (2014). Trends in cohabitation outcomes: Compositional changes and engagement among never-married young adults[18]. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 76, 826-842.

10. Manning, W. D. (2015). Cohabitation and child wellbeing[19]. *The Future of Children*, 25(2), 51-66.

11. See Marriage and positive child outcomes: commitment, signaling, and sequence[20]. A thorough review of societal trends can be had in Sawhill, I. V. (2014). *Generation unbound: Drifting into sex and parenthood without marriage*[21]. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

12. One excellent review of the complexity that children from prior relationships represent for the lives of their parents is the following: Guzzo, K. B. (2014). New partners, more kids: Multiple-partner fertility in the United States[22]. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 654, 66-86. doi:10.1177/0002716214525571

13. For an excellent article that suggests going slower has benefits, see Sassler, S., Addo, F. R., & Lichter, D. T. (2012). The tempo of sexual activity and later relationship quality[23]. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74, 708-725.

## Endnotes:

1. *Before “I Do”*: <http://nationalmarriageproject.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/NMP->

- BeforeIDoReport-Final.pdf
2. *cohabidating*: <http://slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com/2010/11/cohabidating.html>
  3. National estimates of the rise in serial cohabitation:  
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049089X09001227>
  4. Premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, and the risk of subsequent marital dissolution among women:  
[http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600089?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600089?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)
  5. Sowing wild oats: Valuable experience or a field full of weeds?:  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pere.12009/abstract>
  6. Odds of spousal infidelity are influenced by social and demographic factors:  
<http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/3280226/odds-spousal-infidelity-are-influenced-by-social-demographic-factors>
  7. here: <http://slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com/search?q=selection+effects+are>
  8. here: <http://family-studies.org/selection-effects-and-personal-choice/>
  9. *The power of commitment*: [http://www.amazon.com/Power-Commitment-Guide-Active-Lifelong/dp/0787979287/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1458016558&sr=8-1&keywords=The+power+of+commitment](http://www.amazon.com/Power-Commitment-Guide-Active-Lifelong/dp/0787979287/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1458016558&sr=8-1&keywords=The+power+of+commitment)
  10. Commitment processes in close relationships: An interdependence analysis:  
<http://spr.sagepub.com/content/10/2/175.short?rss=1&ssource=mfc>
  11. The social psychology of groups: [http://www.amazon.com/Social-Psychology-Groups-Harold-Kelley/dp/129753347X/ref=tmm\\_hrd\\_swatch\\_0?\\_encoding=UTF8&qid=1458016486&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/Social-Psychology-Groups-Harold-Kelley/dp/129753347X/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1458016486&sr=8-1)
  12. Assessing commitment in personal relationships: [http://www.jstor.org/stable/353245?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/353245?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)
  13. Later first marriage and marital success: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3437253/>
  14. here: <http://family-studies.org/why-doesnt-living-together-before-marrying-decrease-the-risk-of-divorce/>
  15. here: <http://slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com/2012/09/inertia-created-by-your-past-self-can.html>
  16. The impact of the transition to cohabitation on relationship functioning: Cross-sectional and longitudinal findings: <http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2012-11480-001/>
  17. Historical trends in the marital intentions of one-time and serial cohabitators:  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jomf.12083/abstract>
  18. Trends in cohabitation outcomes: Compositional changes and engagement among never-married young adults: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4712741/>
  19. Cohabitation and child wellbeing:  
<http://www.futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/Cohabitation.pdf>
  20. Marriage and positive child outcomes: commitment, signaling, and sequence: <http://family-studies.org/marriage-and-positive-child-outcomes-commitment-signaling-and-sequence/>
  21. *Generation unbound: Drifting into sex and parenthood without marriage*:  
[http://www.amazon.com/Generation-Unbound-Drifting-Parenthood-Marriage/dp/0815725582/ref=tmm\\_hrd\\_swatch\\_0?\\_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=](http://www.amazon.com/Generation-Unbound-Drifting-Parenthood-Marriage/dp/0815725582/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)
  22. New partners, more kids: Multiple-partner fertility in the United States:  
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4182921/#R37>
  23. The tempo of sexual activity and later relationship quality:  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.00996.x/abstract>

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