

Religious Heterogamy and Relationship Stability: A Comparison of Married and Cohabiting Unions

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Many studies have explored dynamics within religiously heterogamous marriages, but little is known about religiously heterogamous cohabiting unions. Using data from the Fragile Families Study, this study examines the influence of religious heterogamy on union stability among married and cohabiting couples. Results suggest that religious heterogamy is more common in cohabiting unions than marriages. Results also suggest that cohabiting unions are more likely to dissolve than marriages, and the risk of separation is higher for religiously heterogamous cohabiting unions (especially those in which one partner is religious and the other is not) than religiously heterogamous marriages. Finally, there is evidence showing that some religiously heterogamous cohabiting couples have a higher risk of relationship dissolution than religiously heterogamous married couples due to lower relationship quality. Overall, this study extends the religion and family literature by showing that religious differences may lead to greater instability for cohabiting relationships than marriages.

A sizeable body of research suggests that religious heterogamy (relationships in which each partner identifies with a different religious affiliation) is associated with lower marital stability (e.g., Bahr 1981; Heaton and Pratt 1990; Lehrer and Chiswick 1993; Call and Heaton 1997). Religion helps to form values, beliefs, and attitudes among individuals, and couples who share these beliefs are more likely to remain married and maintain a happy marital relationship (Heaton 1984; Ortega, Whitt, and Williams, Jr. 1988; Lehrer and Chiswick 1993). In contrast, differences in religious beliefs may create strain in a relationship. Indeed, religiously heterogamous marriages are associated with increased marital conflict, lower marital happiness, lower support for children, and an increased likelihood of divorce (Ortega et al. 1988; Call and Heaton 1997; Sherkat and Ellison 1999; Curtis and Ellison 2002; Petts and Knoester 2007).

Although the link between religious heterogamy and marital instability is well-established, little is known about the influence of religious heterogamy within cohabiting unions. Most individuals enter into a cohabiting relationship at some point in life, and cohabitation has become a more accepted living arrangement, especially among low-income and younger populations. (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006; Manning and Brown 2006). Given the prevalence of cohabitation in the U.S., it is important to examine whether and how cohabiting relationships are different from or similar to marriages.

This study aims to increase our understanding of religiously heterogamous relationships by examining the relationship between religious heterogamy and relationship stability within marital and cohabiting unions. Two research questions guide this study. First, is religious heterogamy associated with increased instability among both married and cohabiting couples? Second, are religiously heterogamous cohabiting relationships more or less likely to dissolve

than marital relationships? On the one hand, religiously heterogamous cohabiting relationships may be more likely to dissolve; without the barriers of divorce preventing a breakup, couples may be more likely to dissolve a cohabiting relationship due to religious differences. On the other hand, cohabiting couples are often more tolerant and less religious. Thus, religious heterogamy may be more common among cohabiting couples, and the informal nature of many cohabiting relationships may lead cohabiting individuals to be more accepting of religious differences.

Five years of longitudinal data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study are used to examine whether religiously heterogamous couples are more likely to dissolve their relationship than religiously homogamous couples, and whether this relationship differs by union type. The Fragile Families data is well-suited for this study because (a) information from both partners was collected, allowing for an examination of religious differences, (b) the focus is on low-income or “fragile” families, which includes a high rate of cohabitation, and (c) three follow-up interviews were conducted, allowing for an examination of whether religious heterogamy is associated with union stability.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Religion and Family

The institutions of religion and family are closely linked, and numerous studies have linked religious values and practices to positive family outcomes such as well-being for adults and children, higher relationship quality among both parents and children, lower levels of family conflict, greater social support, increased interaction, and stronger family bonds (Abbott, Berry, and Meridith 1990; Ellison 1991; Call and Heaton 1997; Pearce and Axinn 1998; Edgell 2006).

There are a variety of reasons to explain why religion is associated with positive family outcomes. First, religious institutions provide opportunities for families to interact with one another and strengthen family bonds (Abbott et al. 1990). In addition to regular religious services, religious rituals such as baptisms and bar mitzvah's also help to bring families closer together. Furthermore, religious institutions often stress family values, encouraging people to be kind and loving parents, supportive partners, and forgiving, affectionate people (Greeley 1991; Wilcox 2004).

Involvement in religion may also help to enmesh families within a larger moral community that provides social support to both parents and children (Stark 1996; Smith 2003; Edgell 2006). Interactions within a religious community help to reinforce religious values and norms, which may help to strengthen family relationships. Parents can rely on other members of the religious community for parenting guidance and support, and these communities may also act as agents of social control, deterring individuals from engaging in activities that would be harmful to themselves or their families (Smith 2003).

Finally, religion may be an especially important source of social support for low-income families or families that are struggling in other ways. Many people turn to religion in times of difficulty, and numerous studies suggest that various religious practices (prayer, attendance, etc.) can serve as useful coping mechanisms that help individuals to deal with their problems (Ellison 1991; Mirola 1999; Lichter and Carmalt 2009). In addition, many religious institutions offer specific resources such as childcare and financial aid to families that are in need (Edgell 2006).

Religious Heterogamy and Marriage

Within the religion and family literature, a large body of research links religious beliefs and practices to marital quality, marital happiness, and marital stability (Ortega et al. 1988; Call

and Heaton 1997; Sherkat and Ellison 1999). Many religious institutions emphasize marriage, stress the importance of lifelong, committed relationships, and focus much of their programming and teaching to married couples and families (Edgell 2006; Wilcox, Chaves, and Franz 2004). Indeed, religious individuals are more likely to get married than non-religious individuals, and religious involvement increases the likelihood that a marriage remains stable over time (Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992; Call and Heaton 1997).

Although religion may provide a number of benefits to married couples, these benefits may only be realized among couples who share religious beliefs. Couples who share religious beliefs may also share a set of values and worldviews, increasing solidarity and stability in the relationship (Lehrer and Chiswick 1993; Call and Heaton 1997; Kalmijn 1998). Religion may also increase relationship quality as religious individuals often place more value on creating and sustaining good relationships. As a result, homogamous couples may experience closer companionship and bonding due to shared religious beliefs (Lehrer and Chiswick 1993; Mahoney et al. 2003). Furthermore, religious homogamy may increase the likelihood that married couples are enmeshed in the same social network; couples who share beliefs and attend religious services together may be more likely to receive social support from a religious community (Call and Heaton 1997; Kalmijn 1998).

In contrast, differences in religious beliefs and practices between spouses may be problematic. Dissimilar religious beliefs may result in differing worldviews, beliefs, and values about a variety of things such as housework, raising children, and gender roles within the family (Kalmijn 1998). These differing views may increase marital conflict and decrease marital happiness as couples disagree on a variety of decisions (Heaton 1984; Chinitz and Brown 2001; Curtis and Ellison 2002). In addition, religiously heterogamous couples may not have the same

resources for handling conflict as same-faith couples, such as conflict resolution and adjustment techniques, further increasing the likelihood of conflict within heterogamous marriages (Wilson and Filsinger 1986; Pearce and Axinn 1998).

Having children present in the household may further increase marital conflict among couples with different religious beliefs (Crohan 1996). Parents often desire to pass on religious beliefs to children, even if they do not have strong beliefs themselves (Berman 1968; Wilcox 2002). Thus, religion may be discussed more frequently in families with young children as parents decide how best to raise their kids. As a result, marital conflict may be greater in religiously heterogamous families with children as these families are forced to discuss their religious differences and how best to raise their children.

Differing beliefs and values as well as higher marital conflict increases the likelihood that religiously heterogamous marriages end in divorce (Bahr 1981; Curtis and Ellison 2002; Heaton 2002). Among heterogamous couples, the risk of divorce may be even greater when there is more religious distance between spouses. That is, couples who adhere to very different religious beliefs (e.g., one spouse claims a religious denomination and the other spouse is not religious) may be more likely to divorce than couples who belong to distinct, yet quite similar, denominations (e.g., both spouses belong to different mainline Protestant denominations). Furthermore, because the Fragile Families data focuses on couples who just recently had a child, it is possible that the relationship between religious heterogamy and marital instability may be stronger among these new parents.

Religion, Cohabitation, and Relationship Stability

Although many studies have examined the role of religion in marital relationships, less is known about religion in cohabiting relationships. Cohabitation has increasingly become a

common family form in the U.S.; most couples now cohabit prior to getting married, and at least one in eight children are born into a cohabiting family (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Stanley, Whitton, and Markman 2004; Brown 2005). Given the prevalence of this family form, it is important to examine the implications of these relationships for both adults and children. Numerous studies have explored the similarities and differences between cohabitation and marriage, but little research has focused on how religion may function in similar and different ways in cohabiting families. One recent study suggests that religious participation is associated with higher relationship quality among both cohabiting and married couples (Wolfinger and Wilcox 2008), that this study extends this research by focusing on whether religious differences between partners are more or less likely to lead to relationship dissolution among cohabiters than married couples.

There are a number of reasons to believe that religious heterogamy may be equally or more likely to lead to relationship dissolution among cohabiting couples. Similar to married couples, religiously heterogamous cohabiting couples may have different values and worldviews, which may create conflict, resulting in lower relationship quality, more emotional distance between the couple, and a greater risk of breaking up (Curtis and Ellison 2002; Heaton 2002).

Because cohabiting relationships are more unstable than marriages (Teachman 2003; Manning, Smock, and Majumdar 2004), any conflict may be increase the risk of relationship dissolution. Whereas divorce presents a barrier to marriage (albeit a fairly easy barrier to overcome), there are fewer obstacles to ending a cohabiting relationship. Thus, arguments over religious differences may be more likely to lead a couple to end their cohabiting relationship. Indeed, there is some evidence that cohabiters are more likely than married individuals to dissolve the relationship when each partner has dissimilar beliefs (Hohmann-Marriott 2006).

Many individuals view cohabitation as a way to test out a relationship before marriage (Axinn and Thornton 1992; Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman 2009). Because cohabitation is not institutionalized, many people cohabit to see whether they ultimately want to marry his/her partner. During this “trial period”, couples may uncover many things about their partner and be forced to work out these differences. Thus, religiously heterogamous couples may attempt to work out their religious differences while they cohabit. As such, cohabitation may help to screen couples; couples that discuss religious differences and decide how best to handle those differences may get married, whereas those who cannot reconcile these differences break up (Blackwell and Lichter 2004). Indeed, cohabiting relationships are more likely to be heterogamous on a variety of characteristics, and also more likely to dissolve than married unions (Blackwell and Lichter 2004). In contrast, marriage may be selective of either religiously homogamous couples or religiously heterogamous couples that have developed a strategy to deal with their religious differences.

Religious heterogamy may also be more likely to lead to instability among cohabiting couples due to the stigma of cohabitation in many religious communities. Because religious denominations often view living together prior to marriage as sinful (Christiano 2000; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995; Edgell 2006), cohabiting couples may be ostracized from a religious community. Thus, they may not have access to the social support networks, teachings about families and relationships, and other resources that married couples receive. Lack of access to resources that may help families deal with difficulties in their relationship and elsewhere may increase the likelihood of relationship dissolution among cohabiting couples.

Although there are reasons to expect that religious heterogamy is more likely to lead to relationship dissolution among cohabiting couples, it is also possible that religiously

heterogamous cohabiters are less likely to end their relationship than religiously heterogamous married couples. Cohabiters are less likely to be traditional, and less likely to be religious than married individuals (Williams and Lawler 2001; Hohmann-Marriott 2006). Because cohabitation is stigmatized in religious communities, religious individuals are more likely to avoid these unions. As a result, cohabitation as a family form is selective of less religious individuals. Even though cohabiting individuals may still identify with a religious denomination (often times the religion in which they were raised), they attend religious services less frequently and place less importance on religion than married individuals (Thornton et al. 1992; Lehrer 2000). If individuals have low levels of religiosity or are not religiously active at all, then any religious differences between partners are likely to be less problematic than if both partners felt strongly in their religious beliefs. Thus, whereas religious heterogamy is associated with marital instability as couples clash over religious differences, religious heterogamy within cohabiting relationships may be less significant if cohabiters are not actively involved in a religious community.

HYPOTHESES

The conceptual framework leads to a number of hypotheses regarding the relationships between religious heterogamy, union status, and relationship dissolution. First, I expect that religious heterogamy will be associated with an increased risk for relationship dissolution among both married and cohabiting unions. Second, I expect that religiously heterogamous cohabiting unions will be more likely to dissolve than religiously heterogamous marriages due to the lack of social support for cohabiting couples and the lack of barriers to union separation. Third, I expect that relationship quality will partially mediate the relationship between religious heterogamy and relationship dissolution. That is, religiously heterogamous couples are less likely to feel close to

one another and more likely to argue with one another, both of which increase the likelihood of relationship dissolution.

DATA AND METHODS

Sample

Data from four waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW) are used in this study. This is a longitudinal, birth cohort study that was designed to follow new and mainly unwed parents and follows 4,898 children born between 1998 and 2000. Parents were interviewed at the hospital shortly after the child's birth and then again for three follow-up interviews approximately one, three, and five years after the child's birth. The FFCW is an urban study that is representative of all nonmarital births in cities with populations of over 200,000. There are also a sizeable number of married parents included in the study, allowing for a comparison of married and cohabiting unions. Specifically, 4,798 mothers and 3,742 fathers in 20 cities were interviewed at the baseline, and retention rates for each of the follow-up interviews is over 80% (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001).

Of the 3,830 families in which both mothers and fathers were interviewed, 1,208 were excluded from this sample because the parents were not married or living together at the time of their child's birth. An additional 45 couples were excluded due to missing data on religious affiliation, and 137 cases were deleted due to inconsistencies in dates reported by the mother (the date of union separation occurs prior to the baseline interview, the date at which the marriage or cohabitation began occurs after the baseline interview, etc.). For this study, I then focus on 2,440 couples who were either married ($N = 996$) or cohabiting ($N = 1444$) at the time of their child's birth, and couples in which the mother reported when the marital or cohabitating relationship began (at the one-year follow-up interview).

Dependent Variable

Relationship dissolution (or union separation) is the dependent variable for this study. A relationship is considered to be dissolved if the couple is no longer married or residing together in the same household. Couples were at risk for dissolution starting at the birth of their child (i.e., the date of the baseline interview) until either the relationship ended, or couples were censored. Relationship dissolution is treated as a discrete event, and couples are right-censored if they (a) dropped out of the survey or (b) were in an intact relationship at the end of the fourth wave of interviews. Because this study focuses on whether or not a relationship ends, cohabiting couples who transition into marriage ($n = 441$; 31.39% of cohabiters) are considered stable because the union remains intact (even though the type of union changes). The cumulative observed period for this sample is 9,069 person-years. Relationship dissolution is measured by the month and the year in which the relationship ended, as reported by the mother in the second, third, and fourth waves of data. When mothers reported a separation but did not provide a month or year of separation, they were coded as separating in January of the year in which they were interviewed.

Independent Variables

Union Type. Union type is taken from mothers' reports at the baseline interview of whether she was married to or residing with the biological father of her new child.

Religious Heterogamy. Based on previous research, three measures of religious heterogamy are used in order to capture relationships with varying levels of religious distance (Petts and Knoester 2007). Faith-None Heterogamy indicates couples in which one partner claims a religious affiliation and the other claims no religious affiliation. Across-Religion Heterogamy indicates couples in which both partners identify with a different religious affiliation, and both are not Protestant. Inter-Protestant Heterogamy indicates couples in which

both partners identify with a different Protestant denomination. To create these variables, religious denominations were first categorized using the classification scheme created by Steensland et al. (2000). Religious heterogamy was then determined by differences between these categories of religious affiliation.

Religious Participation. Both mother's and father's religious participation were measured at each wave, and are included in the models as time-varying variables. Each parent was asked how often he/she attends religious services. Responses were recoded to range from 0 = *never* to 5 = *once a week or more*.

Mediating Variables

Two variables are included to assess whether religious heterogamy increases the risk of relationship dissolution because of lower relationship quality. At each interview, mothers were asked how often (ranging from 1 = *never* to 3 = *often*) fathers were (a) fair and willing to compromise when you had a disagreement, (b) expressed love and affection for you, (c) insulted or criticized your ideas (reverse coded), and (d) encouraged or helped you to do things that were important to you. The mean of these questions at each wave ($\alpha = .55$) is used to indicate the level of emotional support in the relationship. In addition, mothers were asked how often (ranging from 1 = *never* to 3 = *often*) they disagreed with fathers in the previous month about money, sex, the pregnancy, drinking and drugs, and being faithful ($\alpha = .63$). The mean is used as the indicator of relationship conflict, and this measure is treated as a time-invariant variable and taken from the baseline interview.

Demographic Characteristics

A number of variables are included that may account for the relationships between union type, religious heterogamy, and relationship stability. First, relationship duration is measured in

years. One year after the birth of a child, mothers were asked to report when their marital or cohabiting relationship began. Using this date, the relationship duration variable indicates the number of years the couple has been married or cohabiting prior to the start of this study. Second, mother's and father's age is measured in years and measured at the baseline interview. Third, mother's race is categorized as White (reference group), Black, Latino, or other racial group. An additional variable is used to indicate racially heterogamous relationships. Fourth, two variables are used to indicate the family structure in which the mother and father were raised. These dummy variables indicate whether both the mother and the father lived with both of their parents at the age of 15. Fifth, a time-varying variable is included to indicate the number of kids (in addition to the focal child) that the couple has at each wave. Finally, a dummy variable is included to indicate whether either partner has been married prior to the beginning of this study.

Socioeconomic Status

Five variables are used to measure SES. Mother's educational attainment indicates the highest level of education that mothers have achieved at the baseline survey, categorized as less than high school (reference group), high school diploma, some college completed, and college degree. A dummy variable is also included to indicate couples in which both partners have achieved a different level of education. Household income, ranging from 1 (under \$5,000) to 9 (greater than \$75,000), is treated as a time-varying variable. This measure indicates the amount of income within the household over the past year, and is measured at each wave. Time-varying dummy variables are also used to indicate whether the father and mother are currently working at each wave (1 = worked for pay during the week prior to each interview). Finally, a dummy variable is included to indicate whether the mother received welfare benefits or food stamps in the past year. This is a time-varying variable that is measured at each wave.

Analytic Strategy

Life-table estimates and Cox proportional hazards models are used to examine whether religious heterogamy is associated with relationship stability, and also whether this relationship differs by the type of union (i.e., married or cohabiting). Life-tables allow for a description of the cumulative proportion of married and cohabiting couples who have ended their relationship by the fifth year after their child's birth. In addition, Cox models are used because (a) they do not assume any particular survival distribution, and (b) they allow for the inclusion of time-varying variables, which is useful in examining how relationships may change over time (Allison 1984).

The analysis proceeds in a number of stages. First, I examine mean values of all variables used in this study, and whether the means differ by union status to explore the differences between married and cohabiting unions. Second, life-table estimates are obtained for both married and cohabiting couples by type of religious heterogamy to gain an understanding of the overall rates of dissolution within each category. Third, Cox models are used to examine whether union type and religious heterogamy are associated with relationship dissolution. Results are presented in four stepwise models: (a) union type and religious heterogamy, (b) adding controls for religious participation to examine whether this relationship can be explained by levels of religiosity, (c) adding demographic controls and SES variables, and (d) including variables that assess relationship quality to examine whether the relationships between union type, religious heterogamy, and relationship dissolution is partially mediated by relationship quality. Finally, following the same stepwise process, separate models are run for each type of religious heterogamy in order to test whether the risk of dissolution differs between religiously heterogamous cohabiting unions and religiously heterogamous marriages.

Most variables have very few missing values. However, a couple of key variables – household income and emotional support – have a fair amount of missing cases. Moreover, the number of missing values for the time-varying father variables increases in later waves as fathers drop out of the study (these cases remain in the sample as long as the mother is interviewed and reports the date of dissolution or gets censored). To account for missing values and retain a larger sample, regression-based techniques are used to impute missing data. Supplementary analyses using only baseline values (omitting the time-varying values in later waves) and listwise deletion produced similar results as those presented here.

RESULTS

Summary statistics for the full sample, as well as separate mean values for married and cohabiting couples, are presented in Table 1. Consistent with previous research, cohabiting couples are more likely to be religiously heterogamous and less likely to attend religious services than cohabiting couples. Specifically, less than half of cohabiting couples (48%) are religiously homogamous, compared to 65% of married couples. Cohabiting couples are also more likely than married couples to be in a heterogamous union with greater religious distance (faith-none and across-religion heterogamy), and attend religious services a few times a year on average.

----- Insert Table 1 about here -----

The remaining results in Table 1 are also consistent with previous research. Married couples have been together longer on average (4 years compared to 2 years), are older on average, are more likely to have been raised by both biological parents, have higher levels of education and income, are more likely to be working, and are less likely to have received welfare in the previous year. Also as expected, cohabiting couples are less likely to receive emotional support from their partner and report higher levels of conflict.

----- Insert Table 2 about here -----

Life-table estimates are presented in Table 2 and Figure 1. These results show the cumulative proportion of unions that have dissolved by the fourth wave of data (which was collected 5 years after the birth of the child). By the end of the observed period, approximately one-third of cohabiting unions dissolved, compared to only 13.63% of marriages. This difference highlights the relative instability of cohabiting unions, and supports previous research.

Somewhat surprisingly, results in Table 2 suggest that the cumulative proportions of marriages that dissolve are similar for both religiously heterogamous and religiously homogamous couples. Although the proportions are slightly different (e.g., 20% of inter-Protestant marriages dissolve compared to 12% of homogamous marriages), these differences are not statistically significant. This finding contrasts with previous research showing that religious heterogamy is associated with instability, and suggests that perhaps any presence of religion is beneficial for fragile families (Wolfinger and Wilcox 2008).

----- Insert Figure 1 about here -----

In contrast, faith-none cohabiting couples and cohabiting couples with different Protestant affiliations are more likely to end their relationships than religiously homogamous cohabiters. Specifically, over 42% of faith-none and inter-Protestant cohabiters dissolve their relationship by the 5th year after their child's birth, which is 30% higher than the rate of dissolution for religiously homogamous cohabiting couples. These results suggest that the risk of dissolution is higher for cohabiting relationships in which the religious distance between partners is greater. Faith-none couples have perhaps the greatest religious distance (religion vs. no religion), and supplementary analyses suggest the majority (just under two-thirds) of the inter-Protestant relationships have one partner that identifies as a Black Protestant. Although it seems

as though inter-Protestant relationships should have less religious distance between partners, the uniqueness of Black Protestantism may contribute to greater instability when these beliefs are not shared in a cohabiting relationship (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Hunt and Hunt 2001) These results are further illustrated in Figure 1.

Table 3 presents results from Cox models that assess the relationships between union type, religious heterogamy, and relationship dissolution. Results are presented as hazard ratios, which describe how a one-unit change in a variable influences the relative risk of dissolution. Results in Model 1 further confirm that relative instability of cohabiting unions; cohabiting couples are almost 3 times more likely to dissolve their union than married couples. In addition, there is also evidence that religious heterogamy is associated with relationship instability. Faith-none relationships are 52% more likely to dissolve than heterogamous relationships, and inter-Protestant couples are 56% more likely to end their relationship than religiously heterogamous couples. Results are fairly consistent when controlling for religious participation (Model 2), providing further evidence that greater religious distance between partners may create instability in the relationship.

----- Insert Table 3 about here -----

Results in Model 3 suggest that SES and demographic characteristics account for much difference in risk of dissolution between cohabitation and marriage, and all of the significant difference between religious heterogamy and religious homogamy. Once SES and demographic variables are included, cohabiting couples are only 57% more likely to dissolve their relationship than married couples, supporting previous research suggesting that instability in cohabiting relationship is due in large part to cohabitation being selective of minorities, younger individuals, and individuals with less education and lower incomes. Indeed, supplementary analyses suggest

that SES and relationship duration explains much of this difference, as cohabiting couples are more likely to have lower SES and have a newer relationship than married couples, both of which increase the likelihood of instability. Results in Model 3 also show that the relationship between religious heterogamy and risk of dissolution is no longer statistically significant. Supplementary analyses suggest that race is driving these results. The majority of religiously heterogamous couples are also interracial couples, and racial differences appear to be more influential in predicting relationship dissolution than religious differences.

As expected, relationship quality is associated with union instability. As shown in Model 4, receiving emotional support from the father reduces the risk of relationship dissolution, and conflict between partners increases the risk of relationship dissolution. However, in contrast to my hypotheses, these factors do not mediate the relationships between religious heterogamy, union type, and relationship instability.

To analyze whether the relationship between religious heterogamy and union instability differs by union type, separate models were run for faith-none, across-religion, and inter-Protestant heterogamous unions as well as religiously homogamous unions. These models follow the same stepwise format as presented in Table 3, and only the hazard ratios for cohabiting vs. married unions are presented to focus on whether religiously heterogamous cohabiting couples are more or less likely to dissolve their relationships than religiously heterogamous marriages. Results are presented in Table 4.

----- Insert Table 4 about here -----

As expected, bivariate results (Model 1) suggest that cohabiting relationships have a greater risk of dissolution than marriages regardless of religious composition; faith-none cohabiting couples are over 3.5 times more likely to dissolve their relationship than faith-none

marriages, inter-Protestant cohabiters and religiously homogamous cohabiters are just less than 3 times more likely to dissolve their relationship than inter-Protestant and homogamous married couples, and across-religion cohabiting relationships are approximately twice as likely to dissolve within 5 years of the birth of a child than across-religion marriages. These results are consistent when controlling for religious participation (Model 2).

Differences between marriage and cohabitation emerge in Model 3 when SES and other demographic characteristics are controlled for. Although results in Table 3 showed that cohabiting relationships have a higher risk of dissolution than marriages, results in Model 3 of Table 4 suggest that this varies by the religious composition of the union. Cohabiting relationships with greater religious distance are at a greater risk of dissolving than marriages; faith-none and across-religion cohabiters are approximately twice as likely to dissolve their relationship than faith-none and across-religion married couples. In contrast, once SES and other demographic characteristics are controlled for, the risk of dissolution for religiously heterogamous couples and inter-Protestant couples are not significantly different between cohabiters and married couples. This suggests that religious differences may be especially problematic in cohabiting relationships. Cohabiting couples may have fewer resources to rely on to deal with these differences, and the lack of barriers to relationship dissolution may lead cohabiting couples with large religious differences to be more likely to end their relationship due to differences in beliefs and values.

Indeed, results in Model 4 suggest that religiously heterogamous cohabiting relationships are at greater risk for dissolution due to lower levels of emotional support and higher levels of conflict. As hypothesized, relationship quality does appear to mediate the relationships between union type, religious heterogamy, and relationship dissolution. Once the measures of emotional

support and conflict are included, the risk of dissolution between religiously heterogamous cohabiting relationships and marriages are no longer statistically significant. This suggests that the reason why faith-none cohabiters and across-religion cohabiters are more likely to dissolve their relationships than married couples is that cohabiters may be less likely to receive emotional support and more likely to argue with one another.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to extend our knowledge on religious heterogamy by examining the influence of religious heterogamy on the stability of cohabiting unions and whether the relationship between religious heterogamy and union instability differed by union type. Overall, results coincide with previous research showing that cohabiting unions are more likely to be religiously heterogamous and more likely to dissolve than married unions. Furthermore, there is some evidence supporting the hypothesis that religiously heterogamous cohabiting unions (especially those with greater religious distance between spouses) have a greater risk of dissolution than religiously heterogamous married unions.

As expected, religious heterogamy is associated with an increased risk of relationship dissolution among cohabiting couples. Cohabiting partners who adhere to very different religious backgrounds may each have a different set of values and beliefs, which may limit the support, closeness, and affection that cohabiters may share with one another as well as increase relationship conflict. Specifically, cohabiting couples in which one partner is religious and the other is not as well as couples in which each partner has different Protestant beliefs are more likely to end their relationship within five years after the birth of a child than religiously homogamous cohabiting couples. Although I expected that across-religion heterogamous couples would also have a greater risk of relationship dissolution, the lack of a significant difference may

be due to a convergence between Catholicism and Protestant denominations. Removing across-religion relationships between Catholics and Protestants in supplementary analyses suggested that across-religion heterogamous cohabiting couples were more likely to dissolve their relationships than religiously homogamous couples. Future research should continue to explore similarities and differences between Catholics and Protestants and how these variations may influence union stability.

Somewhat surprisingly, results from this study did not support my hypothesis that religious heterogamy would be associated with an increased risk of dissolution among married couples. There are a couple of possible explanations for this finding. First, some studies suggest that differences in religious affiliation are less important than differences in religious participation and religious importance when predicting marital quality and conflict (Curtis and Ellison 2002; Lichter and Carmalt 2009). Thus, simply belonging to different religious denominations may be less likely to increase relationship instability than differences in religious practices. Alternatively, religiously heterogamous married couples may still be receiving social support and guidance from religious communities that provide resources to build and sustain a relationship. In contrast to cohabiting couples that may be stigmatized from religious communities, married couples may continue to receive support from religious organizations even if they do not share the same religious beliefs. This support may be especially beneficial to minority families, low-income families, and families that face other social or economic stresses, all of whom face a greater risk of relationship dissolution than families who are more financially stable.

The main goal of this study was to examine whether the relationship between religious heterogamy and union instability differed between married and cohabiting couples. Consistent

with my hypothesis, religiously heterogamous cohabiting unions have a higher risk of dissolution than religiously heterogamous marriages. Even after controlling for SES and demographic characteristics, greater religious distance between partners increases the risk of relationship dissolution for cohabiting couples relative to married couples. Large differences in religious beliefs between partners may result in increased conflict over worldviews, family values, and how to raise their new child. Couples with very different beliefs may also provide less social and emotional support to one another; sharing religious beliefs often lead couples to feel more emotionally and spiritually connected to one another, and religiously heterogamous cohabiting couples may lack this connection. Indeed, results support my hypothesis that relationship quality mediates the relationships between religious heterogamy, union type, and instability; religiously heterogamous cohabiting couples are more likely to end their relationship than religiously heterogamous married couples due to greater conflict and lower emotional support.

Although the focus of this study is on religious heterogamy, results also suggest that religiously homogamous cohabiters are no more likely to end their relationship than religiously homogamous married couples (once SES and other demographic characteristics are accounted for). Despite the stigma of cohabitation within many religious communities and the high rate of dissolution for cohabiting relationships, cohabiting couples who share religious beliefs seem to receive some benefits that increase the stability of their relationship. Sharing beliefs may result in greater emotional and spiritual support for one another, fewer arguments, and agreements on how to raise children, all of which may increase the stability of a relationship regardless of union type.

There are also some important limitations to note. First, the Fragile Families data includes a disproportionate number of low-income families, minorities, and other characteristics

that increase the risk of relationship dissolution. Although these data are useful because they contain a sizeable number of cohabiting couples as well as a sample of married individuals to use for comparison, the results for this study are not generalizable to families who are more financially stable and families without any children. Future research should explore whether the relationships between religious heterogamy, union type, and relationship instability found in this study hold true for middle-class families, suburban and rural families, and families without children.

Another limitation of this study is that questions about religious affiliation were not asked at each wave of data collection. Many individuals change their religious affiliation for their spouse (or partner), and religious switching may result in greater closeness and emotional support as each partner shares religious beliefs and participates in religious activities together. Supplementary analyses suggest that converting to the religion of one's spouse is significantly associated with a lower risk of relationship dissolution, and future studies should continue to examine how religious converters may be similar to or different from couples that are consistently religiously heterogamous or homogamous.

In addition, I was unable to sufficiently consider whether certain denominational combinations within heterogamous marriages had different implications for children. I would expect that greater religious distance between the denominations of each spouse would be more likely to negatively impact children's well-being. However, small sample sizes prevented a full exploration of whether certain combinations with greater religious distance result in greater conflict and lower children's well-being than marriages with less religious distance.

Despite these limitations, this study uses longitudinal data on married and cohabiting couples to contribute to the literature on religious heterogamy by showing that the relationship

between religious heterogamy and relationship stability differs by union type. This study also contributes to a larger literature on religion and family life by showing that although religion may provide a number of benefits to fragile families (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007; Wolfinger and Wilcox 2008; Lichter and Carmalt 2009), differences in religious beliefs may be a divisive force contributing to high rates of instability within fragile families. Overall, results indicate that dissimilar religious beliefs between partners increase the risk of relationship dissolution among cohabiting couples. Furthermore, religiously heterogamous cohabiters have a higher risk of dissolving their relationship than religiously heterogamous married couples due to higher levels of conflict and lower emotional support between partners.

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Table 1. Summary Statistics			
	Total	Married	Cohabiting
Religious Composition			
Religious Homogamy	0.54	0.65	0.48 *
Faith-None Heterogamy	0.15	0.09	0.19 *
Across-Religion Heterogamy	0.19	0.15	0.21 *
Inter-Protestant Heterogamy	0.12	0.11	0.12
Religiosity			
Mother's Religious Participation	2.09	2.52	1.79 *
Father's Religious Participation	1.93	2.36	1.63 *
Demographic Characteristics			
Relationship Duration (years)	2.95	4.39	1.95 *
Mother's Age	26.20	29.29	24.07 *
Father's Age	28.77	31.67	26.75 *
White	0.29	0.44	0.20 *
Black	0.36	0.23	0.44 *
Latino	0.30	0.25	0.33 *
Other Race	0.05	0.08	0.03 *
Mixed Race Relationship	0.15	0.14	0.16
Mother's Parents Married at 15	0.50	0.65	0.39 *
Father's Parents Married at 15	0.52	0.67	0.42 *
Number of Additional Kids	1.11	1.06	1.15
Previously Married	0.17	0.14	0.19 *
SES			
Mother did not graduate high school	0.30	0.15	0.39 *
Mother has HS Education	0.28	0.20	0.34 *
Mother attended some college	0.26	0.28	0.24 *
Mother has college degree	0.17	0.37	0.03 *
Difference in Education Between Parents	0.50	0.45	0.53 *
Household Income	5.32	6.69	4.39 *
Father Working	0.86	0.93	0.81 *
Mother Working	0.41	0.49	0.36 *
Family received welfare	0.29	0.11	0.41 *
Relationship Quality			
Emotional Support	1.73	1.76	1.71 *
Conflict	0.38	0.31	0.42 *
N	2440	996	1444
<i>Note:</i> Baseline values are presented for all variables. All estimates are unweighted.			
* Indicates that cohabiters are significantly different ($p < .05$) from married individuals at the time of the child's birth.			

Table 2. Cumulative Proportion of Unions Ending in Separation by Union Status at Child's Birth and Religious Composition of Union

	Total (N = 2,440)	Homogamy (n = 1338)	Faith-None (n = 359)	Across-Religion (n = 459)	Inter-Protestant (n = 284)
Married at birth (n = 996)	13.63	12.03	14.81	15.13	20.03
Cohabiting at birth (n = 1444)	33.41	29.30	42.13 *	29.26	42.95 *
Total (N = 2440)	25.31	20.90	35.43 *	24.56	34.39 *

Note: Results based on life-table estimates. All estimates are unweighted.

* Indicates a significant difference ($p < .05$) from religiously homogamous unions.

Figure 1. Cumulative Proportion of Unions Ending in Separation by Union Status and Religious Composition of Union

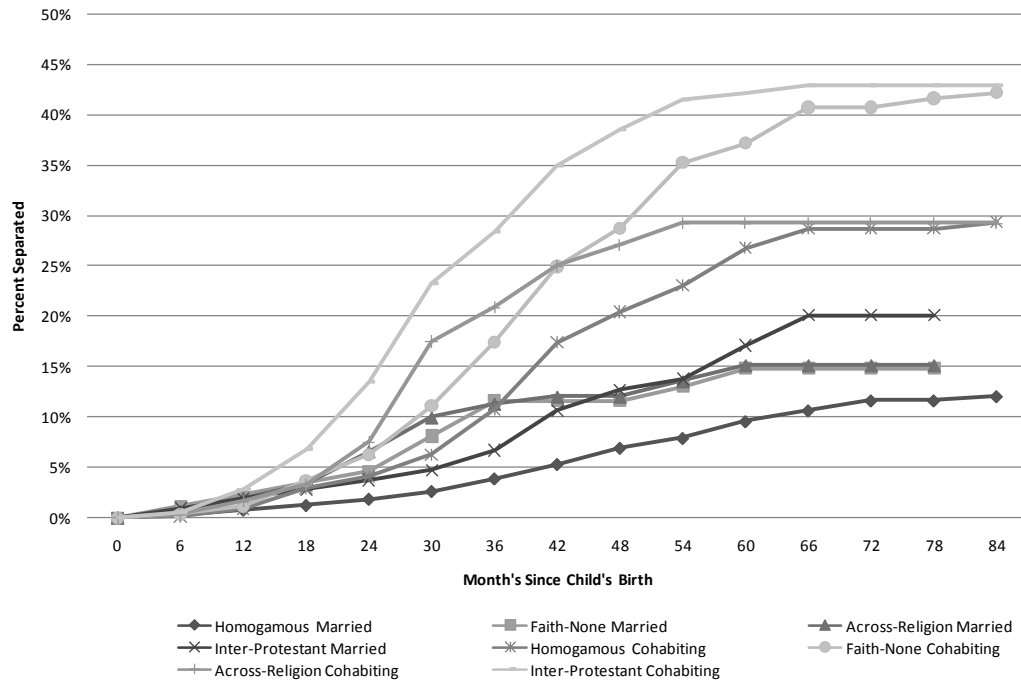


Table 3. Hazard Ratios of Union Separation by Year 5 after the Birth of a Child

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Union Status				
Cohabiting	2.88 ***	2.77 ***	1.57 ***	1.55 ***
Religious Composition				
Faith-None Heterogamy	1.52 ***	1.42 **	1.10	1.07
Across-Religion Heterogamy	1.06	1.03	0.91	0.88
Inter-Protestant Heterogamy	1.56 ***	1.54 ***	1.11	1.07
Religiosity				
Mother's Religious Participation		0.97	0.99	1.00
Father's Religious Participation		0.96	0.95	0.96
Demographic Characteristics				
Relationship Duration			1.02	1.01
Mother's Age			0.96 **	0.96 ***
Father's Age			0.99	0.99
Black			1.50 ***	1.42 **
Latino			0.82	0.79
Other Race			0.87	0.86
Mixed Race Relationship			1.58 ***	1.48 ***
Mother's Parents Married at 15			0.87	0.91
Father's Parents Married at 15			0.88	0.91
Number of Additional Kids			0.97	0.96
Previously Married			1.33 *	1.30 *
SES				
Mother has HS Education			0.95	0.97
Mother attended some college			0.93	0.93
Mother has college degree			0.70	0.72
Difference in Education Between Parents			1.14	1.14
Household Income			0.97	0.98
Father Working			1.10	1.14
Mother Working			1.11	1.09
Family received welfare			1.29 **	1.26 *
Relationship Quality				
Emotional Support				0.64 ***
Conflict				1.64 ***
-2 log likelihood	8738.45	8734.73	8600.93	8554.80
N = 9,069 person-years				
<p>Note: Results from Cox Proportional Hazards Models are presented. Religious participation, number of additional kids, income, whether the mother/father is working, whether the family received welfare, and emotional support are treated as time-varying covariates. All other variables are taken from the baseline survey. All estimates are unweighted.</p>				
*p < .05 **p < .01 *** p < .001				

Table 4. Hazard Ratio of Union Separation for Cohabiting versus Married Unions by Religious Composition of Union

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Homogamy	2.96	***	2.64	***	1.34		1.35	
Faith-None Heterogamy	3.61	***	3.69	***	2.07	*	1.96	
Across-Religion Heterogamy	2.24	***	2.30	***	1.89	*	1.78	
Inter-Protestant Heterogamy	2.89	***	2.97	***	1.57		1.55	

Note: Results from separate Cox Proportional Hazards Models by religious composition of union are presented. Only the hazard ratio for cohabiting vs. married is presented. Each model number corresponds to the models presented in Table 3. All estimates are unweighted.

*p < .05 **p < .01 *** p < .001