



ResearchLink

What Do Relationships of Expectant Cohabitors Look Like?



Three new studies shed light on the nature of relationships in which unmarried couples living together are expecting their first child. Both male and female partners were interviewed about (1) relationship commitment, (2) relationship talk, and (3) sacrifices they make for each other or their relationship.

Women whose male partners reported low commitment had more symptoms of depression. Men whose female partners reported more daily hassles and sacrifices felt less satisfied with the relationship. Yet when partners talked about their relationship, most used language that reflected commitment (e.g., "We" versus "I"). These findings highlight how diverse and complex cohabiting couples are; they also show that men and women may experience cohabitation differently.

A New Way to Study Cohabitation

Cohabitation occurs when two romantic partners live together without being married. In the United States, the rate of cohabitation and cohabiting with children has grown at dramatic rates. In 2007, about 4 in 10 babies were born to unmarried women; nearly 50% of these babies were born to a cohabiting woman. Yet in the United States cohabiting couples are often viewed negatively.

This negative view comes from studies showing that cohabiting relationships lack stability over time (see Text Box 1). Less stable relationships can be problematic for children of cohabitators (e.g., lower academic achievement; problems with peer relationships). These findings about cohabitators and their children are less true in other countries where

married and cohabiting couples are viewed as more alike. For example, in Britain and Europe, cohabiting couples are not seen as less stable, and births inside and outside of marriage are treated more equally to marriage in terms of public policy.



Text Box 1: Why Cohabitors Are Often Seen As Less Stable Than Married Couples

Cohabiting couples may struggle with how to define their relationship. They may not be clear about what cohabiting means:

- Is it an agreed-upon lifetime commitment to one another?
- Is it a shared household without careful thought about long-term commitment?
- Is it something else?

Cohabiting relationships are 5 times more likely to break up than marriages. Cohabiting partners report:

- Lower quality of the relationship (e.g., less satisfaction)
- More negative communication

About the Studies

Dr. Melissa Curran and her team of graduate and undergraduate students wanted to get a more complete picture of cohabiting relationships. To do so, they looked at other features not usually studied in cohabitators. They looked at couples with a wide range of income levels, not just cohabitators with lower



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incomes. They interviewed both cohabiting partners; usually only the woman is studied. By interviewing both partners, they could see how female and male cohabitators were affected by their own and their partner's outcomes.

The team observed how cohabitators experienced relationship talk (the use of "me" versus "we"), commitment, and sacrifice. They used three methods to identify factors connected to relationship stability and partner well-being (see Text Box 2). Their studies were guided by two theories about relationships.

(1) Social exchange theory. People will look out for themselves first, and need strong motivation to compromise their own self-interest. People seek to increase experiences

that they feel good about, and to reduce experiences that they feel cost them something. If the overall outcomes please them compared to what they expect, they should feel positive about the relationship.

(2) Interdependence theory. To make a relationship last, partners in a couple need to consider outcomes beyond their own. In most long-lasting relationships, both people promote their own and their partner's well-being. When couples disagree with one another, they can choose to make a sacrifice for the partner or the relationship. In this way, people give up their own self-interests in order to consider their partners' needs. They want their partner to stay in the relationship so they make sacrifices for their partners even if they do not benefit directly.



Text Box 2: Different Ways to Study Relationships

STUDY QUESTION	METHOD	APPROACH
How does the partner's commitment to the relationship affect the individual's depressive symptoms?	Surveys	Individuals and their partners were asked to rate their commitment to the relationship on a scale of 0 (low) to 8 (high) for each of 8 items; they rated their depressive symptoms on a scale of 0 (low) to 3 (high) for each of 20 items.
How are making daily sacrifices for one's partner and feeling hassled by everyday things linked to relationship satisfaction?	Daily Diaries	People were asked to record hassles and sacrifices they felt on a daily basis for a set number of days.
How often do people use "We" versus "I" when they talk about their relationship?	Open-ended Interviews	Partners were asked questions verbally and answered in any way they wanted.

Study 1: Relationship Commitment and Depressive Symptoms

In general, women report more depressive symptoms than men, and cohabitators report more depressive symptoms than married couples. Given that relationship quality is linked to depression, the researchers asked: How does the partner's commitment to the relationship affect an individual's own depressive symptoms? They also asked whether cohabiting women were more at risk for depression than cohabiting men. The sample included 128 heterosexuals (61 couples and 6 individuals) who were at least 18 years old, expecting their first child, and living together; both partners had to be willing to participate. People were recruited

through community agencies, Craigslist, and hospitals in a U.S. southwestern mid-size community. Cohabitators filled out surveys about relationship commitment, satisfaction, conflict, and depressive symptoms. An Actor-Partner Interdependence Model was used to test how commitment from the individual and the partner affects one's own depressive symptoms (see Text Box 3).

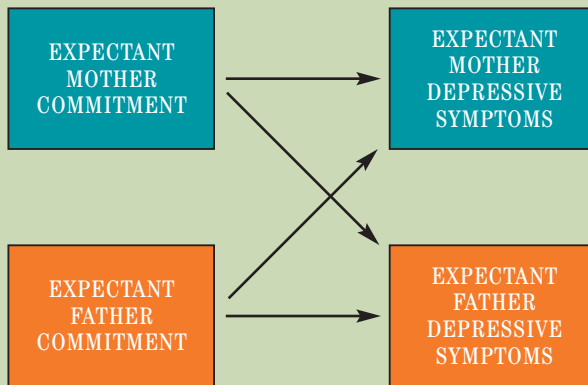
Findings:

- The less committed the male partner, the higher the woman's depressive symptoms.
- A woman's commitment level did not affect a man's depressive symptoms.



Text Box 3: The Challenge of Studying Both Partners in a Couple

To learn how each person in a couple affects the other person, researchers often use the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model. The model looks at how people's (*the actors*) feelings or behaviors affect their own outcomes and that of their partners. It also looks at how "*partners*" affect their own and the actors' outcomes. For example, suppose you want to know how a cohabiting couple's commitment to the relationship affects their depressive symptoms. In the model, you enter the expectant mother's level of commitment (actor) and how often she has depressive symptoms. You also enter the expectant father's commitment level (partner) and depression frequency.



Study 2: Daily Sacrifices, Hassles, and Relationship Satisfaction

Making sacrifices in the relationship has the potential to show care and concern for one's partner and relationship. The research team wanted to know whether making daily sacrifices for one's partner would increase the partner's relationship satisfaction. They also asked whether experiencing daily hassles affected relationship quality. Seventeen cohabiting couples from Study 1 were asked to report for 7 days whether they made any of 12 sacrifices; on each day, they also recorded how many hassles they experienced and their relationship satisfaction.

Findings:

- The more sacrifices both male and female partners made, the more their own relationship satisfaction decreased.
- When female partners reported more hassles than usual – and more sacrifices – male partners reported less relationship satisfaction, but female partners did not



Study 3: How Cohabitors Talk about Their Relationship

People in committed relationships report greater wholeness between themselves and their partners. This sense of wholeness can be seen when partners talk about the relationship more in terms of "we" versus "me." When spouses use more "we" talk, they experience more positive problem-solving and lower divorce rates. The researchers wanted to know: What kind of talk do cohabiting couples use the most? They interviewed 36 unmarried cohabitators from Study 1. Partners talked about (1) how the economy affected their relationship, (2) plans for the baby, and (3) plans to marry their partner. Interviews were coded for how many times the partner talked about their own outcomes ("me") versus their partner's or expectant child's outcomes ("we").

Findings:

- The majority of cohabitators (69.4%) said that the difficult economy affected them.
- Most (86.1%) spoke mainly about their relationship in terms of "we."

Example of a "We" Quote: "Our decision to be close to family has been generated by economic circumstances; otherwise we might just be doing this off . . . with friends."

(Woman, 27, Caucasian, Bachelor's degree)

Implications from all three studies:

- Cohabiting relationships are more complex than typically thought, and men and women seem to experience them differently. For example, partner commitment to the relationship matters more for women than men. That is, when cohabiting men are less committed, their female partners report more depressive symptoms. But the women's commitment level does not affect male partners' depressive symptoms. Also, sacrifices and hassles seem to matter more for men. On high hassle days when female partners sacrifice more, relationship satisfaction was lower for men but not for women.



- Counselors need to be aware that cohabiting couples often think of themselves and their partner as a unit working together. For instance, cohabitators used “we” more often than they used “me” or “I” when they talked

“Cohabiting relationships are more complex than typically thought, and men and women seem to experience cohabiting relationships in different ways,” says Dr. Melissa Curran, assistant professor of Family Studies and Human Development at The University of Arizona.

about their relationship, the expected child, and the difficult economy. Counselors can begin assessing a couple's relationship by finding out what kind of talk the partners use to describe their relationship.

- Mental health practitioners need to be aware that female cohabitators may be more at risk for depression than their male partners. They need to keep in mind how male partner commitment may affect his female partner's mental health.
- Future research may want to focus on couples' relationship talk (the use of “me” versus “we”) regarding daily sacrifices and hassles. It should look at the ways that partners' talk about their daily efforts in the relationship may affect relationship satisfaction.

[This ResearchLink](#) summarizes three reports:

- (1) Curran, M. A., Corkery, S. A., & Post, J. H. (2011). Partner commitment, gender, and depressive symptoms for expectant cohabitators. *Family Science*.
- (2) Totenhagen, C. J. & Curran, M. A. (2011). Daily hassles, sacrifices, and relationship quality for pregnant cohabitators. *Family Science*.
- (3) Corkery, S. A., Curran, M. A., & Benavides, R. (2011). “Me” and “we:” How expectant cohabitators talk about economic difficulty. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*.

[Suggested citation for this ResearchLink:](#)

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