

Living together: The best way to divorce-proof a marriage?

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Young adults see living together as the best way to protect against divorce, not as an alternative to marriage, a University of Michigan researcher says.

"For a long time, cohabitation has been viewed as a challenge to the institution of marriage," said U-M sociologist Pamela Smock. "But young adults we interviewed are more likely to see living together as a good way to protect against [divorce](#)."

Smock, a research scientist at the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR), is the co-author of an article in the current issue of the newsletter of the National Council of Family Relations. In the article, Smock and

Bowling Green State University sociologist Wendy Manning review findings from a recent qualitative study of more than 350 young adults in the Midwest.

"Our participants come from diverse social classes and racial and ethnic backgrounds," Smock said. "They are Latino, white, and African American. They are social workers, waiters, truck drivers, electricians, teachers, home health care aides, prison guards, part-time students, sales clerks, and paralegals. And they are unemployed."

Most study participants were either living with someone at the time of the interview, or had been living with someone in the recent past. When asked about their relationships, many brought up the subject of divorce.

"Everyone had a divorce story," Smock said. "Either their [parents](#), their relatives, their friends, or all of these, had been divorced." Roughly half of the participants in the study did not grow up with both biological parents.

"Based on experience, young adults are well aware that marriage can be fragile and they want to do whatever they can to avoid a failed marriage," Smock said. "For many, that means living with someone before they consider getting married."

According to Smock and Manning, three themes emerged when the young adults explained why cohabitation is a good way to "divorce-proof" a marriage:

--Socks and toothpaste: Living together is the best way to discover the "real" person and decide whether you are compatible over the long haul.

--The test drive: Living together is a smart way to gain information to decide whether you want to get married.

--A sure-fire antidote to divorce: Not getting married in the first place is the only way to guarantee you won't wind up getting divorced.

According to Smock and Manning, cohabitation serves to weed out marriages least likely to succeed. The value of these "premarital divorces," they point out, was first identified by University of Wisconsin-Madison social scientists Larry Bumpass and Jim Sweet.

"This idea lost currency for some time, with the debate about cohabitation centering on whether it was eroding the institution of [marriage](#)," Smock said. "But it's an idea that we're hearing loud and clear in the voices of the young adults we've interviewed, many of whom are convinced that living together is the best way to keep divorce at bay."

Provided by University of Michigan ([news](#) : [web](#))

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