Relational Quality of Expectant Cohabitors: The Roles of Relational Sacrifice and Spirituality

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**Cohabitation**

- Cohabitation rates have been increasing; a trend likely to continue (Seltzer, 2004).

- Associated with lower relationship quality:
  - more negative communication
  - lower levels of satisfaction
  - higher levels of conflict and ambivalence
  - more relational instability
  - break up rates 5 times higher than for married couples
  - increased role ambiguity

  (Jose, O’Leary, & Moyer, 2010; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman 2006)
Cohabitation with children.

• **Concern:**

  For children, instability in the family is a risk factor for child problems such as internalizing and externalizing problems (Cowan, Cowan, Schulz, & Heming, 1994; Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000).

• In a recent study 59% of individuals stated that unmarried couples having children was a “bad thing,” versus 6% indicating it as a “good thing” (Pew Research Center, 2009).
Cohabitation with children continued...

- Nonmarital childbearing is increasing
  4% in 1950
  33% in 1999
  40% in 2007

- nearly 40% of nonmarital births occur within cohabiting unions (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Musick, 2002).

- About two-fifths of children in the U.S. are expected to live in a cohabiting household at some point (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).
Transition to Parenthood

- A time of vulnerability and stress
- Imperative to understand relationship quality and its associations for cohabitors prenatally as this denotes a beginning point of couples’ transition to parenthood together (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Cox & Paley, 1997).

- Examining non-demographic individual and relational factors may reveal greater heterogeneity about cohabitation (Kiernan, 2004).

- Need to understand what relational and/or individual characteristics characterize cohabitors.
Relationship Quality: Commitment and Satisfaction

- **High Commitment:**
  - associated with relationship persistence
  - a predictor of staying together (Bui et al., 1995; Rusbult, 1983)
  - promotes prorelationship behaviors (Rusbult et al., 2004).

- **Satisfaction** = high rewards and low costs
  (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959)

- Satisfaction and Commitment are positively associated
  (Agnew, et al., 1998; Rusbult, 1983; Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993)

- Note: It is possible to be...
  --- highly committed but dissatisfied
  --- low on commitment yet satisfied
  (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997).
Relationship Quality: Ambivalence and Conflict

- **Ambivalence**: feeling uncertain, confused, worried, or trapped in the current relationship
  - Higher ambivalence distinguishes couples headed for divorce (Huston et al., 2001)
  - associated with conflict during the marital dissolution process (Ponzetti & Cate, 1986)
  - predicts break-up rates (Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990)

- **Conflict**: high intensity of and frequency of negativity in a relationship (Braiker & Kelley, 1979)
  - considered problematic
  - associated with various mental health, physical health, and family problems, (e.g., depression, poor parenting, and insecure attachment (see Fincham & Beach, 1999)
Relational Sacrifices  (Kelley, 1979)

- Conflicts of interest = opportunities to sacrifice
- Thought to bode well for relationships
- Demonstrate care and concern

- Sacrificing may not always be best:
  - should not always forego own interests
  - Frequent sacrificing linked to relationship difficulties (Helgeson & Fritz, 2000), higher depression, and lower satisfaction (Whitton et al., 2007).

- Easy sacrifices may allow individuals to show care and concern for their partner, but in a way that does not undermine oneself.
Spirituality

Strong and positive correlation between religiousness and spirituality (Hill, Pargament, Hood Jr., McCollough, et al., 2000) also found in our study ($r = .58, p < .000$)

Greater religiousness positively impacts relationship quality:
- greater marital stability
- higher commitment
- more positive marital functioning
- greater tolerance of marital conflict (Mahoney et al., 2001)

Spirituality:
- Prenatal period = psychological & social turning point for couples (Mahoney & Tarakeshwar, 2005)
- Positively correlated with satisfaction with social support (Jesse & Reed, 2004)
- Significant predictor of life satisfaction
- Moderates stressors and life satisfaction (Fabricatore, Handal, & Fenzel, 2000)
If individuals perceive they are making easy, versus difficult, sacrifices for their partner, this may allow them to sacrifice while maintaining some focus on their own needs and outcomes.

*Easy* sacrifices may bode well in regard to relationship quality for highly spiritual people.
Current Study

**HETEROGENEITY OF COHABITATION:**
Individual and relational characteristics should work individually and together to explain relationship quality outcomes.

* Focus on independent and interacting roles of **spirituality** (individual characteristic) and perceptions of **ease versus difficulty of relational sacrifices** (relational characteristic) as they affect **relationship quality** (e.g. Commitment, satisfaction, ambivalence, conflict).
Hypotheses

- **H1:** With greater perceived ease of sacrifice, relationship quality should be more positive (higher commitment and satisfaction) and less negative (lower ambivalence and conflict).

- **H2:** With greater spirituality, relationship quality should be more positive (higher commitment and satisfaction) and less negative (lower ambivalence and conflict).

- **H3:** With greater spirituality and greater perceived ease versus difficulty of relational sacrifice, relationship quality should be more positive (higher commitment and satisfaction) and less negative (lower ambivalence and conflict).
Procedure and Participants

- Community sample, targeted at recruiting expectant cohabitators and their partners (at least 18 years old, expecting first child together)
  - recruited from community agencies (e.g., Women, Infants, and Children), Craig’s List, and hospitals frequented by pregnant women.

- 46 individuals (22 couples and 2 women)

- Ethnicity: Caucasian (45.7%) and Hispanic (30.4%)

- Median level of education: “some college or an Associate’s degree (41.3%)”

- Individual income less than $5,000 a year (28.3%)

- Age (18 to 32 years) (median = 24; SD = 4.13)

- Relationship length (1.5 months to 7 yrs,) median = 2 years

- Pregnancy intentions: 62.5% reported unplanned pregnancy
Measures

- **Spirituality** (Reed, 1987):

  - 10 items; 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) scale
  - \( \alpha = .95 \)

- Sample items:
  
  “My spiritual views have had an influence upon my life.”

  “I seek spiritual guidance in making decisions in my everyday life.”
Measures continued...

- **Relationship quality.**

  **Commitment** (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998):
  - 7 items, 0 *(do not agree at all)* to an 8 *(agree completely)* scale
  - *(α = .78)*
  - Sample item: “I want our relationship to last for a very long time”

  **Satisfaction** (Hendrick, 1988):
  - 7 items (1 to 5 scale)
  - *(α = .84)*
  - Sample item: “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship”

  **Ambivalence and Conflict** (Braiker & Kelley, 1979):
  - 5 items each, 1 *(not at all)* to 9 *(very much)* scale;
  - Conflict: *(α = .82)*, Ambivalence: *(α = .89)*
  - Sample items:
    - “To what extent do you feel “trapped” or pressured to continue in this relationship?” *(ambivalence)*
    - “How often do you and your partner argue with each other?” *(conflict)*
Measures continued...

Relational Sacrifices.

- Focus on ease versus difficulty of relational sacrifices:
  
  \([-3 \text{ (very difficult)} \text{ to } +3 \text{ (very easy)}, \text{ with a true } 0 \text{ (neutral)}]\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relational Sacrifice Activities</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily Schedule</td>
<td>Household tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure</td>
<td>Amount of time spent with friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimate Behavior</td>
<td>Amount of time spent with the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Physical Appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diet and Exercise</td>
<td>Financial Standing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Arrangements</td>
<td>(Childcare)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Referred to as “changes” for partner

adapted from Whitton et al. (2007)
Analyses

- SAS proc mixed to control for the nonindependence

- Four separate models:
  - (1) commitment
  - (2) satisfaction
  - (3) ambivalence
  - (4) conflict

- Race and Education as controls

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**Spirituality**

X

**Ease versus Difficulty of Sacrifice**
H1: Higher Spirituality and Relationship Quality

- Not supported

- Higher spirituality associated with significantly lower commitment, lower satisfaction, higher ambivalence, and a trend toward higher conflict.
H2: Ease of Sacrifice and Relationship Quality

- Supported

- Greater perceived ease of sacrifice was associated significantly with higher satisfaction, lower ambivalence, and lower conflict.
### Results of Multilevel Models for Relationship Quality as Associated with Spirituality and Relational Sacrifices ($n = 46$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Commitment</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th>Ambivalence</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intraclass correlation</strong></td>
<td>$r = .41^*$</td>
<td>$r = .17^*$</td>
<td>$r = .34^*$</td>
<td>$r = .18^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong></td>
<td>$7.71^{***}$</td>
<td>$30.70^{***}$</td>
<td>$11.22^{***}$</td>
<td>$18.92^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SE</strong></td>
<td>$0.15$</td>
<td>$0.80$</td>
<td>$1.26$</td>
<td>$1.31$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td>$-0.51^*$</td>
<td>$-0.84$</td>
<td>$3.41^+$</td>
<td>$-0.01$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>$0.29$</td>
<td>$-0.93$</td>
<td>$1.56$</td>
<td>$0.35$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spirituality</strong></td>
<td>$-0.21^*$</td>
<td>$-1.36^*$</td>
<td>$3.38^{**}$</td>
<td>$1.32^+$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ease vs. Difficult Sacrifices</strong></td>
<td>$0.03^+$</td>
<td>$0.30^{**}$</td>
<td>$-0.69^{**}$</td>
<td>$-0.60^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spirituality X Ease vs. Difficulty of Sacrifices</strong></td>
<td>$0.03^*$</td>
<td>$0.17^*$</td>
<td>$-0.41^{**}$</td>
<td>$-0.17^*$</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Note.** All betas ($b$s) are unstandardized coefficients. $^+p < .10$, $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.
H3: Higher Spirituality, Ease of Sacrifice, and Relationship Quality

- Supported

- Higher spirituality and ease of sacrifice was significantly associated with higher commitment, higher satisfaction, lower ambivalence, and lower conflict.
The effect of ease of sacrifice on positive relationship quality outcomes as a function of spirituality.

- **Commitment**

- **Satisfaction**

![Graphs showing the relationship between ease of sacrifice and commitment/satisfaction at different levels of spirituality.](image)
The effect of ease of sacrifice on negative relationship quality outcomes as a function of spirituality.

- Ambivalence

- Conflict
Discussion

- Findings speak to how cohabiting relationships can vary according to individual characteristics and relational processes.

- Unexpected pattern of results

  (in regard to spirituality and relationship quality):
  - Most studies of religiousness and spirituality are on married couples (Mahoney et al., 1999)
  - may be that being unmarried and expecting a child is at odds with individuals’ spiritual beliefs
  - findings are important as they underscore why some research has found negative associations with relationship quality and stability
Discussion

- Findings underscore the importance of giving to one’s partner to demonstrate care and concern, but not in ways that are not too difficult for oneself.

- Perceived ease of relational sacrifices seems to offer highly spiritual individuals a chance to improve their relationship quality. That is, if highly spiritual individuals, presumably at odds with themselves given their situation of being unmarried and pregnant, can make easy sacrifices for the partner, this may bode well for relationship quality and the subsequent future or stability of their relationship.
Limitations

- Small sample size was small
- Limited generalizability (i.e. Geography)
- Unknown if pattern of findings would be consistent for couples of other relationship statuses or making different relationship transitions (cohabitation, engagement, marriage, remarriage, etc.)
- Crosssectional
Conclusion

- Although highly spirituality expectant cohabitators are experiencing less positive and more negative relationship quality, such negative feelings were attenuated, and such positive feelings were increased, for highly spiritual individuals who perceived that sacrifices made for their partner were easy, rather than difficult.

- The study of relational factors (such as sacrifices for the partner) and individual characteristics (such as spirituality), should continue to be examined in studies of cohabitation, as a way to increase our knowledge of these increasingly prevalent and heterogenous unions.
Questions?

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