ABSTRACT

Much of our attitudes towards life events are formed from early experiences. How we choose to conduct our adult lives can derive from experiences of all kinds. Education, religion, family, and the formation of relationships are the foundations of the ideals and values that make us who we are. The purpose of this study was to assess the differences in attitude towards cohabitation and out-of-wedlock childbirth based on when participants started dating. It was hypothesized that the earlier a person enters his/her first relationship, the more accepting he/she would be of cohabitation and out-of-wedlock childbirths.

BACKGROUND

Although actions do not necessarily reflect attitudes, the amount of people are cohabiting and having children out-of-wedlock is increasing. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), 1,485,220 unmarried women ages 15-50 years old gave birth in the United States in 2010. Nearly 4 in 10 births in the United States were to unmarried women in 2007 (Ventura, 2009). It was found that two-fifths of children would eventually live in a household in which a parent was engaged in cohabitation (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) also reported that 9.9% of households were inhabited by unmarried partners.

Sassler (2010) determined that as times are changing, so are the ideas of what is acceptable as far as a relationship is concerned. She found that the ideas of relationships have not yet been studied. Additionally, relationships with the opposite sex that take place in late adolescence affect relationships in early adulthood–especially union formation–giving evidence to the continuity between the relationship experiences of the two age groups (Foley, Chessey, & Muller, 2007).

This study took a closer look at the correlation between the age of a person’s first relationship and how that affects their attitudes toward cohabitation and out-of-wedlock childbirth. It was hypothesized that the younger a person is when entering his/her first relationship, the more accepting of these topics he/she would be.

METHOD

Participants

The majority of participants (77%, n = 768) were between the ages of 18 and 21, were racially and ethnically diverse, coming from Anglo-European Caucasian (44.6% n = 445) and African-American (13.3%, n = 133), and 68.2% were female and (n = 337) 33.8% were male.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire. Participants were asked three questions that assessed their age, racial background, and sex.

First relationship questionnaire. Participants answered a question that assessed their age at first relationship, “How old were you when you had your first boyfriend/girlfriend?” Response options ranged from 1 (10 to 15) to 5 (>18).

Attitudes towards cohabitation questionnaire. Eight scenarios were presented that assessed participants attitudes regarding cohabitation. Examples of these items include “the flexibility of a cohabiting relationship is preferable to marriage” and cohabitation is basically a trial marriage during which one realizes whether the relationship works. Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Attitudes towards out-of-wedlock childbirth questionnaire. Seven scenarios were presented that assessed participants attitudes regarding out-of-wedlock childbirth. Examples of these items include “it is morally wrong for people to conceive a child out-of-wedlock” and “if a woman becomes pregnant outside of marriage, it is a disgrace to her family.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Procedures

Participants were recruited through introduction to psychology courses at a mid-western public university and received either research credit or class extra credit for participation. All participants read and completed an informed consent letter prior to completing the 30-minute online questionnaire. Participants were first asked general demographic questions followed by sets of questions regarding their dating history, relationship attitudes, and family structure while growing up.

RESULTS

Correlations of study variables were conducted. Results indicated a positive relationship between attitudes toward cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births but no significant relationships between other study measures. Results can be found in table 1. Two one-way ANOVAs were conducted to determine the relationship between age at first relationship and attitudes toward cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births. Results were not significant for attitudes toward cohabitation. F (4, 998) = 1.64, p > .05, nor attitudes toward out-of-wedlock births, F (4, 998) = .88, p > .05.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to assess the differences in attitude towards cohabitation and out-of-wedlock childbirths based on when participants started dating. It was hypothesized that the earlier a person enters his/her first relationship, the more accepting he/she is of cohabitation and out-of-wedlock childbirths. The results of the study did not support the hypothesis.

Past research supports the fact the number of people cohabitating and having children out-of-wedlock are both increasing (e.g., Ventura, 2009). Previous studies, however, did not look at relationships between the attitudes toward cohabitation and out-of-wedlock childbirths and the age at which one started dating. It is possible that these relationships have not yet been studied.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

Like all studies, this study too has some limitations. The data analyzed in this study was collected online and involved retrospective data. Therefore, participants may not have been completely honest in their responses.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The idea that the younger a person is when he/she enters into a relationship would be more accepting may not have been completely honest in their responses. Future research into what factors may contribute to attitudes towards cohabitation and out-of-wedlock childbirth.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procedure</th>
<th>Correlation Coefficients</th>
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<tr>
<td>Birth Attitudes</td>
<td>Cohabitation Attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth Attitudes</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabitation Attitudes</td>
<td>.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>First Relationship</td>
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*p < .001