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HARDING
UNIVERSITY

NATURE OF COHABITATION

The Nature and Experiences of Cohabitation in Non-Marital Couples

Bryan Rendon

Under the guidance of Dr. [Justin Moore](#)

Harding University Mcnair Scholars Program

Abstract

This study aims to explore the phenomenon of cohabitation by gathering the unique experiences of couples who are currently in a non-marital cohabitative relationship. The driving research question are as follows: What are the unique experiences of cohabitative couples and what common themes do their stories share? A phenomenological qualitative methodology was used to collect, transcribe and code the narrative data from three interviews with couples currently living in a shared space and self-identifying as non-marital cohabiting couples. The results and discussion section include three significant themes identified in all three couples that include: 1) Difficulty in Transition From Independence To Interdependence 2) Financial Unity and Advantages of Cohabitation 3) Future Plans For Marriage. Moreover, recruiting more participants and minimizing criteria to specific races/ethnicities was suggested for future research.

Keywords: Cohabitation, Couple, Marriage

The Nature and Experiences of Cohabitation in Non-Marital Couples

Increase in Popularity of Non-Marital Cohabitation

In recent years, cohabitation, a non-marital couple intimately sharing a living space outside of marriage, has been on the rise as a normative lifestyle in the U.S. (Manning et al., 2019; Smock, 2000). Not only is cohabitation increasing in popularity, but it is also being seen as a normative prelude to marriage. Scholars such as Smock (2000) report an increase of 50% over the past two decades of non-marital cohabitating couples eventually marrying. Moreover, Smock (2000) notes most cohabitating couples marry just within a few years. According to Manning, Smock, and Fetro (2019), 93.5% of young women ages 18-24 in the U.S expect to marry, while about two-thirds (68%) of them expect to cohabit with their future spouse. Furthermore, non-marital cohabitating couples seem identical to married couples in that a non-marital cohabitative relationship includes all the benefits of marriage except the government's official recognition as a family unit (Brown & Booth, 1996).

Non-marital cohabitation increasing within the U.S has caused an increase in complexity, diversity, and inequality in union formation (Sassler et al., 2020). According to Sassler and Lichter (2020), the traditional formation of marriage and family are in decline (Sassler et al., 2020). Moreover, most people hope to marry, however, the journey of marriage looks different now than it did in the past (Sassler et al., 2020). Some cohabiters do not refer to their partner as “unmarried partner” or even see themselves as unmarried couples; instead, they see their unique

relationship as more complex but lack the language to describe their relational status (Singh, 1996). Smock notes that cohabitation has dramatically complicated the marriage process (Smock, 2000). Considering the rise in popularity of cohabitation, it is crucial to note its multi-faceted effects on a relationship.

Diverse Effects of Cohabitation in Relationships/Marriages

Couples who cohabitated before marriage reported lower quality satisfaction in their relationship and gradually became more disinterested in marriage (Thomson et al., 1992). Moreover, cohabitation negatively affects marriage probabilities and is associated with more significant marital conflict and poor communication skills within a marriage (Thomson et al., 1992; Cohan et al., 2002). However, Bouchard (2006) contends that a successful cohabitation experience frequently results in marriage. Nevertheless, research shows that most married couples who cohabitated prior to marriage end up divorcing within years of marriage (Smock, 2000). Contrary to most research on cohabitation, Vespa and Painter (2011) make the case that cohabiters who marry their only partner are predicted to have positive marital outcomes related to wealth accumulation. Furthermore, couples who cohabitated before marriage showed lower marital dissolution rates in their first year than married couples who did not cohabit before marriage (Rosenfeld et al., 2019).

While successful premarital cohabitators may have a short-term advantage in their first year of marriage, there are also long-term consequences that include low satisfaction levels in the marriage and low emotional intelligence. (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). Cohabiting couples were more likely to end their relationship despite being satisfied due to the lack of marital

commitment (Bouchard, 2006). In addition, the tensions of conflict and poor outlook of the relationships in cohabitating couples enable women to end relationships due to the lack of more significant consequences than those who are married (Bouchard, 2006). Bouchard also suggests that the dyadic adjustment assessment questionnaire is the number one indicator of a potential separation or marital dissolution for a cohabitating couple/marriage (Bouchard, 2006).

The long-term consequences of cohabitation indicate a higher likelihood of divorce in a marriage (Cohan et al., 2002.) Cohabitators report experiencing more disagreements and fights than married couples (Brown et al., 1996). Research suggests that couples who cohabitated prior to marriage are more pessimistic and hostile than their counterparts who did not cohabit before marriage (Cohan et al., 2002). Woods and Emery (2002) argue that cohabitation alone does not cause divorce or marital instability; instead, the cohabitators' characteristics and values directly correlate with marital outcomes. Overall, research on premarital cohabitation suggests links and associations with low commitment in relationships and low emotional intelligence to their partner. Thus, indicating a greater likelihood of divorce if/when premarital cohabitating couples get married (Cohan et al., 2002).

Cohabitational Effect on Family Relationships

Alongside the internal relationships between the cohabitating couple, the relationships with the couples' parents are primarily negative (Eggebeene, 2005). Parents with cohabitating children are less likely to provide them any support due to the lack of approval for their children's lifestyle choices and the creation of relational barriers. Cohabitation experiences among older individuals aged 51 and up are also mostly negative. Cohabitators, particularly older

women, have lower incomes and are more likely to consume alcohol than marital couples (Brown et al., 2006). However, household incomes and benefits are higher with cohabiters, such as individual health insurance and low-risk commitments are advantages for older cohabiters (Brown et al., 2006; Vespa et al., 2011).

All in all, the dominant discourse on non-marital cohabitation lacks research in sharing the unique qualitative experiences of non-marital couples. Therefore, to further understand this phenomenon of cohabitation, it is crucial to give voice to the unique experiences of cohabitating couples. This study aims to explore the phenomenon of cohabitation by gathering the unique experiences of couples who are currently in a non-marital cohabitative relationship.

Method of Inquiry

Design

This phenomenological qualitative study was framed in a constructivist viewpoint, allowing for a phenomenon's interpretation. Following IRB approval, a phenomenological methodology was implemented to collect, transcribe and code the narrative data from interviews with three self-identified cohabitating couples. The interviews were conducted virtually using both live synchronous video conferencing and phone calls, at the couples' convenience, to make them feel safe and comfortable.

Participants

The sample size was 3 self-identified cohabiting couples. The participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. The only selection criteria were that the

participants must be non-marital cohabitating adults. The participants also filled out a consent form to best ensure the rights and responsibilities of both the interviewer and interviewee.

The couples were recruited by convenience sampling through the researchers' network. The researcher also utilized social media to recruit participants. The researcher encountered challenges in finding participants to interview within a small time frame.. Two couples were interviewed over Google Meet and Zoom. The last couple was interviewed over the phone.

Some variables that could influence responses from participants included but are not limited to religious beliefs, socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, and prior experiences of cohabitation. Furthermore, the researcher acknowledged the biases and preconceptions about the phenomenon and made them known to the participants prior to the interviews.

The first couple interviewed was given the identifier code of, “Wilfred” and “Maria”. This couple, at the time of this study, was located in central Texas, and was thirty-nine and forty-two years old. Wilfred and Maria are from Guatemala and are of Latino descent and have one son together. They have been together for a total of twelve years.

The second couple was given the identifier code of, “John” and “Mary”. This couple, at the time of this study, was twenty-seven years old and twenty-nine years old. John and Mary are of Latino descent and have one daughter together. They have been together for a total of nine years.

The last couple interviewed was given the identifier code of, “Joe” and “Ashley”. This couple, at the time of the study, was located in central Arkansas, and are twenty-seven and thirty years old. They have children together and have been together for a year and a half.

The duration of this study took about 2 months to complete. The grand research question is as follows: What are the unique experiences of cohabitative couples and what common themes do their stories share? This foundational question will be answered and followed by three major grand-touring questions coupled with clarifying questions. The study aims to answer the grand research question by gathering couples' unique experiences through interviews.

Instruments

The researcher was the primary data collector, and he used a program to transcribe the interviews to codify the data and identify common themes within the manuscripts through open and axial coding. The questions in the interviews included three grand touring questions, which are as follows: (a) Could you talk to me about your experiences with cohabitation and the key factors that influenced your decision to cohabit? (b) What have been some of the difficulties you have experienced since cohabitating? (c) What have been some of the benefits you have experienced since cohabitating? Moreover, these grand touring questions were followed by probing questions to receive clarity in participant responses.

In addition, the researcher acknowledged his preconceived notions of the phenomenon under study. The researcher continually checked his bias throughout the research process and bracketed his preconceptions. The researcher assumed a respectful and learning posture when

exploring the experiences of participants and to his best ability allowed the participants' descriptions to emerge.

Reflexivity Statement

At the time of this study, the researcher was a 22-year-old Hispanic male who graduated from Harding University with a bachelor's degree in Bible and Family Ministry. Moreover, the researcher is a Ronald E. McNair scholar who used this project to complete the research requirement for the McNair program. The researcher is employed as a Behavior Technician at Patterns Behavioral Services in Raleigh, NC, and is married to his wife, who also graduated from Harding University.

During the researcher's senior year at Harding University, he realized his true passion and dream was to become a marriage and family therapist. The researcher sought opportunities to build experience and learning through clinics and mental health facilities through hands-on clinical work. This motivation was to bolster his graduate application and become admitted to an MFT graduate program. In search of opportunities, the researcher applied to become a Behavior Technician, eventually being hired by Patterns Behavioral Services.

The researcher's interest in cohabitation began when he realized that some of his family members were cohabitating couples. He met this realization with confusion about why they did not just marry. He always thought that they had been married but then realized that as he learned more about union formation and families, they were not married for many reasons. However, the researcher understood that cohabitation was not the same as marriage.

His epiphany during his college years always made him wonder about the phenomenon of cohabitation. He concluded through minimal research, internet inquiry, and conversations with trusted community members that cohabitation outside of marriage differed from his Christian worldview. It was not until the opportunity to research a topic through the McNair program that the researcher's interest in studying the phenomenon of cohabitation emerged.

Procedures

The method of data collection was a 30-minute narrative interview with the members of the couple concurrently. The interviewer then asked three semi-structured, grand-touring questions with the follow up of probing questions. The interviewer then had interview protocols that detailed some impressions and contain 2-3 takeaways from the interview. The interviewer was the primary data collector. The interviewer also acknowledged biases and pre-existing positions and gave a consent form to the interviewees to fill out prior to the interview. Each interview was recorded for the purposes of transcription and codification. The interviewer used the program named "Scribie" which automatically transcribes all recorded interviews. The interviews were recorded on zoom/google meet or over the phone. The method of collecting and analyzing data was done through open/axial coding and thematic analysis under the oversight of the research mentor, in order to peer debrief and identify major themes from the data.

Each participating couple was assigned a unique identifier code known only to the primary researcher and faculty advisor. This code was the only personal identifier connected to the data obtained during the interviews. Any identifiable references made by participants during the interview were redacted to help ensure no identifiable information can be deduced from the

published data, transcription, and/or codes. The coding methods used were open and axial coding in order to categorize sentences and phrases and use thematic analysis to find themes within the data.

All participant data was coded to ensure confidentiality and were stored in and/or in secure locations. Finally, the primary researcher summarized the results and conclude the research with the findings and future suggestions for further research.

Interview Protocols

The interviewer began by thanking the couple for being willing to be interviewed. As part of the introduction to the interview process, the interviewer included reflexivity statements about his own lived experiences. Then, the interviewer reminded the interviewees about the confidentiality form and about the anonymity of the interview.

Following this, the interviewer asked couples if what was spoken to them was clear and if they had any questions or concerns. From there, the interviewer began with the questions and implemented clarifying questions throughout the interview. At the end of the interview, the interviewer thanked them again for their time and ask for any concerns or questions, or last comments they wish to raise.

Data Analysis

After collecting data, recorded interview data was transcribed through a program called “Scribie”. The researcher utilized a coding procedure to organize transcripts, facilitate ease of

discussion, and maintain the confidentiality of the couples. Each transcript was classified with identifier codes such as, “Wilfred & Maria”. Each transcript also received a number based on the order of completion. The data analysis involved reading, rereading, and rereading again of the transcripts.

Moreover, the researcher used consistent codes throughout all three transcripts in order to provide clarity and consistency in the data and form overarching themes explaining the interconnectedness of the data. On the first read-through, limited comments or observations were made in order to obtain a sense of the whole interview. Upon the second reading, commonalities in the couples' descriptions were noted with the same codes throughout all the data. For the final reading, the researcher and his mentor together identified major themes emerging from the transcripts and codes across all the couples' descriptions of their experiences.

This was done by giving value to the statements made by the couples and using a phrase that encapsulated the value of the statement. For example, Wilfred and Maria spoke about acceptance being the key to transitioning into cohabitation. The researcher put “Key to successfully cohabitating is acceptance and love”, as a code and then put this code in another document in a three-column page that contained all the codes from all the transcripts side by side.

After compiling common codes with open and axial coding, the researcher met with his mentor, Dr. Justin Moore, and they both read each transcript once while making limited comments or observations in order to obtain a sense of the whole interview in each transcript. After two to three hours of reading the transcripts and verifying the value of the codes, they both

identified three major themes with three subthemes that came from the first theme. These themes emerged from the transcripts and codes across all the couples' descriptions of their experiences.

Verification Procedures

The researcher used the following verification procedures in this study: (a) Peer debriefing and (b) audit trails were done in order to provide validity to the data. The researcher peer debriefed with his supervisor, Dr. Justin Moore, and reviewed and coded all the transcripts. Furthermore, the researcher utilized a field journal in order to document the research process, and record any thoughts or observations during the data collection and analysis process.

Findings

Three Major Themes

The Researcher and his mentor identified three major themes: 1) Difficulty in Transition From Independence To Interdependence 2) Financial Unity and Advantages of Cohabitation 3) Future Plans For Marriage.

Difficulty in Transition From Independence to Interdependence

Difficulty in transition from independence to interdependence emerged as a prominent theme in all the transcripts. All three of the couples described the difficulty of initially starting with struggles in their relationships and moving toward success in their relationships. Three sub-themes were identified within this major theme. They are as follows: Time and acceptance, family-centered, and commonality.

Time and Acceptance

In answering the second grand touring question, Wilfred and Maria consistently said that the way they overcame difficulties in transition was through acceptance and love. Wilfred remarks,

The biggest challenge is you're not you anymore. There are two people now. And then in everything is really hard. Your money, your bills, your time, everything is really hard.

And we say it's hard because we're not used to it when we started together. (0:14:57.0S2:) Maria adds by saying, "living together is totally different than living alone" (0:14:57.0 S2:). Both Wilfred and Maria affirmed that transitioning from living alone to living together was difficult in the beginning. Wilfred elaborated on this and said,

If we look back at the first year for the little things that make you upset, now you actually laugh about it and say, "That's... Why do I even like look at it when it's a silly thing?" Now that we're together completely, that's on the past... Silly things. (0:22:44.0)

They both made it very clear that the transition from independency to interdependency flowed from acceptance and love. "The key to live together is acceptance." (0:15:57.2 S2:), remarks Wilfred. Maria commented, "...if you really love them, you will accept them as they are." Wilfred and Maria spoke about how over time, the transition smoothed out and it became easier. Wilfred said, "Once you start getting used to it, it becomes easy and easy and easy." (0:24:02.0 S2:) For Wilfred and Maria, their experience in managing the transition from being alone to living together was that acceptance and love were key.

Family Centered

They mentioned that family was also of paramount importance to them. When asked about why they decided to share their finances (a theme that will be discussed further later on),

Wilfred remarks, “Because we are family.” (0:20:25.3 S2). The term “acceptance” or “accept” occurred fourteen times in this interview with Wilfred and Maria. Therefore, time and acceptance and emphasis on family values were the keys for this couple to move from struggle to success in transitioning to cohabitation.

In John and Mary’s interview, they described a very similar experience with the transition from independence to interdependency in their relationship. Mary remarks, “We've had our challenges just trying to learn each other and trying to adapt to each other and compromise has been like the biggest thing” (0:15:34.8). John also comments saying,

It's a never-ending battle. But I guess, I mean, we don't all... I guess there's a pretty good amount of stuff that we like differently, that we do differently. (0:17:25.7)

Like Wilfred and Maria, John and Mary had difficulties transitioning to living together.

Family Centered

However, John and Mary had a similar yet different approach in how they came to overcome the struggles they encountered in transition. Mary remarks,

But now after counseling and after our break and everything, we've just... A lot of the things that we used to find so frustrating and we've kind of just let them go. We don't really argue too much. And if we do, we let it go a lot faster than we did before. (0:21:47.1)

We note that from this remark the way John and Mary overcame the difficulties of transition was acceptance over time. Couples therapy provided the space for them to understand and accept each other more deeply. Mary comments, “And now we kind of talk very well. And so it's a lot... Again, maybe we just matured and so we just in love.” (0:22:32.8).

Later on in the interview, John adds another layer that influenced the acceptance and love for one another in overcoming the challenges of transition by mentioning the birth of their daughters. He notes,

Even then, as I said, when we got our newest daughter, and other daughters. And so it's definitely changed our mindset towards ourselves, definitely. (0:24:22.5)

John emphasized that what contributed to a successful transition was their prioritizing of their children. In John and Mary's unique experience, they moved from struggles to success in their cohabitation transition by accepting each other and being family-oriented.

Commonality

The last couple, Joe and Ashley, also spoke about how they overcame the difficulties of transitioning into cohabitation. Similar to the previous couples, Joe and Ashley did not have any serious difficulties in their transition. However Joe and Ashley clarified their experiences of transition by saying, "It's a working, it's always a working progress. (0:16:12.4). They found that the key to their success in transitioning to cohabitation was commonality and family values.

When asked about difficulties in their experiences since cohabitating, Joe remarks, "I mean, we haven't had really had any serious difficulties." (0:08:00.8). Ashley and Joe pointed out that their success had to do with their similar life style habits. Ashley notes "We had a lot in common. (0:08:43.2). Joe affirms his partner by saying "Yeah." ((0:08:43.2). Ashley also commented on this by saying, "Ashley: Coming into it, and we knew that from early on in the relationship." (0:08:44.9).

Family Centered

Another key point that emerged from this couple was that prioritizing family led to a successful cohabitation experience. Ashley says, “ Family's just a big thing to us and we always put the kids first. It always worked out. (0:08:49.5)”. This important quote from the couples interview completes a thread found in all the interviews that hit on the importance of family. Family is one of the keys that led to a successful transition to cohabitation.

However, Joe and Ashley honestly brought up the difficulties they have recently experienced and shared with the interviewer on how they overcame those difficulties. Ashley said,

Well, right now we're kinda redoing a camper and [laughter] redoing a camper together has been a little bit of a task. (0:11:26.7)

Joe adds,

Yeah, but I like to do stuff my way. Pretty much. I want to help with more of the help than mortgages, you just sit there and communicate with me while I do it and get out of my way. (0:11:37.8)

When asked how they dealt with this difficulty, Joe said, “Letting her do it a little bit more, I guess would be it. If she would just do it my way, it wouldn't be that big a deal. (0:12:15.8)”. In response, Ashley humorously responded to Joe by saying,

Too bad I have a brain. My way works better half the time. [laughter] Just trying not to let the little things eat us up and just trying to talk about it more. (0:12:22.2)

Joe and Ashley essentially spoke about dealing with the difficulties of transition by not having a “your way” or “my way” mentality. Rather, they emphasized an “our way” mentality which came

in the form of positive communication. Joe said, “In a positive way, communicating in a positive way.” (0:12:48.2). Therefore, for Joe and Ashley, the way they moved from struggles to success in cohabitation was through commonality, prioritizing family, and having a team mindset.

Therefore, in all of the interviews, we find that the theme of difficulty in transition from independence to interdependence is a major theme woven throughout all the stories of these couples. This major theme has three subthemes that make up the whole of the theme. Meaning, this theme came in the form of time and acceptance, prioritizing family, and commonality.

Financial Unity and Advantages of Cohabitation

The financial unity and advantages of cohabitation also emerged as a major theme in this study. We found that all the couples noted some type of logistical/financial circumstance that led to their decision to cohabit. When asked about the key factors that influenced their decision to cohabit, Joe and Ashley remarked, “Well, it's easy, it's cheaper.” (0:01:51.9). John and Mary commented something similar, saying, “Yeah. I think one of the biggest, of course, I mean, when it comes to living together is gonna be financially [laughter] supportive.” (0:10:47.8). Both of these couples viewed cohabitation as being beneficial and supportive and convenient for their relationship.

Joe and Ashley were long-distance at one point in their relationship and they thought that cohabitating would be far less expensive than traveling every weekend. Joe remarks,

No, I wouldn't, not... No, I think the financial thing is really the biggest thing, we was already seeing each other every single weekend and before we moved in together, I was

an hour away. So I was spending the money to come see her. (0:07:00.8)

Thus, moving in together would be more convenient, cheaper, and easier for them.

John and Mary spoke about how they were living in Mary's parents' house before they moved in together. They had desired to move into their own place and thought it would be best for them.

John remarks,

Because again, it did influence that. And as far as like the financial side, I mean, you know, we were both, working, I think we were both working at Chick-fil-A at the time. And from there we had gotten better jobs whenever we were moving out already. And so, we didn't feel that we had to be financially supported by her parents at that point (0:13:43.1)

However, Wilfred and Maria decided that living together was best for their situation since they were not legally in the States. Wilfred remarked,

We decided together. It's not a one person decision, we've talked about it. We came to that agreement. We're not getting married until we can actually come here legally. And yeah, it is hard sometimes (0:10:31.6)

For Wilfred and Maria, moving in together was the best choice for them since they were not legal citizens. They found that in order to make the best use of their resources that moving in together would be best.

Moreover, all the couples noted that they pay their bills together and have unity in their finances. Wilfred and Maria commented on their unity in finances by saying, "Financially we

come together as one.” (0:19:22.4 S2). John and Mary note, “We always... Our money goes to one bank and one account and we both have access to that one account and everything...”

(0:25:23.3). John and Mary also added that this mindset brought them closer together. They note,

With the mindset that we have going forward with the finances, I feel like it's helped us in

our relationship, and I feel like it's helped us grow and it's one less thing we fight about, so. [chuckle] (0:28:19.1).

John adds,

so I never kind of put it above between us. I always told her it's like, "Whatever that we're gonna do together, we're gonna try to make sure that we go through whatever it is together." (0:29:33.3).

In a similar way, Joe and Ashley also share their finances together. Joe and Ashley remarked that unity in the way they approached finances was an “unspoken agreement”. Joe remarks,

... It's a mutual unspoken agreement. We don't really split pay, you pay this, I pay this, we just pay as long as just pay average paid, especially like with groceries, utilities anything of sort like that. (0:04:04.5).

Joe continues,

I'll just say it was easy and simple for us, I say, it was just being, it was unspoken, so it just kind of work yourself in there and it works out. It's not really something that we had a discussion about, hey, who's gonna do this, who's gonna do this. It just, it's just way it worked out. That's how we've been doing it. (0:05:53.9)

As for Joe and Ashley, we note that they too experienced unity in their finances as John and Mary and Wilfred and Maria did. Therefore, this demonstrates that all the couples had the mindset of coming together in their finances.

Future Plans For Marriage

The last major theme found in all of the interviews is the theme of future plans for marriage. All the couples, ranging from one to twelve years of being together in a non-marital cohabitating relationship, voiced future plans for marriage.

Wilfred and Maria noted in their interview that the biggest reason why they are cohabitating is due to their circumstances with being undocumented immigrants. Wilfred remarked,

We're just waiting to get married, because as you know we're engaged, but we just haven't had the opportunity to get married yet, due to our situation in the States. So that's pretty much what it is. If the situation will be a little different, we would be married long time ago. Did that make sense? (0:05:12.9)

Later on in the interview, Wilfred and Maria comment, " Well, we're happy. And even though we are not married, we one day will be." (0:27:19.3) Wilfred and Maria hope to one day officially be married in the U.S once they legally become citizens of the United States.

John and Mary share the same plans, to one day officially be married. The only barrier in their way is legal matters. Similarly, John and Mary once thought of marriage as something of a peripheral matter and simply unimportant. John and Mary remark,

The biggest thing, it's like, "Oh yeah, yeah, sign all these papers." You have to go through the whole thing. I mean honestly, it's not that I had never wanted to do it, but I've always personally felt it's one of those, I guess, administrative kind of things. It doesn't really matter what it is, it's a matter between us. (0:31:47.0)

John then adds,

But now more and more as I get older now, I guess I can see the importance of that. More recently, I think, this, Richard, we've kind of gone a little bit more towards going to church and attending that and learning more about it, and I think that that's something that we should do so, I think that's definitely something that we're moving more towards rather than just kind of keeping the way the things are now. (0:31:47.0)

For John and Mary, they once saw marriage as unimportant and too much of a hassle. However, John and Mary have been recently attending church and meeting with the pastor for Bible studies and discussions of marriage. They noted that as they got older and obtained more knowledge about marriage, that this is causing them to want to move towards officially getting married.

Joe and Ashley also voiced to the interviewer that they hope to one day get married.

When asked about their future plans and dreams, Ashley and Joe remarked, "...And I think we

both like to say that maybe marriage was in the future, but we're just not in any timeframe."

(0:20:05.6). Joe and Ashley also hope to one day officially be married. Interestingly, although not legally married, the couples interviewed felt as if though they are already married. Wilfred and Maria said,

Because you only get married once. And that's a fact. When it comes to me, you only get married once, with one person. You don't marry one, two, or three person, that's not what it is. (0:10:31.6)

Maria adds, "personally, we do feel married even though we aren't legally married." (0:13:52.3).

John and Mary made a similar statement,

I've never really thought of ourselves just like a couple or like boyfriend, girlfriend, I've always thought of us being together, we're married always. I've never once kind of thought it's like, "Oh, this is the person I'm just gonna try out and go to the next." Or anything like that. That's really, really why I think that's always been a topic that we have kind of had, it's like the marriage part, of course. (0:30:29.9).

Joe and Ashley did not make any statements about already feeling married. However, This could be represented of their shorter time in a cohabitating relationship compared to the other couples..

Whereas, Wilfred and Maria and John and Mary have been together for more than nine years.

Based on the time frame of these couples, John and Mary and Wilfred and Maria feel as though they are married. Therefore, the last major theme identified in this study is that all three of the non-marital couples stated that they plan to enter into an institutional marriage in the near future.

Discussion

The couples' descriptions of their experience with cohabitation both supported and differed from present literature examining the phenomenon of cohabitation. All in all, the

participants cited their experiences as a cohabitating couple to be difficult in the beginning but then becoming more smooth and more satisfying. Moreover, all three of the couples described having some kind of unity in their finances and even voiced their future plans for institutional marriage.

Previous studies found in the literature review show that cohabitation is increasingly on the rise in popularity (Manning et al., 2019). In this present study, participants all described their circumstances as being complex but all agreed upon the experiences that for their unique situations they found cohabitation to be most appropriate and beneficial to them. For example, John and Mary described their situation with living with Mary's parents and wanting to move out as justification for cohabitating in their own space. They remark, And from there we had gotten better jobs whenever we were moving out already. "And so, we didn't feel that we had to be financially supported by her parents at that point" (0:13:43.1). Thus, affirming previous studies that indicate cohabitation is a popular lifestyle.

This study affirmed previous studies that said cohabiters do not refer to their partner as an “unmarried partner” or even identifying themselves as unmarried (Smock, 2000). All the couples described their relationship with their partner as being more than simply boyfriend and girlfriend or even as a partner. For example, Wilfred and Maria described their relationship in this way, “personally, we do feel married even though we aren't legally married.” (0:13:52.3) This statement is representative of what all the couples described in their

relationship with one another. In addition, all three couples affirmed their future plans to one day marry. This confirms Bouchard (2006) who contends that a successful cohabitation experience frequently results in marriage.

Another confirmation found in previous studies show that financial advantages such as low-risk commitments are advantages for older cohabiters (Brown et al., 2006; Vespa et al., 2011). All of the three couples affirmed their opportunity to move in together and being financially ready to make that transition. For example, John and Mary spoke about being financially ready to move in together and how that this decision was best for them. They remarked,

And as far as like the financial side, I mean, you know, we were both, working, I think we were both working at Chick-fil-A at the time. And from there we had gotten better jobs whenever we were moving out already.

Moreover, Joe and Ashley said, “ I'll just say it was easy and simple for us...” (0:05:53.9). For Wilfred and Maria, they discussed that their situation called for coming together financially and

that this unity brought them together as family. When asked why this is the case, Wilfred simply said, “Because we are family.” (0:20:25.3). Therefore, this study affirms the financial advantages in cohabitation posited by Brown et al. (2006) and Vespa et al (2011).

However, this study contradicted with studies that reported cohabitating couples as having low commitment in their relationships and low emotional intelligence to thier partner (Cohan et al., 2002). All of the couples voiced great trust in one another and touched on how they are secure in their relationship. For example, Wilfred and Maria spoke about how one major benefit of cohabitation was that they never felt alone. Wilfred says, “ “You're never alone, never alone.”(0:26:10.3 S2). Furthermore, John and Maria affirmed the interviewers reflection to the third grand touring question by saying the couple felt secure in their relationship. John and Maria responded to this reflection by saying, “Yeah, yeah, I think that's a good word to use, just like commitment...” (0:30:29.9). Similarly, the interviewer reflected the comments made by Joe and Ashley by saying,

Yeah. Yeah. You feel like you always have someone there to walk through that or walk that through with. You always have that, your best friend, your faithful companion right by your side. (0:18:20.0)

Joe and Ashley responded by saying, “Yes.”(0:18:44.3). Therefore, this study deviated with previous studies that spoke about how cohabitating couples have a low commitment in their relationships and low emotional intelligence to their partner (Cohan et al., 2002).

Another deviation with previous studies emerged when Joe and Ashley spoke about their families supporting them in their decision to cohabit. This deviated with Eggebeene (2005) who posited that parental support were primarily negative (Eggebeene, 2005). For example, when asked about whether their families were supportive of their decision to cohabit, Joe and Ashley responded by saying, “ Very supportive, for sure.” (0:09:52.1) and Joe added, “but I don't think there was any, I guess, judgment or anything from either side.” (0:09:16.2).

Furthermore, John and Mary spoke about being supported by Mary’s parents who allowed them to live in their house for a time. Although, they did mention the challenges that came with their living situation with Mary’s parents. They said,

Yeah. Well, I guess at that point living with your parents, I mean, it's kind of like living at home with your parents, so you really don't have the liberty to do a lot of things on your own, you always even if they, even, if they say it's okay to do something or it just always kind of feels weird. (0:13:05.7)

In sum, the couples that were interviewed provided rich descriptions and insight that hit on three major themes of difficulties in the transition, finances, and future marriage. Overall, the perspectives they offered were mostly positive. The participants all provided rich insight into their experiences as a non-marital cohabitating couple. The couples felt difficulties in transition in the beginning of their cohabitative relationships, but then progressed forward from struggles to success. Again, all the couples emphasized the importance of unity in finances and even voiced possibly marrying in the future.

Limitations of the Study

This study presented challenges in that only three couples were interviewed, which makes for a small sample size compared to larger qualitative methodologies. Small sample sizes, however, are a common feature of research qualitative designs. Another potential limitation include religious and different cultural values that were not taken into consideration. Lastly, another challenge emerged when the interviewer made biases and preconceptions known to the interviewees for the purpose of making them aware of the researchers' bias. This presented the challenge of potentially influencing interviewee responses.

The researcher took care to minimize bias as discussed in the sampling and procedure sections of this paper. However, a potential strength of this study was the incorporation of interviewing couples concurrently instead of separately to get the fullest descriptions possible of what the couples experience together. The incorporation of interviewing couples concurrently increased the richness of the couples' shared experiences with each other.

Future Directions

The research both confirmed and deviated with findings in the literature about the nature and experiences of cohabitation in non-marital couples. However, some areas of potential additional inquiry also emerged. It became apparent that cultural family and religious values and principles had a major influence on the couples to make decisions and work through difficulties. Two out of the three couples interviewed were of Latino descent. Whereas the other couple was of American descent.

Research in the future, therefore, may also focus on a certain race and ethnicity in order to dive deeper into how one ethnic group experiences cohabitation compared to another ethnic

group. For example, one driving research question can be, what are the unique experiences of American and Latino couples who cohabit? How are they similar? Where do they differ in the experience? Doing this will allow for more inquiry into cultural values, religion, and family principles.

As mentioned before in this paper, the study is limited in its methodological design. A very small sample size was obtained. The researcher encountered difficulty in recruiting participants. However, the recruitment process was significantly improved when the researcher contacted the right people, such as local churches, family clinics, etc. Further studies can be expanded to recruit more participants and incorporate cultural values, and religious backgrounds, and can first begin the recruiting process by reaching out to community leaders and institutions.

Finally, this study took place in months. it would be more beneficial to future research to also expand the time frame in order to have adequate time to recruit participants.

Appendix A

Informed Consent

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Title of Study: The Nature and Experience of Cohabitation in Non-Marital Couples

Investigators: Bryan Rendon and Dr. Justin Moore

Name: _____ De pt: _____ Pho ne: _____

Purpose of Study

- The purpose of the study is to explore the phenomenon of cohabitation by gathering the unique experiences of couples currently in a cohabitative relationship..
- Ultimately, this research may be published in a peer-reviewed journal article.

Description of the Study Procedures

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:
- Be interviewed and asked 3 general questions followed with some clarifying questions based on responses. Honesty regarding the the questions will be very helpful and expected.
- Given anonymity and provided a unique identifier code to protect your identity.

- The duration of the interview will be 30 mins and be recorded for the purposes of transcription.
- Sign a consent form for the purposes of protecting and ensuring your rights and responsibilities.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

- The study has minimal to no risk. There may be the risk of feeling uneasy or uncomfortable sharing personal information about your cohabitation experience. However, the likelihood of this is moderate. There will be no leading with questions and no judgment from the interviewer. All information shared will be with the consent and comfort of the participants.
- If there are any concerns or questions about this project, please contact Dr. Justin Moore at jmoore4@harding.edu.

Benefits of Being in the Study

- There are no monetary benefits for being in the study. Your participation will be greatly appreciated and we will be thankful for the opportunity to hear your story and unique experiences.

Confidentiality

- This study is anonymous. We may collect general demographic information, unique and personal relationship experiences, but will not be collecting or retaining any information about your personal identity. All identity information will be confidential and anonymous and you will be presented with an identifier code. This code will be the only personal identifier connected to the data obtained during the interviews. Any identifiable references made by you
- during the interview will be redacted to help ensure no identifiable information can be taken from the published data, transcription and/or codes.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting your relationship with the investigators of this study. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely from the study at any point during the process.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

- You have the right to ask questions about this study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the study. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, at brendon@harding.edu or by telephone at 214-516-0825.
- If you have any other problems, complaints, concerns, about the project and/or the primary researcher, please contact Dr. Justin Moore at jmoore4@harding.edu.

Consent

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above.

Subject's Name (print): _____

Subject's Signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's Signature _____ Date _____

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