A Survey of Cohabitation on Two College Campuses

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Cohabitation emerged in the late 1960s because of relaxed housing rules, the availability of the “pill,” a philosophy held by a plurality of students regarding the desirability of sex accompanying affection, and, perhaps, a need on the part of some students for a primary relationship. Some empirical data on the climate in which cohabitation emerged on two colleges are presented. A limited portrait of some of the characteristics of students who would cohabit or had cohabited and the conditions under which they would consider entering into this arrangement is also provided. Data from this study revealed that a plurality of students on both campuses felt that cohabitation was acceptable when it was part of a relationship involving either planned marriage or affection. In addition, willingness to cohabit as well as cohabitation was more common among (1) males than females, (2) Jewish than Catholic and Protestant students, and (3) low church attendance students than high church attendance students. Between 10% and 15% of the students on the campuses were cohabiting.

KEY WORDS: cohabitation; college; sex; heterosexual; student.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s, feature articles began appearing in the mass media reporting on unmarried college students living together (Shepard, 1966; Klemesrud, 1968; Wynn, 1967; and Block 1968). Furthermore, the national news media brought this living arrangement to the attention of the public when they reported the action that Barnard College took against one of its students who was violating college housing regulations by living with a male Columbia student (Klemesrud, 1968).

Observers of the college scene indicate that cohabitation was not prevalent among college students, at least on a large scale, until recently. At the close of the 1960s, however, a number of conditions provided a climate on
college campuses that was conducive to the emergence of this pattern. Off-
campus housing rules were relaxed, the “pill” became readily available, and
many students had adopted an intellectual philosophy about the desirability of
sex accompanying affection (Reiss, 1967).

Although the mass media presented interesting accounts of small numbers
of couples who had lived together and speculated on the prevalence of this
arrangement, in 1969 there were no hard data available on the prevalence of
this arrangement on college campuses, on the types of students who had co-
habited or would cohabit, or on the circumstances under which this arrange-
ment was considered appropriate.

This article presents some data from a study of student cohabitation on
two college campuses conducted between 1969 and 1970. Two cross-sectional
surveys were made, one at a large Midwestern university and another at a small
Northeastern state college. In both cases, an attempt was made to obtain a repre-
sentative sample of the student body. The large size of the Midwestern university,
however, made this extremely difficult. Therefore, while comparisons will be
made between the two campuses, it is recognized that differences between the
two campuses may be a function of the different sampling procedures.

Questionnaires were administered to students in selected upper and lower
division courses. A sample of 539 students was obtained from the Midwestern
university which included students from the colleges of Administrative Science,
Agriculture and Home Economics, Education, Engineering, Humanities, Social
and Behavioral Sciences, Math and Physical Sciences, and Medicine. A sample
of 500 students was obtained from the Northeastern campus which included
students from all divisions of the college: Arts, Science, Education and Health,
Physical Education, and Recreation.

RESULTS

In order to ascertain the climate in which cohabitation emerged, students
were first asked to indicate the circumstances under which they felt premarital
coitus was appropriate. Roughly half of the students on both campuses required
some kind of relationship — engagement, contemplation of marriage, affection-
ate relationship — to be present prior to engaging in premarital coitus. The lar-
gest number of students considered premarital coitus to be acceptable when
there was a genuine affectional relationship and when effective contraception
was employed (see Table I).

About 20% of the students on both campuses considered desire plus
effective contraception to be an acceptable condition for coitus, while approx-
imately 10% considered desire alone to be an adequate justification of inter-
course. Nearly twice as many men as women considered coitus acceptable
when both parties desired it and employed effective methods of contraception,