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Interdependence in Dating and Cohabiting Relationships: The Role of Cognitive Interdependence, Commitment, and Marital Intent

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Abstract

This study uses Interdependence Theory, specifically cognitive interdependence and the investment model of commitment, to further understand the impact of marital intent in cohabiting versus dating relationships. Contrary to the hypothesis posed, results revealed that individuals in cohabiting relationships and dating relationships experience similar levels of interdependence. However, people who report an intent to marry their partner, whether dating or cohabiting, have higher degrees of centrality of relationship, commitment, satisfaction, investments, and a lower level of perceived relationship alternatives than those who did not report marital intent. The results of this study suggest that marital intent may work similarly in dating relationships and cohabiting relationships, and that Interdependence Theory has utility for understanding why marital intent makes a difference in relational stability.

Keywords: cognitive interdependence, commitment, cohabitation, dating relationships, marital intent

The traditional order of events in a romantic relationship has changed throughout the years as cohabitation becomes an increasingly common option in western culture (Stanley, Whitton, Markman, 2004). Between 1960 and 2000, cohabitation increased 28-fold (Fitch, Goeken, & Ruggles, 2005), and by 2012 there were more than 7.8 million couples in America sharing a home outside of marriage (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). Nearly two thirds of newlyweds now cohabit prior to marriage (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008), and 60% of young adults actually expect to cohabit with a partner in the future (Manning, Smock, Dorius, & Cooksey, 2014).

A body of knowledge regarding the experiences, qualities, and outcomes of these relationships has accompanied this interest and researchers have sought to answer a variety of questions. Common research questions pertain to how cohabitation affects a couple's future marriage (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Bennett, Blanc, & Bloom, 1988) and the reasons why cohabitators have higher breakup rates than married relationships (Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007). In responding to questions like these, researchers have concluded that cohabiting relationships are less satisfying, less stable (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991), and less committed unions than marriage (Raley & Bumpass, 2003).

Social scientists continue to call for advances in the literature in order to "help people increase their chances of success in their most important relationships" (Stanley, Rhoades & Markman, 2006, p. 508). Toward this end, cohabitation research has primarily focused on how cohabitation affects future marriage (Hsueh, Morrison, & Doss, 2009), and relatively few studies have compared cohabitation with dating (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2012a). Studies of dating and cohabitation are worthwhile, however, given the relatively large number of people who put off marriage until later in life (Addo, 2014; Santos & Weiss, 2016) and who opt to serially cohabite or date in the meantime. Indeed, cohabitation is less likely to be a step toward marriage than it used to be (Lichter, Turner, & Sassler, 2010), and thus comparing patterns in cohabitation to those in other partnerships like dating is important part of understanding the union development process (Manning, Smock, Dorius, & Cooksey, 2014; Rhoades et al., 2012a).

A study of interdependence, in particular by measuring cognitive interdependence within cohabiting and dating relationships can provide information regarding the quality of these relationships. Cognitive interdependence is defined as the extent to which people in relationships see themselves less as individuals and more as part of a collective (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). For example, those with high cognitive interdependence are likely

to use more “we” language and report that the relationship is a more central and important part of their life (Agnew, et al., 1998). Cognitive interdependence is an important relationship quality because it is associated with higher levels of happiness, better quality relationships, healthier communication habits, and less destructive behavior during a crisis (Rusbult, 1980; Stanley et al., 2004). Relationships with a high degree of cognitive interdependence are also shown to be more satisfying and committed than relationships with a low degree of cognitive interdependence (Agnew et al., 1998).

The following section reviews the relevant literature on cohabitation as compared to marriage and dating, followed by the interdependence theories relevant to this study.

Cohabiting Unions

Cohabiting relationships have been studied by social scientists since the 1970s (Macklin, 1972). Cohabitation literature has focused largely on the effects of cohabitation on marriage and has attempted to facilitate understanding about the quality of these relationships (Brown & Booth, 1996; Hsueh, Morrison, & Doss, 2009). Cohabitation is both common and relatively short, with most of these relationships leading to marriage or termination within five years (Smock, 2000). A substantial number of studies on cohabitation report the undesirable aspects of living together before marriage. For example, there is evidence that people who cohabit before marriage exhibit decreased quality of communication after marriage (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002), invest less in their future marriage (Poortman & Mills, 2012), and are more likely to divorce (Thomson & Colella, 1992) than those who do not cohabit before marriage.

More recent scholarship has offered new insights, particularly about why cohabitation has gained in popularity despite its apparent downsides. One of the early explanations for the negative patterns in cohabitation was the selection argument; the assertion that people who cohabit tend to have personal, perhaps counter-cultural characteristics that make their relationships vulnerable, and indeed there was some evidence for this perspective (e.g., Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2004). As cohabitation becomes commonplace, however, and as the kinds of people who choose to cohabit becomes more diffuse, the selection argument has become less relevant (Manning & Cohen, 2012). Current research shows that few people choose cohabitation because they eschew marriage (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009), for example. More common reasons for cohabiting include spending time together, enjoying the convenience, or testing the relationship to see if it is marriage-ready (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). Rather than a rejection of marriage, it may be that increases in cohabitation reveal a rejection of divorce. Study results have indicated that cohabitators tend to value marriage, and are looking for choices they believe will help them avoid the high emotional, social, and financial costs of dissolving a marriage (Perelli-Harris, Berrington, Sánchez Gassen, Galezewska, & Holland, 2017). Some cohabit with an intention or plan to marry already in place, while others are unsure or wish to test the partnership first.

Premarital cohabitation is a term used to describe couples who are living together while engaged and/or are open to the idea of eventually marrying their partner. Premarital cohabiting couples view cohabitation as a step that is taken toward a legal agreement (Brown & Booth, 1996; Stanley et al., 2004). Premarital cohabitators are more likely to marry their current partner than nonmarital cohabitators, and their relational quality has been found to be similar to the relational quality of marriage (Brown & Booth, 1996).

Nonmarital cohabitation is a term to describe couples who are living together as an alternative or substitute for marriage and/or who do not plan to marry their partner (Brown & Booth, 1996; Stanley et al., 2004). Nonmarital couples’ lack of a plan to marry their cohabiting partner may be because they are unsure about the possibility of the relationship as a long-term commitment and want more information before deciding (Manning & Smock, 2009). A desire to test the relationship is understandable considering the pervasiveness of divorce (Perelli-Harris et al., 2017). It is perhaps not surprising, for example, that witnessing a parental divorce as a child is a predictor of cohabitation as an adult (Liefbroer & Elzinga, 2012).

The unfortunate irony is that testing the relationship by cohabiting, without a prior marriage plan, doesn’t seem to improve the chances for a happier marriage. There are many possible reasons for this, as the experience of cohabitation and its effect on marriage appears to be multifaceted (Manning & Cohen, 2012). Relevant here, however, Tang, Curran, and Arroyo (2014) found that cohabitators who reported their choice grew out of a desire to test the relationship experienced lower commitment and satisfaction, and greater conflict and ambivalence, than those who cohabited because they wanted to spend more time together. Research also showed that individuals without marriage plans experienced lower personal dedication to their relationship (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2012b) than those with

marriage plans, but they nonetheless experienced increases in relationship constraints over time (e.g., owning a shared pet; co-signing). Thus, it appears to become increasingly difficult to terminate a cohabiting relationship, even if the internal dedication needed for long-term stability is relatively low. Nonmarital cohabitators are also more likely to be vulnerable to asymmetrical levels of dedication (Stanley et al., 2006) since they have not necessarily come to an agreement about their mutual commitment, as engaged couples have. Either member of the couple may be more or less dedicated, but men are statistically more likely than women to see cohabitation as a test of the relationship (Rhoades et al., 2009).

Cohabitation versus Marriage

Some researchers claim there are very few differences between marriage and cohabitation (Brown & Booth, 1996; Vaculik & Jedrzejczykova, 2009), while others argue that cohabitation is more similar to being single than it is to marriage (Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990). Although cohabitation and marriage share similarities, such as, the sharing of a household, domestic tasks, and sometimes finances (Brown & Booth, 1996; Osborne et al., 2007; Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990), most social scientists discuss the differences between these two types of relationships. The most obvious difference is that in most states cohabitation is not recognized as a lawful union in the way that marriage is (Brown & Booth, 1996; Hsueh et al., 2009).

Aside from marriage being a legally recognized relationship, cohabitation and marriage also differ in commitment level, as cohabitators report a lower commitment to their partner than married people (Forste & Tanfer, 1996; Hsueh et al., 2009; Stanley et al., 2004). One explanation for the difference in commitment is that cohabiting relationships have fewer perceived costs or obstacles to ending the relationship than does marriage (Perelli-Harris, et al, 2017; Stanley et al., 2004; Smock, 2000). This does not mean that dissolving a cohabiting union doesn't come with its own constraints (e.g., a shared lease), only that marriage may have additional pressures, such as those from family and friends or a belief that divorce is wrong (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Cohabitation and marriage also have significantly different levels of relationship satisfaction (Stanley et al., 2004) and there is evidence that some of the known health benefits of marriage do not extend to cohabiting couples (Blumberg, Vahratian, & Blumberg, 2014). The results of these studies add to the literature that claims marriage is a more satisfying relationship than cohabitation and that cohabitation may be a less than optimal relationship choice.

Cohabitation versus Dating

As stated prior, the body of research on cohabitation versus dating is relatively small. However, a few possible trends can be identified. First, cohabitators appear to have more problems with conflict than daters. Specifically, they report more arguments (Hsueh et al., 2009), negative communication and physical aggression (Rhoades et al., 2012). Second, cohabitators appear to have greater relationship stability. That is, fewer issues with commitment and security (Hsueh et al., 2009) and higher levels of both dedication and constraint (Rhoades et al, 2012). Interestingly, in the study by Rhoades et al. (2012), even though there was evidence of greater commitment, cohabitators reported lower satisfaction than daters.

Meanwhile, other research suggests cohabiting and dating are more similar than different. Some studies have reported they share similar levels of satisfaction, emotional rewards, and love (Brown & Bulanda, 2008; Giordano, Manning, Longmore, & Flanigan, 2012). As in cohabiting relationships, there are many relationship paths daters can take. Some dating relationships will end and some will segue into cohabiting or marital unions (Giordano et al., 2012).

The current study adds to the relatively small body of literature that compares cohabiting and dating relationships and produces data that distinguishes type of relationship and marital intent. The focus of the study is on cognitive interdependence and commitment. These are important constructs as they are associated with a variety of relational benefits, such as, increased nurturing (Corkery, Curran, & Benavides, 2011) and selflessness (Agnew et al., 1998). Both cognitive interdependence and commitment are grounded in interdependence theory.

Interdependence Theory

The current research uses interdependence theory, formally conceptualized by Kelley and Thibaut in 1978 as a framework for understanding social interaction. According to this theoretical perspective, relational partners engage in a social exchange whereby they influence one another's outcomes, in the form of both rewards and costs. Rewards are the benefits and fulfillment a person experiences by interacting with a partner (Impett, Beals, & Peplau, 2001;

Reeder, 2014). Rewards may be emotional, like feeling joy or excitement, and they may also be instrumental, like receiving a gift or getting help with housework. The costs are the challenging aspects of a relationship that result in negative experiences, emotions, or attitudes (Impett et al., 2001; Reeder, 2014). Costs include negative emotions like frustration or rejection, or not receiving help with a needed task or resource. When rewards outweigh costs, relational partners will be more satisfied and thus more likely to move toward closeness and commitment (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). This is particularly likely when the reward-cost ratio in the current relationship is perceived to yield better outcomes than any alternative (i.e., another relationship or being single).

The theory holds that while people primarily consider what is rewarding or costly to them and their own self-interests, relationships can evolve to a point where members shift their concern from the self to the interests of the partner and the relationship. Interdependence theory refers to this phenomenon as the *transformation of motivation* (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). During this transformation, people put aside their instinct to be self-centered and begin to provide their partner rewards without expecting a beneficial outcome in return (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). The transformation of motivation is gradual and does not happen in every relationship, but when it does, partners demonstrate *prorelationship motives*, such as, forgiveness, accommodation, and sacrifice (Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). A mental shift “in the nature of personal identity and self-representation” (Agnew et al., 1998, p. 41) creates benefits for the relationship, such as, a strong effort in nurturing the relationship (Corkery et al., 2011), greater relationship stability and commitment (Aron et al., 1992), and higher levels of positive communication and relationship satisfaction (Gamarel, 2014). Cognitive interdependence assists in measuring this shift.

Cognitive Interdependence

The theory of cognitive interdependence was created to aid in understanding the closeness people experience in relationships and the mental representations of the “self-in-relationship” (Agnew et al., 1998, p. 939). Cognitive interdependence refers to the degree to which “couple members regard themselves as part of a collective unit that includes the partner” (Agnew et al., 1998, p. 942). A high degree of cognitive interdependence has been shown to create benefits in a relationship despite the fact that there is “some loss of unique, individual identity” when someone is dependent on their partner (Rusbult et al., 2001, p. 103).

Cognitive interdependence manifests itself within a relationship through three specific cognitive processes that will be measured in this study: increased plural pronoun usage (Agnew et al., 1998; Corkery et al., 2011), a strong “sense of being interconnected” (Aron et al., 1992, p. 598), and the perception that the relationship is a central and important aspect of life (Agnew et al., 1998).

Plural Pronoun Usage. When people have a strong “couple identity” they use pronouns “we” and “us” more often than pronouns “I” and “me” (Agnew et al., 1998; Corkery et al., 2011). A greater sense of “we-ness” is associated with greater relationship satisfaction, commitment, and self-expansion (Agnew et al., 1998; Fitzsimons & Kay, 2004). Researchers have gauged how close someone feels to their partner by measuring the language they use while speaking about their relationship.

Many researchers have successfully made claims about human behavior through the use of linguistic measures. Corkery et al. (2011) studied the language used by cohabiting couples that were expecting their first child. The goal was to measure the degrees of collectivism and cognitive interdependence in cohabiting relationships during times of economic difficulty. The findings were consistent with past research that indicated higher plural pronoun use was associated with greater thoughtfulness, care, and concern for one’s significant other (Agnew et al., 1998; Corkery et al., 2011). Gamarel (2014) measured plural pronoun usage in her study of HIV serodiscordant dating couples (one partner is HIV-positive, the other is HIV-negative). She concluded that couples with stronger plural pronoun usage have better coping habits and better health behaviors.

Cognitive interdependence can be assessed in cohabiting and dating unions by measuring possessive first-person plural pronouns, such as, we, us, and our in the context of how people communicate about their relationships (Agnew et al., 1998).

Sense of Being Interconnected. Understanding the variance in interconnectedness, otherwise known as closeness, in interpersonal relationships is important because closeness distinguishes one type of relationship from another. Closeness is the difference between a stranger and a best friend and the difference between a classmate and a lover (Aron et al., 1992). Interconnectedness is a critical process because feeling close to another person allows a variety of needs to be fulfilled, such as, needs for security, sexuality, and emotional involvement (Agnew et al., 1998).

Interconnectedness develops in a relationship as the “self” and the “other” merge together and a psychological link between the two is created (Agnew et al., 1998; Aron & Aron, 1986). The psychological link influences an individual to act “as if some or all aspects of the partner are partially the individual’s own” (Aron et al., 1992, p. 598).

Centrality of Relationship. Centrality of relationship is defined as the degree to which “a relationship is an integral component of the self” (Agnew et al., 1998, p. 942). When someone has “high” centrality of relationship, they treat that relationship as an important aspect of their life. This doesn’t mean a person will focus all of their time and energy on the relationship but they will consider their relationship a top priority. Studies that measure for centrality of relationship show that it is positively associated with relationship quality (Agnew et al., 1998; Aron et al., 1992). Research also indicates that individuals who make their relationship central and switch focus from their own needs to a focus on the needs of the relationship are less likely to remain in a conflict (Bernal & Baker, 1979) because they are equally concerned with their partner’s well-being during conflict as they are with their own (Rusbult et al., 2001).

This quality is desirable because it creates a perception that the relationship is an essential part of life and encourages strong commitment (Agnew et al., 1998). The key constructs in cognitive interdependence are associated with the constructs within commitment theory. Cognitive interdependence and commitment “operate in a pattern of cyclical mutual growth” (Agnew et al., 1998, p. 946) such that when high degrees of cognitive interdependence are found, higher levels of commitment are likely to be found as well.

Commitment

Commitment is essential in developing quality interpersonal relationships (Goddard, 2007). In the context of a romantic relationship, commitment may be defined as “the degree to which an individual experiences long-term orientation toward a relationship” (Impett et al., 2001, p. 312). The definition also includes the intention to maintain the relationship over time (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010). Similar to cognitive interdependence, commitment is a psychological experience that influences relationship behaviors and promotes people to act in the best interest of their significant other rather than focusing on the short-term interest of the self (Agnew et al., 1998; Stanley, Rhoades & Whitton, 2010).

In relationship scholarship, commitment is often measured using Rusbult’s (1980) investment model. Research conducted with the investment model consistently shows that both dependence and commitment increase when relationship satisfaction is high, when there is a low perception of alternatives to that relationship and when the degree to which one is invested in that relationship is high (Reeder, 2014; Rusbult et al., 2001). Rusbult’s model explains how to predict commitment level by measuring the variables: satisfaction (i.e., rewards minus costs), quality of alternatives, and investments. The first variables were derived from interdependence theory and Rusbult added the variable of investment.

The size of investment within a relationship refers to the “magnitude and importance of the resources that are attached to a relationship—resources that would decline in value or be lost if the relationship were to end” (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998, p. 359). Investments typically include things such as children, emotional energy, effort and identity. In cohabiting relationships, for example, common investments may include a shared residence, shared possessions and money, and also the investment of time. Research suggests that the more someone has invested into an interpersonal relationship the more likely they are to remain in that relationship (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994).

Grounded in interdependence theory, the investment model and cognitive interdependence are related frameworks. When Agnew et al. (1998) used the investment model to assess the role of commitment in cognitive interdependence in romantic relationships, they found commitment level was positively correlated with interconnectedness and plural pronoun use. Since both frameworks are also related to a variety of positive outcomes for couples (Agnew et al., 1998; Le & Agnew, 2003; Stanley et al., 2004), together, they can help explicate the quality of cohabiting versus dating relationships.

Hypotheses

Individuals in cohabiting relationships are expected to experience greater cognitive interdependence and commitment than those in dating relationships. Individuals who intend to marry their partner are also expected to experience more cognitive interdependence and commitment than those who have not set a marital intention. The specific hypotheses of this study are listed below:

H₁: The degree of cognitive interdependence will be positively correlated with degree of commitment.

H₂: Relationship type will be associated with the degree of cognitive interdependence and commitment.

H₃: Premarital relationships will experience a greater degree of cognitive interdependence and commitment than nonmarital romantic relationships.

H₄: Premarital cohabitators will experience a greater degree of cognitive interdependence and commitment than premarital daters.

Method

Procedure

Following a process approved by the Institutional Review Board of a mountain west university, participants were recruited through in-person announcements and email invitations to 300 juniors and seniors in communication and psychology courses. As compensation for participation some individuals were provided with extra credit and each participant who wished to be included was entered into a drawing for a \$25.00 gift card.

Participants were emailed a link to the Qualtrics survey via their student email addresses and were given about two weeks from when they received the link to complete the survey. At the beginning of the survey there was a cover letter that informed participants about the purpose of the research but did not divulge what the investigation is looking for as to avoid the good participant effect, where participants alter their behavior to conform to the researchers' expectations (Jackson, 2014). The cover letter stated that the researchers would be "measuring mental and emotional experiences within dating and cohabiting relationships." Participants provided informed consent by starting the survey and were prompted to spend as much or as little time on the survey as desired. The anonymous survey took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete.

Participants

Two hundred and sixty people (210 women, 46 men, 3 transgender/intersex, 1 "prefer not to answer") completed the survey, but those who were not currently in a heterosexual non-marital relationship lasting at least 4 months were excluded from analysis. Four months was the longest minimum that could be used to retain enough participants for analysis. After the exclusion criteria were implemented, 159 participants remained.

Eighty-two percent of the sample were women, and the average age of respondent was 22.21 years ($SD = 3.09$), with a range of 18 to 48 years. The mean relationship duration was 2.39 years ($SD = 1.74$), with a range of 4 months to 10 years and two months, and cohabitators had been living together for an average of 1.72 years ($SD = 1.29$), with a range of one month to seven years. Ethnically, the sample was mostly White (56.8%), followed by Hispanic or Latino (7.5%), Asian or Pacific Islander (3.1%), Native American (1.3%), and other (1.3%). Approximately half of the sample consisted of daters (55.3%) both premarital (39%) and nonmarital (16.3%), and the rest consisted of cohabitators (44.6%), premarital (39.6%) and nonmarital (5%). A small percentage of cohabitators (11.3%) indicated they had no intent to marry the partner they are living with, compared to the 42% of daters that indicated they had no marital intent.

Measurements

Type of Relationship. Participants responded to questions intended to identify whether they were premarital cohabitators, nonmarital cohabitators, premarital daters or nonmarital daters. First, they were asked whether or not they were currently living with their significant other, and then they were asked whether they were committed for life and planned to marry their partner (premarital), committed for life but did not plan to marry their partner (nonmarital), or had no plans to stay with their partner (nonmarital).

Interconnectedness. The Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) scale is recommended by social scientists as a tool to measure a person's perception of how close they are to another person (Gächter, Starmer, & Tufano, 2015). Aron et al. (1992) created the IOS scale to measure the "direct sense of interconnectedness" within interpersonal relationships (p. 605) and later Agnew et al. (1998) implemented the scale as a component of measuring cognitive interdependence.

The IOS scale uses seven Venn diagrams that contain two circles each. The first circle is labeled "self" and the second circle labeled "other" in reference to the partner. There is a variance of overlap in the diagrams that range from complete separation to a nearly complete overlap. The participants were asked to choose the degree of overlap that best describes their current romantic relationship. The IOS scale does not identify the reasons someone feels close to another person but focuses on an individual's own perception of their interconnectedness with their romantic partner. The IOS scale is easy to administer and widely used to measure perceptions of overlapping selves in a variety of different studies (Gächter et al., 2015).

The Inclusion of Other in Self (IOS) scale was analyzed with a single score between 1-7—one indicating the least inclusive and seven indicating the most inclusive—depending on which image they identified that best described their degree of overlap with their partner.

Plural Pronoun Use. In order to measure plural pronoun use, as offered by Agnew et al. (1998), participants were prompted to list a range of personal thoughts about their current romantic relationship. They were given examples of positive thoughts, such as, "We were made for one another," and "I get a lot out of my relationship," and were offered examples of negative thoughts, like, "Sometimes I feel the need for more space," and "It's amazing how much we fight with one another." By design, examples for positive and negative thoughts each included one example with singular pronouns and one example with plural pronouns. Participants were given 14 spaces to record thoughts and recorded an average of 4.79 thoughts ($SD = 4.13$).

The linguistic analysis of plural pronoun usage was measured by coding the thought responses for plural and singular pronouns. Plural pronouns included "we," "us," "our," and "ourselves"; singular pronouns included "I," "me," "my," "myself," "mine," "he," and "she." After finding these pronouns within each individual thought, the thought response was put into one of four categories: (1) Contains only plural pronouns (e.g., "We spend every moment we can together"). (2) Contains only singular pronouns (e.g., "He often leaves the toilet seat up"). (3) Contains both plural and singular pronouns (e.g., "We fight a lot but he always finds a way to make me smile"). (4) Contains no possessive pronouns (e.g., "The relationship is great"). After being categorized, the number of plural thoughts listed, relative to total thoughts listed, within each relationship category was calculated.

Centrality of Relationship. Four self-report items measured how central the participants' relationship is in their lives. The centrality of relationship items are answered on a 9-point response scale (1 = "disagree completely" to 9 = "agree completely"; Agnew et al., 1998). Example items include: "I spend a lot of time thinking about my relationship with my partner" and "Among the things that give my life meaning, my relationship is most important." Agnew et al. (1998) found good interitem reliability ($\alpha = .82$). Responses were averaged for a centrality of relationship score, with higher means indicating greater centrality of relationship.

The Investment Model Scale. The investment model (Rusbult, 1980) was used to measure commitment. The scales provided by this model has been used for decades to predict commitment in a variety of social situations with high reliability (Le & Agnew, 2003). The four investment model variables are measured through the questionnaire: relationship satisfaction (five items), quality of alternatives (five items), investment (five items), and commitment (seven items). Participants report the degree to which they agree with each item (e.g., "I feel satisfied with our relationship") on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "disagree completely" to 9 = "agree completely." Two items were negatively phrased (e.g., "I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end in the near future") and thus reverse-scored. After the reversals, the item mean was found for each of the four variables.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using R version 3.2.0. (R Core Team, 2015). The independent variable was type of relationship (i.e., premarital cohabitators, nonmarital cohabitators, premarital daters, and nonmarital daters). The dependent variables were the each of the cognitive interdependence variables (interconnectedness, plural pronoun use, and centrality of relationship) and each of the commitment variables (satisfaction, investments, and alternatives). A correlation analysis was used to determine the relationship between cognitive interdependence and commitment. A two-tailed *t*-test was used to analyze the data where two groups were compared (e.g., premarital cohabiting versus premarital dating). An ANOVA was used when comparing all four relational types.

Results

H1: The Degree of Cognitive Interdependence Will Be Positively Correlated with Degree of Commitment

Past research (Agnew et al., 1998) suggests cognitive interdependence and commitment are positively correlated; the purpose of the first hypothesis was to determine whether the current sample aligns with established research. In the current sample, two of the measures of cognitive interdependence, interconnectedness, $r(157) = 0.28$; $p < .01$, and centrality of relationship, $r(157) = 0.35$; $p < .01$, were positively correlated with commitment level.

Each cognitive interdependence variable was then tested with each of the commitment variables (satisfaction level, investment size, and quality of alternatives). Interconnectedness, $r(157) = 0.30$; $p < .01$, and centrality of relationship $r(157) = 0.23$; $p < .01$, were positively correlated with satisfaction level. Interconnectedness $r(157) = 0.34$; $p = .34$, and centrality of relationship, $r(157) = 0.48$; $p < .01$, was also positively correlated with investment size. As would be expected given the trend thus far, interconnectedness, $r(157) = -0.23$; $p < .01$, and centrality of relationship, $r(157) = -0.18$; $p < .05$, had a significant negative correlation with quality of alternatives. In other words, individuals who perceive more good alternatives to the current relationship also experience less connection in the relationship. Plural pronoun usage was not significantly related to any of the tested variables. See Table 1.

H2: Relationship Type is Associated with the Degree of Cognitive Interdependence and Commitment

When all four relationship types were considered (i.e., premarital cohabitators, nonmarital cohabitators, premarital daters, and nonmarital daters), neither interconnectedness, $f(3) = 1.51$, $p = .22$, centrality of relationship, $f(3) = .50$, $p = .68$, or the use of plural pronouns, $f(3) = 2.43$, $p = .61$, varied by relationship type. It was only when premarital versus nonmarital groups were compared that differences in the cognitive interdependence variables emerged (see Hypothesis 3).

There were significant differences by relationship type on commitment and its variables (satisfaction, alternatives and investments), so post-hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted to determine specific differences by type for each variable. Premarital cohabitators had a significantly higher commitment level ($M = 8.46$, $SD = 0.9$) than nonmarital cohabitators ($M = 7.21$, $SD = 2.32$), $p = .01$. Premarital daters ($M = 8.42$, $SD = .71$) had a higher commitment level than nonmarital daters ($M = 6.35$, $SD = 1.44$), $p = .001$, and nonmarital cohabitators ($M = 7.21$, $SD = 2.32$), $p = .01$. Premarital cohabitators ($M = 7.78$, $SD = 1.18$) were significantly more satisfied than nonmarital daters ($M = 6.88$, $SD = 1.37$), $p < 0.5$. Premarital cohabitators ($M = 6.6$, $SD = 1.22$) also had invested more than nonmarital daters ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 1.49$), $p < 0.5$. Nonmarital daters ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 3.85$) perceived a significantly higher level of quality alternatives than premarital daters ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.5$), $p < .001$, or premarital cohabitators ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.6$), $p = .002$. See Table 2.

H3: Premarital Relationships Will Experience a Greater Degree of Cognitive Interdependence and Commitment Than Nonmarital Relationships

Premarital relationships include both premarital cohabitators and premarital daters. Similarly, nonmarital relationships include both nonmarital cohabitators and nonmarital daters. When these two groups were compared, premarital relationships ($M = 6.85$, $SD = 1.31$) experienced significantly higher centrality of the relationship than nonmarital relationships ($M = 6.32$, $SD = 1.5$); $t = 3.35$, $p < .05$. A marginal difference existed between premarital and nonmarital relationships on interconnectedness, with premarital relationships ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.1$) scoring higher than nonmarital relationships ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 1.52$), $t = 1.75$, $p = .08$. The analysis of plural pronoun usage showed no significant results, $t = 0.9$, $p = .37$.

Premarital relationships were significantly higher than nonmarital relationships in commitment and its indicators. Premaritals ($M = 8.44, SD = 0.8$) were higher than nonmaritals ($M = 6.55, SD = 1.69$) in commitment level, $t(124) = 9.31, p < .001$. Premaritals ($M = 7.76, SD = 1.32$) were higher than nonmaritals ($M = 6.87, SD = 1.56$) in satisfaction level, $t(124) = 3.35, p = .001$. Premaritals ($M = 6.53, SD = 1.32$) were higher than nonmaritals ($M = 5.93, SD = 1.47$) in investment size, $t(124) = 2.29, p < .05$. And, consistent with these findings, premaritals ($M = 4.08, SD = 1.57$) were lower than nonmaritals ($M = 5.55, SD = 1.51$) in the perception of quality alternatives to the relationship, $t(124) = 4.88, p < .001$. See Table 3.

H4: Premarital Cohabitors Will Experience a Greater Degree of Cognitive Interdependence and Commitment Than Premarital Daters

In order to assess the differences between premarital cohabitators and premarital daters, the mean of each variable for cognitive interdependence and commitment was calculated and compared using an independent *t*-test. There was no significant difference in the scores on the three cognitive interdependence variables between premarital cohabitators and premarital daters. See Table 4 for specifics, but for example, regarding interconnectedness, there was no difference between premarital cohabitators ($M = 4.81, SD = 1.09$) and premarital daters ($M = 5.02, SD = 1.14$), $t(124) = 1.05, p = .30$. There were also no significant differences between premarital cohabitators and premarital daters regarding the commitment variables. See Table 4, but for example, regarding investment size, there was no difference between premarital cohabitators ($M = 6.6, SD = 1.22$) and premarital daters ($M = 6.46, SD = 1.14$), $t(124) = 0.59, p = .55$.

Discussion

Comparing interdependence measures by relationship type and marital intent yielded some unexpected results. Cohabiting relationships were hypothesized to have higher commitment and cognitive interdependence than dating relationships. Interconnectedness, for example, was predicted to be higher because cohabitators tend to spend larger amounts of time together and share living quarters, a process that may be expected to bring two people closer. Commitment was also predicted to be stronger because of the likely increase of investments of a live-in relationship. Instead, the findings did not bear out these predictions. So, for example, premarital daters were just as invested and satisfied, and saw the relationship just as central to their lives as premarital cohabitators.

The results of this study indicate that living together does not necessarily bring people closer and more committed than dating. This finding has important implications for people who may think that cohabitation, in and of itself, will bring the couple closer together or create deeper commitment. While over half of cohabitators reported they believe cohabitation is a way to ensure compatibility (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991), it would be unwise to expect cohabitation in itself to produce such positive results.

What did statistically differentiate levels of cognitive interdependence and commitment for both cohabiting and dating individuals was marital intent. As discussed, marital intent refers to the future plans for the relationship. This finding builds on prior research that has found that marital intent among cohabitators influences important relationship variables. Brown (2003) found that among cohabitators, intending to marry one's partner was positively correlated to measures of relationship quality. In her study, relational quality was operationalized as self-reported happiness, amount of time spent together, and relationship stability (i.e., whether the relationship is unlikely to dissolve). Cohabiting without intent to marry seems to come with some costs, such as Willoughby, Carroll, and Busby's (2012) finding that such relationships are associated with greater negative communication and conflict. Past research has also found that marital intent can aid in predicting whether or not the relationship will "stay intact, dissolve, or transition to marriage" (Guzzo, 2009, p. 200). Given the findings of the current study, marital intent may work similarly in non-cohabiting dating relationships.

The current study also builds on prior research by offering interdependence as a possible theoretical basis for why marital intent makes a significant difference in relational stability. In this study, those who reported an intent to marry had greater interdependence as measured by centrality of relationship, satisfaction, investments, commitment and a reduced perception of attractive relationship alternatives than those who did not report a marriage plan. The recommendation for those who want positive relational outcomes, whether they are dating or cohabiting, is to be aware of the significant impact of marital intent and to know that intention is a more important indicator of the current and future outcomes of that union than whether they choose to cohabit. Prior studies have indicated that many cohabitators move in together without the intention to marry or have not yet discussed marriage with their partner (Manning & Smock, 2005; Vespa, 2014).

Limitations

The limitations in this study include the lack of diversity in the participant sample and the constraints on recruiting both members within a relationship. The participants were predominantly women, Caucasian and young adults. Findings from a sample with a more diverse range of ethnicity, cultural background, and age may have yielded different findings than the current study. A study with a diverse sample would produce data that is generalizable to a wider population of cohabitators and daters.

Additionally, this study included a small number of nonmarital participants ($n = 34$) in relation to the number of people in premarital relationships ($n = 125$). As 89% of cohabitators ($n = 63$) planned to marry their partner, most did not seem to view their relationship as temporary. There are at least two possible reasons for this result. One, the university where the study took place is a location known for its conservative nature and emphasis on family. It could be that participants were influenced by the values held by the majority of people in their city and found it important to have a marital plan, or at least say they do. Another possible reason is that the sample was self-selected. Perhaps individuals with less secure relationships chose not to participate.

In addition, only one member from each relationship was recruited to participate, and that member was usually a woman. Prior research suggests that studying both members in a romantic partnership provides a more comprehensive understanding of relationship satisfaction and is more accurate than data from either partner alone (Whisman, Uebelacker, & Weinstock, 2004). Although, in the study by Willoughby, Carroll, and Busby's (2012), the man and the woman's responses to the question, "How long will it be from now until you and your partner plan to marry?" were so highly correlated ($r = .80$) that they used the woman's response as their data point for "the actual length of time until marriage" (p. 405).

Recommendations for Further Research

As the meaning of cohabitation continues to change, researchers have plenty of work to do. More research on dating versus cohabitation would be particularly helpful as many people are delaying marriage and opting instead for other forms of romantic bonding. Continuing to investigate cohabiting couples who do not intend to marry is also an important direction for future research. It may also be worth investigating if other variables in addition to marital intent, perhaps family or social support, differentiate these relationships on interdependence. Social scientists should also consider recruiting both partners from romantic relationships to discover whether satisfaction in a relationship is based on one's own marital intentions, or whether the quality of a relationship is higher when partners' marital intentions match.

Conclusion

The traditional relationship trajectory in America and many parts of the world has historically followed the rule: be heterosexual, date, fall in love, get married, and then live together (happily ever after). Now it is normative for relationships to progress in different ways, including living together before marriage. The prevalence of cohabitation warrants research in order to provide cohabitators and daters with information regarding the potential experiences and outcomes of cohabitation. This study offers an important contribution to the field by using interdependence—specifically cognitive interdependence and the investment model—to provide a theoretical framework to compare cohabiting and dating relationships. This study extends the previous research regarding the role marital intent plays in relationship quality. It also supports the findings from prior scholarship about the positive correlation between cognitive interdependence and commitment.

People in cohabiting relationships and dating relationships with plans to marry their current partner have higher levels of many desirable relationship qualities. As such, marital intent is significant and can give cohabitators and daters a better chance of experiencing connected and committed relationships by giving them a goal for the future.

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Appendix A

Table 1 Correlation of Commitment and Cognitive Interdependence Variables

| Variable | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|----------------------|------|------|---------|---------|---------|--------|--------|-------|----|
| 1 Interconnectedness | 4.82 | 1.22 | -- | | | | | | |
| 2 Satisfaction | 7.57 | 1.42 | 0.30** | -- | | | | | |
| 3 Alternatives | 4.4 | 1.67 | -0.23** | -0.32** | -- | | | | |
| 4 Investment | 6.4 | 1.37 | 0.34** | 0.26** | -0.13 | -- | | | |
| 5 Commitment | 8.03 | 1.32 | 0.28** | 0.60** | -0.50** | 0.29** | -- | | |
| 6 Centrality | 6.74 | 1.37 | 0.32** | 0.23** | -0.18* | 0.48** | 0.35** | -- | |
| 7 Plural Pronouns | 2.48 | 2.65 | -0.03 | 0.03 | 0.03 | -0.06 | 0.06 | -0.08 | -- |

$p < 0.05$; $p < 0.01$; $df = 157$

Table 2 Comparison of Each Relationship Type on Cognitive Interdependence Variables

| | NC | | ND | | PC | | PD | | <i>f</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> |
|--------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|----------|-----------|----------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | | | |
| Interconnectedness | 4.75 | 2.12 | 4.42 | 1.33 | 4.81 | 1.09 | 5.02 | 1.14 | 1.51 | 3 | .22 |
| Plural Pronouns | 2.75 | 2.05 | 1.92 | 2.8 | 2.49 | 2.75 | 2.66 | 2.59 | 0.503 | 3 | .68 |
| Centrality | 7.03 | 1.42 | 6.11 | 1.49 | 6.93 | 1.21 | 6.77 | 1.42 | 2.43 | 3 | .065 |
| Satisfaction | 6.83 | 2.17 | 6.88 | 1.37 | 7.78 | 1.18 | 7.75 | 1.46 | 3.76 | 3 | .012 |
| Alternatives | 5.28 | 1.74 | 5.64 | 1.46 | 4.32 | 1.6 | 3.85 | 1.5 | 9.07 | 3 | .000 |
| Investment | 6.62 | 1.23 | 5.72 | 1.49 | 6.6 | 1.22 | 6.46 | 1.41 | 2.8 | 3 | .04 |
| Commitment | 7.21 | 2.32 | 6.35 | 1.44 | 8.46 | 0.9 | 8.42 | .71 | 30.3 | 3 | .000 |

NC- Nonmarital Cohabitation; ND- Nonmarital Dating; PC- Premarital Cohabiting; PD- Premarital Dating

Table 3 Comparison of Premarital and Nonmarital Relationships

| | Nonmarital Relationships | | Premarital Relationships | | <i>df</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>d</i> | <i>p</i> |
|--------------------|--------------------------|------|--------------------------|-------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| | M | SD | M | 1.752 | | | | |
| Interconnectedness | 4.5 | 1.52 | 4.91 | 0.895 | 157 | 1.752 | .28 | 0.081 |
| Plural Pronouns | 2.12 | 2.64 | 2.58 | 2.023 | 157 | 0.895 | .14 | 0.374 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|------|------|------|-------|-----|-------|------|--------|
| Centrality | 6.32 | 1.5 | 6.85 | 3.346 | 157 | 2.023 | .32 | 0.046 |
| Satisfaction | 6.87 | 1.56 | 7.76 | 4.884 | 157 | 3.346 | .53 | 0.001 |
| Alternatives | 5.55 | 1.51 | 4.08 | 2.29 | 157 | 4.884 | .78 | <0.001 |
| Investment | 5.93 | 1.47 | 6.53 | 9.31 | 157 | 2.29 | .37 | 0.023 |
| Commitment | 6.55 | 1.69 | 8.44 | 0.8 | 157 | 9.31 | 1.49 | <0.001 |

Table 4: Comparison of Premarital Cohabitors and Premarital Daters on Commitment and Cognitive Interdependence Variables

| | Premarital Cohabiting | | | Premarital Dating | | | <i>t</i> | <i>d</i> | <i>p</i> |
|--------------------|-----------------------|------|-----------|-------------------|------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| | M | SD | <i>df</i> | M | SD | <i>df</i> | | | |
| Interconnectedness | 4.81 | 1.09 | 62 | 5.02 | 1.14 | 61 | 1.055 | .37 | 0.302 |
| Plural Pronouns | 2.49 | 2.75 | 62 | 2.66 | 2.59 | 61 | 0.356 | .09 | 0.724 |
| Centrality | 6.93 | 1.21 | 62 | 6.77 | 1.42 | 61 | 0.678 | .17 | 0.502 |
| Satisfaction | 7.78 | 1.18 | 62 | 7.75 | 1.46 | 61 | 0.127 | .03 | 0.915 |
| Alternatives | 4.32 | 1.6 | 62 | 3.85 | 1.51 | 61 | 1.691 | .43 | 0.093 |
| Investment | 6.6 | 1.22 | 62 | 6.46 | 1.41 | 61 | 0.593 | .15 | 0.547 |
| Commitment | 8.46 | 0.9 | 62 | 8.42 | 0.71 | 61 | 0.276 | .07 | 0.791 |