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Meaning making among young adult cohabitators

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Meaning making among young adult cohabitators

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW	5
CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN	28
CHAPTER 4. SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS	37
CHAPTER 5. MEANING OF COHABITATION: RELATIONSHIP VS. RESIDENTIAL	39
CHAPTER 6. COHABITORS' "MEANING" OF MARRIAGE: A GENDERED STORY	96
CHAPTER 7. PERCEIVED PERCEPTION OF SIGNIFICANT OTHERS	136
CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION	161
APPENDIX A	168
APPENDIX B	169
BIBLIOGRAPHY	171

ABSTRACT

Despite the increased prevalence of cohabitation, our understanding has been limited by a primarily quantitative focus that neglects to capture the *voices* of actual cohabitators. Using a symbolic interactionist approach, my study explores the way in which cohabitators construct meaning from the perspective of young adult cohabitators. Based on in-depth interviews with both members of the cohabiting relationship, three different aspects of meaning-making are highlighted. First, I describe two major meanings of cohabitation—cohabitation as relationship and cohabitation as residence—that shape decisions to cohabit and the experience of cohabitation. Second, I explain the meaning of marriage for cohabitators by focusing specifically on gender. Third, I draw attention to respondents' perceptions of the meaning of cohabitation held by their *significant others*. Each of these aspects contributes to an increased understanding of cohabiting relationships and their *place* in the dating/marriage world.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The growing prevalence of cohabitation is recognized as one of the most significant shifts in family demographics of the past century (Smock, 2000). Cohabitation went from something experienced by a small, largely invisible percentage of the population to something that researcher's estimate *most* people will experience at some point in their lives (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Specifically, estimates indicate that between 50% (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), to over 60% (Stanley et al., 2004), of U.S. couples marrying for the first time began their unions by cohabiting.

Connected to the recent growth of cohabitation and its impact on the family is the large amount of recent cohabitation research. The focus of this research has been on establishing not only the prevalence of this phenomenon, but also attempting to understand the impact that cohabitation has on individuals and society as a whole. Specifically, researchers have focused on understanding attitudes about cohabitation and assessing the meaning of cohabitation and its connections to marriage. While important contributions have been made to our understanding of cohabitation, many questions remain. These unanswered questions are largely the result of researchers' reliance on quantitative survey data that doesn't allow us to understand the story behind the numbers, as the voices of cohabitators are missing. A symbolic interactionist approach is also needed.

Symbolic interactionism provides a perspective for understanding how individuals interpret and interact with people and objects in their lives. People do not respond

directly to things, but instead attach meanings (derived from interaction) to them and respond based on those meanings (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, understanding meaning is the key to understanding behavior. I apply this conceptualization to cohabitation research by recognizing that in order to understand why there has been an increased prevalence and cohabiting relationships it is necessary to uncover the meaning of cohabitation. This insight can be gained from using a symbolic interactionist perspective, which stresses the importance of meaning, interaction, and their connections to behavior.

My research contributes to our understanding of cohabitation by bringing a qualitative approach together with symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism stresses the importance of understanding the subjective meanings and interpretations people ascribe to events and relationships (Mead, 1934); as such, I conducted in-depth interviews with young adult cohabiting couples. I also used a grounded theory approach to data analysis since this is compatible with an interactionist approach to studying meaning-making.

This study focuses specifically on three aspects of cohabitation, each related to different meanings indicated by cohabiting couples. First, I describe two major meanings of cohabitation—cohabitation as relationship and cohabitation as residence—that shape decisions to cohabit and the experience of cohabitation. Previous cohabitation literature (Smock, 2000) has classified cohabitation into three types, which emphasize that assumed connection between relationship progress and cohabitation. However, this fails to recognize that for many cohabitators living together is less about the relationship and more driven by other residential (pragmatic) factors. By conceptualizing two types of

cohabiting couples (*relationship* and *residential*) my research highlights the importance of these *other* factors impacting why people move in together, how they handle the day-to-day aspects, and their plans for the future. These areas and the distinction between the two types of cohabiting couples are highlighted by exploring cohabitation formation, maintenance, and conceptualization of the future.

Stemming from the ‘family decline perspective’ (Cherlin, 2004; Popenoe, 1993, 2005), there is a concern regarding the impact of cohabitation on marriage. However, the significance of marriage remains high (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001) and estimates indicate that nearly 90% of people will eventually marry (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). As such, there is a need to understand the meaning of marriage for cohabitators. My second ‘meaning’-related finding does just this, as I describe the meanings of marriage held by cohabitators. In addition to expanding upon the original *relationship* and *residential* couple distinction, this also help us understand the connection between cohabitation and marriage.

Third, I draw attention to respondents’ perceptions of the meaning of cohabitation held by their *significant others*. Specifically, cohabitators discussed the perceptions of their parents and other people close to them. Understanding the influence of significant others and how they impact a cohabitators’ sense of self will help to better understand behavior, as our sense of self is influenced by our perception of how we think that others see us (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Therefore, this is used to understand why people choose to cohabit and assess the situation in the way that they do.

In a world in which cohabitation has become the norm it is necessary to explore the meanings behind the behavior in order to understand not only why that behavior occurred in the first place, but also the larger implications of it. My research demonstrates the importance of understanding the cohabiting relationship by hearing the voices of young adult cohabitators. By utilizing a symbolic interactionist perspective new insights into the meaning of cohabitation and related aspects are made. This is essential given the increased prevalence of cohabitation as one of the life transitions experienced by most young adults and the potential impact that cohabitation has on marriage as an institution. Understanding cohabiting relationships can also help to better understand relationships in general, given the connections to both dating and marriage.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Symbolic Interaction Theory

The last decade of research on family and intergenerational relations has struggled with appropriate theoretical frames within which to understand the growing multiplicity of family relations, the societal causes of familial forms and dynamics, and the consequences of society (communities, families, and individuals) as a result of changes in family forms. (Curran, 2002:577)

This lack of theory is particularly true when discussing the presence of symbolic interactionism within contemporary family research, as only a few select symbolic interaction concepts have been utilized by family researchers. As such, the current cohabitation research (as I will identify) has left many unanswered questions in need of a symbolic interactionist approach. To help fill this void my research utilizes a symbolic interactionist approach to understand young adult cohabiting couples.

Symbolic interactionism is an important theoretical paradigm that brings unique insight into understanding both the individual and society as a whole.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the connection between *symbols* (i.e., shared meanings) and *interactions* (i.e., verbal and nonverbal actions and communications). It is essentially a frame of reference for understanding how humans, in concert with one another, create symbolic worlds and how these worlds, in turn, shape human behavior. (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993:136)

From this perspective, society *is* interaction in that society exists as the reciprocal influence of people who take one another into account during interaction. Interaction is ‘symbolic,’ which indicates that interaction exists in relation to the meanings that people

develop. People do not respond directly to things, but instead attach meanings (derived from interaction) to them and respond based on that meaning (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, understanding meaning is the first step to understanding behavior.

Due to this distinctive approach towards society and interaction, symbolic interactionism provides a perspective for studying how individuals interpret and relate to both other people as well as objects in their lives and how this then leads to behavior. In this sense, the key to understanding behavior is to identify the meanings behind it. Mead (1934) referred to this as *taking the role of the other* and highlighted how once a person is able to view one's self from the standpoint of others they can also predict responses and alter their behavior.

Symbolic interactionism also provides the opportunity to explore one's sense of self. Self refers to an individual's conception or understanding of themselves which arises out of social interaction. As a person becomes aware of how others see them this influences how they see themselves (their self). Building on this is Cooley's (1902) concept of the looking-glass self. The looking-glass self refers to our perception of how we think that others see and judge us. Self-feelings emerge out of these perceptions and we begin to see ourselves as we believe others view us. Cooley recognized, however, that one's sense of self develops primarily through interaction with people who are important to us, members of one's primary groups – small groups in which face-to-face interaction occurs. Using a symbolic interactionist conceptual framework, Hanks (1995) has suggested a new paradigm for understanding the context of family relationships, particularly regarding the “special” nature of interactions between family members who

cherish and value each other. This new paradigm looks at how the decisions and actions of an individual in a family can represent the interests of the whole family when they have chosen to define their self in a collective, rather than individual, manner.

Mead (1934) also contributed to our understand of interaction, by recognizing the impact of *generalized others* and *significant others* on one's sense of self. Significant others are specific influential individuals, such as family members, with whom people learn to role-take, allowing them to anticipate the significant others' reactions. Generalized others refer to larger groups of people with whom individuals may role-take. Who a person's significant others are is subjective and may differ depending on the individual; therefore, assumptions should not be made in this regard. Hertz's (2000) interviews with single women who used donors to get pregnant and have a child highlight this idea; she found that the donors, despite their anonymity in most situations, were constructed as significant others for the mothers and children.

Overall, cohabitation research could benefit from the insights provided through symbolic interactionism. A clearer understanding of how people develop meanings and what those meanings are in relation to cohabitation could be obtained by exploring the role of interaction. Orbuch and Veroff (2002) assess the perceptions of one's self and one's partner among interracial newlywed couples. Their results suggest the importance of interaction and how the perceptions that one has about one's self and one's partner in combination with the partner's perceptions can in turn affect the way that each spouse perceives their partner, their own self, and their relationship over a period of time. Building off of this, understanding meanings would bring us that much closer to

uncovering the link between the meaning of cohabitation and behavior related to both cohabitation and marriage.

PREVIOUS COHABITATION LITERATURE

The prevalence of cohabitation has increased drastically over the last few decades and its impact on the family has been tremendous. In connection with this, the amount of research conducted on cohabitation has been extensive, particularly in the recent years. The focus of this research has been on establishing its prevalence, understanding attitudes about cohabitation, and assessing the meaning of cohabitation and its connections to marriage. While insights have been made, complete understanding has been limited due to the primarily quantitative focus and a relative absence of research utilizing a symbolic interactionist perspective. The existing literature is discussed in relation to the additional knowledge that could be gained through this theoretical approach.

Prevalence of Cohabitation

Over the second half of the 20th century the growing prevalence of cohabitation has been drastic, contributing to nearly 4.6 million U.S. households maintained by heterosexual cohabiting couples in contemporary society (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Just over the last ten years cohabitation rates have grown to 45% of women in their reproductive years having experienced cohabitation in 1995, compared to 33% of women in the same age group in 1987 (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Most people are choosing to cohabit at some point in their lives, as cohabiting before marriage has become the norm.

Estimates indicate that between 50% (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), to over 60% (Stanley et al., 2004), of U.S. couples marrying for the first time began their unions by cohabiting. This does not even include the growing number of people who are cohabiting after a divorce, as one-fourth of all stepfamilies are formed through cohabitation (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995).

Cohabitation Attitudes

Not only has there been an increased prevalence of cohabitation, but there has also been a growing acceptance of cohabitation. This increased acceptance has been particularly strong for younger cohorts, as research indicates that the majority of young adults approve of nonmarital cohabitation (Axinn & Thornton, 2000; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). In response to the statement: “It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along,” among female high school seniors, 39% agreed in 1985-1986 compared to 58% in 1997-1998 (Thornton & Young-DeMarco). This suggests that there is not only an increase in mere acceptance of cohabitation, but, acceptance to such a degree that people are encouraging it. Also supporting this idea is the result from a nationally representative sample of adults ages 20-29, where sixty-two percent agreed with the statement, “Living together with someone before marriage is a good way to avoid an eventual divorce” (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001). Adolescents (9th-12th grade) also appear to view cohabitation as a means of increasing the chances of avoiding a divorce and having a successful marriage. The majority expressed positive or neutral attitudes toward marriage

and almost half (48.7%) indicated that they would want to live with someone before they got married (Martin et al., 2003).

The growing acceptance can also be found among adults more generally, as only 36% of adults in the 2002 U.S. General Social Survey disagreed with the statement, “It is alright for a couple to live together without intending to get married” (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2003). Results from the National Survey of Families and Households also suggest increasing approval of cohabitation among older and younger adults (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Most researchers see the increased acceptance of cohabitation as tied to a general acceptance of a wider range of family-like choices and nontraditional lifestyles (Kozuch & Cooney, 1995; Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001). Approval of cohabitation is predicted to continue to grow as a result of the increased acceptance among younger cohorts (Wilhelm, 1998). Therefore, there is a growing trend towards more tolerance and freedom regarding family choices.

Cohabitation attitude research has the potential to benefit from Cooley’s (1902) concept of the looking glass self and Mead’s (1934) significant and generalized others. Highlighted here is the idea that our sense of self is influenced by our perception of how we think that others see us. Therefore, an individual’s sense of self as a cohabitor is influenced by their perceptions of how they think that others see them. Attitudes of others towards cohabitation may be an important part of how an individual sees themselves as a cohabitor or even the choices that they make to cohabit in the first place, and what that means for them. However, this assumption cannot be made without using symbolic interactionism within cohabitation research to examine this. For example, if a cohabitor

believes that ‘others’ think they are doing the right thing (even if these ‘others’ are actually completely against cohabitation), this perception is what is really going to influence the cohabitor’s sense of self and ideas about cohabitation. This also draws attention to Mead’s (1934) claim that not everyone will influence people in the same way. In other words, others’ attitudes may not really matter to your sense of self if these other people are not significant in your life. Even if research shows that there has been an increased acceptance of cohabitation in society, if the cohabitor’s significant others aren’t more accepting, does that increased acceptance really even matter? Also, who are the significant others are in the cohabitators life? Whose ideas about cohabitation do matter and in what way? Does who the significant others are change across an individual’s life course? Attitudes really only matter if the people that the attitudes are about are aware of what the attitudes are *and* that the people who hold the attitudes are considered significant others in the people’s life.

Another important point regarding this discussion is that meanings arise through the process of interaction (Blumer, 1969). This implies an interpretive process where the opinions that even significant others have do not have an automatic, direct impact on one’s sense of self or behavior. Meanings are created through a reciprocal relationship where constant reinterpretation and redefinition occurs. In this sense, it is important to look not only at how cohabitators are influenced by others in their life, but also how others are influenced by cohabitators. For instance, in what way do the cohabiting actions of children influence their parent’s ideas about cohabitation? This suggests the need to

explore multiple sides of the story to truly understand the situation and the way in which this reciprocal relationship works.

Understanding the influence of significant others and how the looking glass self plays out in a cohabitators' sense of self will also help to better understand behavior. Once a person is able to view one's self from the standpoint of others, they can predict these responses and alter their behavior (Mead, 1934). Therefore, these concepts can be used even prior to the actual cohabitation occurring in order to understand why one chooses to cohabit. In addition to understanding why someone would continue cohabiting or transition into marriage, or even why they would break-up after entering into a cohabiting union.

Meaning of Cohabitation

Largely as an emerging result of the family decline perspective (Cherlin, 2004; Popenoe, 1993), there has been an emphasis on understanding the 'meaning' of cohabitation. However, this conceptualization of meaning is different from that put forward from a symbolic interactionist perspective (as discussed earlier). Contemporary family research has focused on being able to understand where cohabitation fits within the larger dating/marital system. Based primarily on quantitative data, the meaning of cohabitation has been classified into three different types: transition to marriage, alternative to marriage, and alternative to singlehood (extension of dating) (Smock, 2000). As research continues to grow on this topic, new theories are emerging, yet concrete conclusions are difficult to make and those attempted should be taken with

caution. In addition to the heavily quantitative emphasis, the diversity of groups (age, presence of children, race, etc.) within this topic only further contributes to the difficulty researchers have with this categorization (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004). Furthermore, by attempting to categorize we are ignoring the idea that “individuals may change their minds about why they are living together, and partners may disagree about whether they are living together with plans to marry” (Seltzer, 2004:925).

Recent research suggests that there are increasing variations in the meaning of cohabitation. While earlier research suggested more support for the precursor to marriage explanation (heavily due to a lack of research on the other explanations), an alternative view has recently received more attention. Recent researchers have concluded that, despite our initial assumptions, cohabitation is neither a precursor nor an alternative to marriage (Seltzer, 2004). Instead, it is seen as simply another step along the dating process or another transition as a new form of serial monogamy evolves. However, this conclusion is often based on assumptions of people’s intentions within the cohabiting relationship – assuming that if the cohabiting relationship ended prior to marriage that it was not a ‘transition to marriage’ type of relationship. This assumption, however, is premature given a lack of the actual cohabitators’ voices present to make this type of conclusion. Additionally, other research has showed that cohabitators often identify cohabitation as a way for them to be sure they are compatible with their partner before marriage (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). Therefore, perhaps those cohabiting relationships that did not end in marriage did so because while the partners were intending to marry they discovered that they were not compatible. This then would still

support the idea of a ‘transition to marriage’ type of cohabiting relationship, as that was the intention even if the end result did not occur.

A considerable amount of quantitative, survey-based research has attempted to understand the meaning of cohabitation in regard to these three types. While insights have been made, questions still remain that require the voices of actual cohabitators. For instance, researchers have concluded that younger cohabitators are more likely to use cohabitation as a precursor to marriage, whereas older cohabitators use it as an alternative to marriage (Goldscheider, Thornton, & Young-DeMarco, 1993; King & Scott, 2005). For Goldscheider et al. this conceptualization is based on the lack of stability for young adult cohabitators. King and Scott also find that older cohabitators report significantly higher levels of relationship quality and stability, as well as noting that younger cohabitators are more likely to report future marriage plans. However, this still says very little about what cohabitation actually means to the cohabitators. For instance, do these cohabitators see their relationship as lacking stability? Is this even significant for them depending on what cohabitation means? Is stability part of their conceptualization of cohabitation? In addition, using intentions to marry says nothing about the other components of the relationship – such as the larger meaning of cohabitation and marriage. Furthermore, the conclusions that researchers make from marital intentions are often based on one cohabitor taking a survey. What about the other side of the story?

In addition to age suggesting possible differences in the meaning of cohabitation, researchers have also highlighted potential gender affects. This research, however, is also based primarily on survey data and is in need of the perspective only made possible

through symbolic interactionism. For example, based on NSFH data, Brown (2000) finds that when women negatively assess their cohabiting relationship, they are more likely to break up. However, men are more likely to remain in the relationship and only decrease their likelihood of marrying their current partner. Questions remain regarding why this is. What is going on with how men and women view cohabitation that women will break up but men just won't take it to the next step of marrying. Are women more likely to see the meaning of cohabitation as being tied to marriage?

According to a study based on qualitative interviews with cohabitators in Scotland, more men than women stress the advantages of an easier exit associated with cohabitation and described entering their cohabiting relationship in terms of 'try and see' (Jamieson et al., 2002). While this study is a good example of the insight made possible from in-depth interviews, further exploration of the larger meaning of cohabitation and the significance of these potential gender differences is needed. Symbolic interactionism stresses the interaction surrounding the development of meaning (Blumer, 1969). Is the person's partner aware of their potential different meaning of cohabitation? What is the significance of this for the couple and for their potential marital intentions?

Other researchers have attempted to classify cohabitation by exploring the way in which cohabitators pool their income. Research has shown that cohabitators are less likely to share their income than married couples (DeLeire & Kalil, 2005; Heimdal & Houseknecht, 2003; Kenney, 2004). In addition to marital status, Heimdal and Houseknecht find that past relationship experiences (divorce) impact income organization among cohabiting couples. Kenney's research suggests that many cohabiting couples use

a 50/50 allocation of expenses; however, this does not necessarily mean that both partners' incomes are equally available to the household. Despite the basic insight into money organization, we know very little about the significance of the financial situation for the actual cohabitators. Do cohabitators see their financial division as signifying what cohabitation means for them in general? In what way? What is it about the meaning of cohabitation that leads people to handle their finances the way that they do? Why does having experienced a prior divorce impact financial pooling? More information is needed on the details of the financial division and the decision made surrounding it, as well as the perceived significance (or lack of) regarding the division in general. This type of insight requires a symbolic interactionist approach to get at the insights of the actual cohabitators.

While some researchers do look specifically at marriage and cohabitation decisions in order to conceptualize what cohabitation means, not all researchers agree that "decision" is even an appropriate term. Manning and Smock's (2005) qualitative research suggests that the movement into cohabitation is often not a deliberate decision; instead it can more accurately be characterized as a slide into cohabitation. In connection with this, many of their respondents could not mark a single date in which the couple started cohabiting, as there was no formal agreement in place; instead it just happened. Research has also suggested that the "decisions" people make to marry when cohabiting are not straightforward, instead, many different factors are taken into consideration – both relationship and economic-related (Smock, Manning & Porter, 2005). Therefore, to

classify cohabitation as one of the three types limits a complete understanding of the situation.

Utilizing a symbolic interactionist perspective also lends itself to an exploration of the definition of cohabitation. Interviews with recent cohabitators highlighted the fluid starting and ending points associated with cohabitation (Manning & Smock, 2005). This suggests the need to let couples define for themselves what it actually means to cohabit. When the cohabitor defines cohabitation, is it the day that both people sign their name to the same lease agreement, or does it start before that when the individuals are staying the night at each others' residences and have moved over personal belongings? Furthermore, do both individuals see their relationship and the start of it in the same way? By allowing this subjective conceptualization of cohabitation, suggested by a symbolic interactionist perspective, where the participants' own voices are heard, a more useful and less restrictive understanding of cohabitation can be gained. As Goffman (1963) points out, it is important to recognize that identities are socially constructed and although someone may stake out an identity claim, the validity of that claim depends on the responses of the audience. This, therefore, raises other questions. How is a couple's definition of what is means to cohabit impacted by the responses of others? Is there a point in which your relationship is defined by others as a legitimate cohabiting relationship?

Meanings arise through the process of interaction with others (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Therefore, while symbolic interactionism lends itself to understanding what cohabitation means for cohabitators, it also highlights the call to assess the process of developing a meaning of cohabitation. How does one develop their meaning of

cohabitation? Who are the people who influence their meaning of cohabitation? Does entering into cohabitation influence one's meaning of cohabitation? Does breaking up when in a cohabiting relationship influence one's meaning of cohabitation? This discussion is also important given that cohabitation is recognized as less institutionalized than marriage (Nock, 1995). Therefore, there is a great need to understand how individuals create their own meanings for their relationship given this cultural ambiguity.

Using a life course approach, Guzzo (2006) has identified the connection between cohabitation and other life transitions/events by showing that many people began cohabiting in the same month or two as another event. While this is insightful, the whole story is missing. We know the correlation; however, we do not have a full understanding of this association. In what way do these other event impact cohabitation? What is the perceived significance of these other events on the decision to cohabit? Were there additional influences not recognized by the survey? Also related to the life course approach, Binstock and Thornton (2003) find that there are couples who transition out of cohabitation without actually breaking up. Based on a quantitative panel study that tracked histories from age fifteen to thirty-one, their research showed that reasons other than discord account for more than one-fifth of all first transitions out of cohabitation. While this is a significant new finding, the voices of the cohabitators are still missing. What is the meaning of cohabitation for these cohabitators? What is the perceived significance (if any) of living apart after cohabiting, but still remaining in a relationship? Does this type of transition impact their meaning of cohabitation?

Research has suggested that the meaning of cohabitation can change over time. Based on qualitative interviews with British cohabiting couples, Lewis, Datta, and Sarre's (1999) find that some couples had started cohabiting for pragmatic reasons but had grown into relationships characterized by strong commitment and seriousness. The significance of this transition needs to be explored, as well as its association with the larger meaning of cohabitation. The interaction effect suggested by symbolic interactionism could also provide insight into the reciprocal impact of the transition. Did both members of the couple change their perception, or just one? Was this transition something that the couple expected to occur? What is the significance of this in general?

While cohabitation research has been dominated by a quantitative focus, it is important to recognize that there have been insights from a few recent qualitative studies. Highlighting the diversity of cohabiting couples, Reed (2006) interviewed cohabiting couples with children to see how they view their relationship and the meanings attached to it. This is an excellent example of uncovering the actual meaning of cohabitation and why cohabiting couples with children make the decisions that they do about cohabitation and marriage. More research is needed like this to uncover meaning for other types of cohabiting couples. Knowledge has also been gained by Sassler (2004) and Smock et al.'s (2006) qualitative research on young adult cohabitators. Both studies suggested that couples often based their decision to move in together on pragmatic reasons such as finances. While Smock et al. also suggested that dynamics such as spending more time together and evaluating compatibility play a role, Sassler failed to identify any other non-pragmatic factors. This suggests the need to further explore this component. Are young

adult cohabitators making connections to the relationship as well and not simply pragmatic reasons? Or are some connecting the decision to the relationship and others to these pragmatic components? What impacts these different meanings of cohabitation? What is the significance of moving in together for a specific reason, whether that is relationship or pragmatic-based? How does this impact other aspects of the relationship?

Overall, symbolic interactionism stresses the importance of meaning as key to understanding behavior (Blumer, 1969; Thomas & Thomas, 1928). However, the categorical conceptualization of meaning that most researchers use does not adequately address what symbolic interactionists are referring to. Instead, we need to let the cohabiting couples define cohabitation for themselves and what that definition actually means to them as individuals and to their relationship. Similar to Harris' (2001, 2006) approach to marital equality, we need to identify what components actually mean for the individuals. This approach would more accurately capture the cohabitators' meaning of cohabitation instead of researchers attempting to classify certain aspects as important determinants to fit the relationship into one of the three types of cohabitation. However, as it stands currently there are a variety of unanswered questions regarding the meaning of cohabitation and the perceived significance of this meaning and associated components.

The connections to marriage

Another area that cohabitation researchers have focused on is the connection between cohabitation and marriage; specifically, two related aspects have been explored.

Both of these, however, necessitate a symbolic interactionist approach. First, researchers have looked at the transition to marriage from a cohabiting relationship. Despite the fact that cohabitation has contributed to the declining rates of marriage (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991); for most, cohabitation is not a permanent state. Half of cohabiting unions end within the first year and only one out of ten last five or more years (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Recently, the number of cohabiting unions that have ended in marriage, as opposed to dissolution, has decreased, contributing to *more* cohabiting unions ending in dissolution than marriage (Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006). According to Smock and Gupta (2002) this reflects a historical shift; the proportion of cohabiting unions that ended in marriage within three years dropped from 60% in the 1970s to about 33% in the 1990s. Even though more cohabiting unions are ending in dissolution than marriage, estimates indicate that nearly 90% of people will eventually marry (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). Additionally, marriage is still held in high regards as most people say that being married and having a family is very important to them (Thorton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), and most expect to marry eventually (Brown & Booth, 1996; Lichter, Batson, & Brown, 2004). Therefore, we need to understand how cohabitators perceive marriage. Do the cohabitators themselves see their cohabiting situation as a marriage? In what way is it perceived as similar? In what way is it perceived as different? Do cohabitators want to get married? Why? What do they believe will change? What do they believe will stay the same?

In a survey of both cohabiting partners, Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin (1991) found that 69% of couples agreed that they either plan or expect marriage and 13%

agreed that they do not expect to marry each another. However, this leaves about one-fifth of the couples disagreeing about marriage expectations with one partner expecting to marry and the other not. Applying a more fluid symbolic interactionist approach to this situation would provide better answers about the communication occurring between these individuals, especially those who disagree about marital expectations. Are the cohabiting partners aware that they feel differently than their partner? In other words, what does a cohabitor believe that their partner thinks about marriage? How does this influence their own marriage perception? How does this influence their behavior in the relationship – do they stay with the person regardless, do they hope to change their partner’s mind? Therefore, with this specific look at cohabitor’s perceptions of marriage there is the need to understand not only the perceptions of both cohabiting partners, but also their perceptions of their partner’s perception. As ultimately this *perception of the perception* type of understanding is more important to realize the person’s own perception and their behavior (Blumer, 1969; Thomas & Thomas, 1928).

The second cohabitation-marriage connection involves an attempt by researchers to understand what marriage means for cohabitators. However, similar to the meaning of cohabitation literature, the approach to meaning is different than one put forth by a symbolic interaction perspective. Much of the discussion about the meaning of marriage stems from the larger debate concerning the future of marriage. Specifically in Cherlin’s (2004) analysis of the “deinstitutionalization of marriage” we see the role that cohabitation plays in societal views of marriage. He identifies cohabitation as a key contributor to the declining marriage rates, which he sees as impacting the future of

marriage more generally. However, despite the perceived declining advantages of marriage, relative to cohabitation, marriage has remained an important symbolic marker (Amato et al., 2003). Regardless, Cherlin and others express concern that marriage is becoming a fading institution. Therefore, much of the research and focus on the “meaning of marriage” debate lies within our views of cohabitation through its connection with marriage. With that said, it also appears that any sort of involvement with premarital relationships will tend to delay marriage, and in fact, cohabitation does not have as strong of negative effect on marital timing as other types of premarital relationships (Gaughan, 2002). This then suggests that while many attack cohabitation as contributing to the decline in marriage, its effect may not be as great as some believe.

Researchers have explored the transition from cohabitation to marriage in order to understand what occurs with the relationship and what this says about the meaning of cohabitation and marriage. Brown’s (2004) research based on NSFH data suggests that transitioning from cohabitation to marriage does not create an increase or decrease in relationship quality. Without hearing the cohabitor’s voices, though, we do not know whether they actually perceive that there is no increase or decrease in relationship quality. Or, what about a change that is not necessarily better or worse? Without exploring this issue from the perspectives of the actual cohabitators, in their own words, this possibility is completely disregarded. Also, if cohabitators do agree that there is no change, was this expected? If so, what is it about the meaning of cohabitation and marriage that leads them to want to get married? If not, what is going on with the marriage that leads to this lack of relationship quality change? Related to the transition, interviews with working and lower

middle class cohabitators suggest that for cohabitators something (particularly financial status) should change prior to marriage (Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). What does this say about the meaning of marriage? Do other groups of cohabitators perceive the same change needed prior to marriage, or other change?

To explore the meaning of marriage for cohabitators and why they would decide to make or not make the transition from cohabitation to marriage, researchers have also looked at the perceived pros and cons of marriage. Gender differences have emerged regarding this, as men see marriage as requiring them to be successful at their career, hold a steady job, and give up their individual leisure pursuits (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995). More men also stress the advantages of an easier exit associated with cohabitation (Jamieson et al., 2002). Both of these findings, however, highlight the need for further exploration. What is it about the meaning of marriage that suggests these types of changes for men? What are the perceived pros of marriage that lead most cohabitators to have intentions of marrying and actually getting married in the future? In an attempt to understand expected positive and negative changes associated with cohabitation, McGinnis (2003) uses survey data to show that cohabiting couples perceived fewer positive and negative changes resulting from marriage (compared to non-cohabiting couples). On the survey people are asked how they would expect their lives to change in nine areas – standard of living, economic security, overall happiness, freedom to do what you want, economic independence, sex life, friendships with others, relationship with parents, and emotional security. On these nine measures they are asked to respond from one to five with one being much worse, five being much better, and three being the same.

While this may provide a glimpse of understanding about perceived changes it also leaves numerous unanswered questions. For instance, what about simply different changes? Not better or worse. Also, what about other perceived areas of change not related to the nine possible choices provided? What is it about these aspects that they believe will change, and why? What is the significance of these perceived changes? Are some aspects of change more significant than others?

Researchers have attempted to explore the connection between cohabitation and marriage by looking at the decision to marry after cohabiting and the larger meaning of marriage for cohabitators. However, I have highlighted just a few of the many questions that remain. Largely these unanswered questions are the result of a quantitative approach that neglects to understand the story behind the numbers, as the voices of cohabitators are missing. The way in which people perceive marriage is also influenced by previous interactions, which has implications for how people behave when married (Hall, 2006). A symbolic interactionist approach, which would emphasize the influence of others regarding how individuals understand and define marriage, is needed.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Despite the recent growth in cohabitation research, the vast majority of the research has only touched on the dynamics of this family phenomenon. As discussed, we have very limited in-depth knowledge of the dynamics of the cohabiting relationship and the perceptions of the actual cohabitators. The importance of using qualitative methods to understand cohabitation has been emphasized recently by other researchers as well.

Through their own qualitative study, Manning and Smock (2005) found numerous ways in which the cohabitation experience was being misunderstood through quantitative methods. Specifically, they highlight the fluid nature of the cohabiting relationship, as couples often ‘slide’ into cohabitation; as well as emphasizing the misunderstood terms for cohabiting couples (such as ‘unmarried partner’) often used in surveys.

While the mostly quantitative cohabitation research has shown the prevalence of cohabitation, it has failed to provide a complete understanding of the situation. For instance, in a survey cohabiting couples were asked: “When you and your current partner first decided to set up home or move in together, did you think of it as a permanent arrangement or something that you would try and then see how it worked?” (Jamieson et al., 2002:360). This type of question, however, only provides respondents with two options. Similar restrictions exist with the NSFH analysis (Bumpass et al., 1991). Particularly in regard to the questions regarding reasons for and against cohabitation, only one of the thirteen items was indicated by a majority of cohabitators.. This suggests that there is something else not captured by the provided survey choices – qualitative research could get at the missing something by providing respondents with the opportunity to express their own *voice*.

The meaning of cohabitation and nonmarital relationships also depends on the expectations of those who form the union and on individuals’ own experiences within the relationship. Individuals’ attitudes on the appropriate conditions for marriage and childrearing, on whether relationships involve lifetime commitments, and on the different rights and responsibilities of women and men in cohabiting and marital relationships affect how they understand their personal relationships. (Seltzer, 2000:1249)

While Sassler (2004) did use qualitative data to identify specific reasons that the individuals choose to cohabit, follow-up research needs to examine how perceptions about cohabitation more generally and the importance of marriage are impacted by and impact the individuals' specific reasons for cohabiting.

Given the prevalence of cohabitation as something that most people experience (Stanley et al., 2004), an in-depth look at the perceptions that cohabitators have about cohabitation is vital. Additionally, considering that the majority of cohabiting unions end in dissolution and not marriage (Lichter et al., 2006), but nearly 90% of people will eventually marry (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001), research needs to understand the connection between cohabitation and marriage. This insight and more could be gained from utilizing a symbolic interactionist perspective, which stresses the importance of meaning, interaction, and their connections to behavior.

Symbolic interactionism is based on the assumption that meaning and learning are gained through interaction with others. How a person understands others, how others come to understand that person, and how the person comes to understand and identify himself or herself are part of the symbolic interaction process. (Yogan, 2000:109)

Recognizing this, my study combines symbolic interactionism with grounded theory to explore the perspectives of young adult cohabitators.

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

Participants for study

My study utilized a qualitative approach to understand young adult cohabitators. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with both members of cohabiting couples. Fifty-one total people were interviewed – forty-eight interviews with both members of twenty-four couples and three interviews with just the female member. Therefore, a total of 27 couples are represented in my study. The participants were mostly students at Iowa State University, a 4-year public university where the majority of students are traditional students. Iowa State University is located in Ames, Iowa, and has an enrollment of 26,160 students, which is split between 20,481 undergraduate students, 3,907 graduate students, and 492 first professionals. The general profile of the students indicates that 70% of the undergraduate students are from Iowa and 83% of them are white, which is a fairly good representation of the state's race/ethnicity distribution (Iowa State University Website 2007).

The specific participants sampled for data collection were Iowa State students enrolled in a variety of courses during the Summer and Fall of 2006 semesters. The courses included Social Problems, Intimate Relations, Social Psychology, Race and Ethnic Relations, and Introduction to Sociology. A wide range of courses ranging from 100- to 300-level in difficulty were chosen to form a diverse group of students and to increase my ability to find cohabitators willing to participate in my study. In the courses students have the opportunity to attend and/or participate in a variety of campus activities

for extra credit, I was able to offer participation in my study as a potential credit opportunity. Therefore, one partner in the relationship was recruited through a course and received credit for their participation. After the interview, they were asked to pass on my contact information to their cohabiting partner if their partner was also willing to participate. Their partner was not compensated for their participation in the study. Stemming from my sampling method, not all participants were Iowa State students. While the original recruited participant was, seven couples consisted of one person attending Iowa State and one person either attending a different college or working fulltime.

We lack a clear culturally understood term for cohabiting partner, as the term “unmarried partner” is not understood by all, which impacts our ability to accurately measure cohabitation (Manning & Smock, 2005). Recognizing this, for my study I defined cohabitation as “living fulltime with a romantic partner” and used this as the criteria in order to recruit participants. I did not specify a certain length of time that the couple had been living together, nor did I indicate that the couple must have a shared lease (or mortgage) arrangement. As a result, my respondents had been living together anywhere from one month to four years. In addition, four of my respondents legally had separate places of residence (their names were on leases at separate places); however, they still lived together fulltime at one of the residences. These cohabitators are referred to as *informal cohabitators*, as opposed to the *formal cohabitators* who have a shared, legal place of residence. My loose definition of cohabitation is also consistent with symbolic interactionism, as McCreary and Dancy (2004) used a similar broad conceptualization of

family membership to identify the members of families. They stress the importance of the meanings of both family membership and those given to interactions as key to determining the effectiveness of family functioning.

Although cohabitation has become increasingly prevalent across a diverse population (Smock, 2000), I was interested in the experience and perception of young adult cohabitators. While older cohabitators are less likely to marry or have already been married previously (King & Scott, 2005), the majority of younger cohabitators will marry eventually (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Stanley et al., 2004) and I was interested in exploring this perspective on marriage. College students in general were chosen because of their specific situation. At Iowa State University, as at many other traditional universities, the majority of students leave home to attend college. As a result, for most this is their first opportunity to live with non-related roommates. Most are also living in a different town from the one where their parents reside, providing a level of freedom to choose with whom to live and to keep it a secret if they desire. Therefore, given the wide range of cohabitators (older, those with children, etc.) to choose from my emphasis on young adult college student cohabitators provides insight into an important group in order to uncover their experiences and perspectives on cohabitation and marriage.

Both partners of the cohabiting relationship were interviewed in order to get a unique perspective of the relationship, one which is different than if only one person was interviewed. Research indicates that partners' influence one another's attitudes in a marriage (Kalmijn, 2005) and that both partners do not always see the situation in the same way (Bumpass et al., 1991; Sassler, 2004). Therefore, by interviewing both partners

I was able to assess potential influence and obtain both perspectives of the relationship. In addition, I asked the participants about their partner's perception in order to assess whether they had a *shared story* or different versions. I was interested in understanding how two people combined their individual perceptions and experiences into one cohabiting relationship.

During the Summer and Fall semesters of 2006, I initially contacted participants in the courses after permission was granted from the instructors (recruitment handout in Appendix A). After briefly explaining the study and its purpose, I invited eligible participants to contact me through e-mail or by telephone. Once they contacted me I provided the students with additional information about the study and the opportunity to ask any questions they had about the research project. Assuming that the individual still wished to participate in the study at this point, interviews were arranged. At the end of an interview I then asked the participant if they thought their partner would be interested in participating as well. If so, my contact information was provided for the partner to contact me in order to learn more about the study, ask questions, and schedule an interview. Using this sampling technique, I was able to collect in-depth data about the cohabiting relationship from both partners.

As with any research design, issues of validity do exist. In-depth interviews, in general, require trust in the reliability and truthfulness of the information that the respondents are provide. The validity of the research can be threatened particularly in situations where the respondent may not feel comfortable disclosing personal information. However, I improved upon this by assuring confidentiality to all respondents

and provided an environment of professionalism and comfort through a private room in the sociology building at the university. In addition, all interviews were voluntary; the respondents were not being forced to answer personal questions about their cohabitation experience and they were reminded when initially volunteering and at the start of the interview that they can refuse to answer a question or stop the interview at any time. However, there is still the potential that those with negative cohabiting relationship experiences did not volunteer to be interviewed or were the only ones eager to talk, which may have threatened my ability to analyze a complete variety of cohabiting relationships. Nevertheless, certain issues in regard to validity are always present in any form with research and all possible measures were taken to validate this particular research project.

Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth interviews, which consisted of a variety of open-ended questions. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were conducted in a private office in the sociology building on the Iowa State University campus. After the study was explained to the participants and any questions were answered, consent was obtained and the interviews began. With the participants' permission, I audio-taped all interviews for later transcription.

I used the existing cohabitation literature in order to develop general categories and specific questions that I was interested in learning more about for my project. Open-ended questions were used in order to provide participants the opportunity to reflect on and discuss their relationship openly and without constraint. The questions began with

general probe questions about the respondent's relationship, such as when they had starting dating and when they moved in together, in order to develop a time frame and understand how they came to cohabit. After this point, specific questions were asked in regard to the respondents' cohabiting relationship and the impact of cohabiting.

Questions about the day-to-day aspects of living together were also addressed. From here, I asked the respondents about their general perception of cohabitation and how they thought others viewed cohabitation. Questions were also asked about the respondents' general perception of marriage and the significance of it to them and their partner. The final set of questions addressed the future of the relationship concerning cohabitation and marriage. Additional questions such as "How do you refer to your partner?" were also asked. For a complete listing of interview questions, please refer to Appendix B.

After each question, I asked additional follow-up questions in an attempt to provide the respondent with the opportunity to elaborate on an idea or provide additional specific information relating to the response. The interviews were generally flexible and informal. When new ideas were expressed, I allowed the discussion to flow in that direction and did not limit the topics to those specifically indicated in the prepared questions. This allowed the respondent to feel comfortable expressing their experiences and opinions freely and provided me with additional insight into the dynamics of the cohabiting relationship. I personally conducted all of the interviews in order to assure reliability in this regard.

These open-ended questions were vital in providing validity to the conclusions that I reached. This allowed respondents the opportunity to provide me with the context

and interactions that have occurred as a basis for explaining their experiences with and perception of cohabitation. By doing this, the specific stories give validation to the relationship experiences by providing numerous examples of different situations. This provides me with an accurate understanding of the relationship and why each person views cohabitation the way they do. Therefore, when the data was analyzed, I was able to examine these specifics in order to assure that my conclusions in regard to the relationships are fully embedded in the data. This is particularly important for the residential versus relationship couples discussed in the first discussion chapter.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was conducted using a grounded theory approach, which allows the responses of the participants to be analyzed and coded throughout the data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). By utilizing this approach, understanding and meaning is derived from the analysis of the patterns in the data. Therefore, upon completion of an interview it was immediately transcribed in order to analysis and code specific categories. These categories were then used in relation to those found in the previous interviews and were reflected in the adaptation of the questions for subsequent interviews. In other words, new questions were developed and existing questions were evolved to reflect the new categories as they emerged in the previous interviews. For instance, early interviews suggested that parents often responded more positively than the participant expected. Asking the participant about their parent's perception of

cohabitation was part of the original interview questions; however, asking whether this was the response/perception that the participant expected had not been originally included. However, as the significance of these expectations emerged I integrated this question into the interviews that followed. Accordingly, this process continued to evolve when new interviews were conducted and categories were developed or dismissed.

According to Glaser (1992), this methodological approach provides the opportunity to discover patterns in the data. However, it is not a "forced analysis" (Glaser); instead, I was able to discover concepts and ideas about the cohabiting relationships as they arose throughout the data collection. I used conceptual ordering (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to make sense of the interviews and associated descriptions. Through this approach I organized the data into concrete categories according to their different aspects. The interviews suggested that there are two different types of cohabitators – *relationship* and *residential*. To illustrate the distinction between these two categories, three different concepts were used. “Cohabitation formation” explored why the couple moved in together and what discussion occurred prior to moving in. This concept was combined with “cohabitation maintenance,” which consisted of characteristics such as how the couple handles finances, what each person learned about the other when moving in together, etc. Also illustrating the differences between the two relationships is the “conceptualization of the future” concept which explores future cohabitation and marital intentions. The two couple categories are also illustrated in an exploration of the ‘meaning’ of marriage and with exploring how this impacts the perceived perceptions of significant others.

Conceptual ordering is an important step in developing theory as this provides the opportunity to understand the cohabiting couple descriptions in a more concrete fashion. However, my aim through this research is more modest than what typically is associated with classic grounded theory, where an explicit theory is developed denoting well-developed categories linked together in larger explanation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Given the limitations of previous cohabitation research (discussed in the literature review chapter) and the exploratory nature of my own study, my goal was to organize the couple descriptions into developed categories and concepts. Strauss and Corbin recognize the benefit of this stage of theory development and that it is the desired end point for some researchers.

The conceptual ordering that I have done lays the foundation for future research to build upon my couple classification (*residential vs. relationship*) through theory development. There is the start of a theory in the first chapter where I lay out the difference between residential and relationship couples through highlighting the perceptions and actions of the couples in ‘cohabitation formation’, ‘cohabitation maintenance’, and ‘conceptualization of the future.’ In this chapter there is a connection made across the various concepts in explaining the *who, what, when, where, why, and how* (Strauss & Corbin) desired in theory construction. To have complete theory development, however, the same type of connections need to be expanded further regarding the meaning of marriage for cohabitators and the perceived perception of significant others. To make this expansion, additional research on residential and relationship cohabiting couples is needed.

CHAPTER 4. SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the sample used in the study. In all, I interviewed 51 young adult cohabitators. Of the participants, 25 were male and 26 were female. The average age for the sample was 22, with an age range from 18 to 36. For males the average age was 23 and for females the average age was 21. The sample also consisted of 45 Caucasians, 2 White/African Americans, 2 Africans, 1 African American, and 1 Asian-American.

TABLE 1 General Characteristics of the Sample

Variables	Sample	
	N	%
Gender of Respondent		
Male	25	49.0
Female	26	50.9
Race of Respondent		
White	45	88.2
White/African American	2	3.9
African	2	3.9
African American	1	1.9
Asian American	1	1.9
Age of Respondent (yrs)		
Average	22	
Range	18-36	

COUPLE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Table 2 shows the couple-level characteristics of the sample that relate to

cohabitation and my specific study. The 51 individuals interviewed represent 26 heterosexual couples and one male homosexual couple. In regard to residential status, 21 were formal cohabitators in that both of their names were on the same lease (or mortgage). Six of the couples, however, did not have both names on the same lease although they both lived at one place of residence. These couples are referred to as informal cohabitators. Three of the couples had shared children present in the home, with one of this three having children from previous relationships as well. In addition, 9 of the couples lived with other non-related roommates. Nine of the couples were currently engaged; 18 couples are not engaged.

TABLE 2 Couple Characteristics of the Sample

Variables	Sample	
	N	%
Couple Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	26	96.3
Homosexual	1	3.7
Couple Type		
Formal	21	77.8
Informal	6	22.2
Residential Presence		
Shared Children	3	11.1
Non-shared Children	1	3.7
Non-related Roommates	9	33.3
Marital Intentions		
Engaged	9	33.3
Not Engaged	18	66.7

CHAPTER 5.

MEANING OF COHABITATION: RELATIONSHIP VS. RESIDENTIAL

Largely as a result of the family decline perspective (Cherlin, 2004; Popenoe, 1993), family scholars have been attempting to understand the ‘meaning’ of cohabitation. However, their conceptualization of meaning is different than that put forward from a symbolic interactionist perspective where reality is a social construction based on the continual negotiations of various perspectives (Simon, 2004). Contemporary family research has focused on being able to understand where cohabitation fits within the larger dating/marital system. Based primarily on quantitative data, the meaning of cohabitation has been classified into three different types: transition to marriage, alternative to marriage, and alternative to singlehood (also known as extension of dating) (Smock, 2000). This three-type categorization makes assumptions regarding cohabitation as being a part of relationship progress, as in the idea that there are steps one takes in dating to get to marriage. This categorization is really only looking at cohabitation in connection to marriage and fails to recognize that for many cohabitators cohabitation may be about a variety of other things. Focusing specifically on interpretations of inequality within one’s marriage, Harris (2006) used a symbolic interactionist approach to conduct qualitative interviews with individuals who defined their relationship as equal or unequal. He avoided making assumptions as to what constitutes marital equality and instead left the meaning up to his participants who defined their relationship in such a way. He also used a story-telling approach where the participants stressed what they believed were the important equal or unequal aspects of their marriage. This approach provided insight into

the individual construction of meaning; for instance, while some participants did stress assumed important aspects of equality such as money or division of household labor, other participants placed more emphasis on unexplored areas such as intellect and religion. Overall, the results of this study highlight the importance of recognizing that the meaning of things is not inherent, which is vital to understanding behavior such as cohabitation.

The dominant conceptualization focuses on aspects of the couple's current relationship and their anticipated future relationship for understanding the meaning of cohabitation for them and their decision-making. However, my study identifies another set of issues recognized by the cohabitators, those related to residence, that also affect cohabitation meanings and decision-making. For some couples, the decision to cohabit and the experience of cohabiting is shaped more by these issues than the progression of their relationship. The importance of non-relationship issues to some couples and relationship issues to other couples emerged throughout the interviews. To highlight the different stories I discuss components related to cohabitation formation, maintenance, and conceptualization of the future. Cohabitation formation refers to what occurs prior to cohabiting – prior discussion and the reasons to cohabit. Maintenance includes the day-to-day aspects of cohabiting including the couples' financial decisions, division of household labor, what was learned about the other partner, the terms used to refer to one another, and the presence of additional roommates. Finally, the couples' future cohabitation and marital intentions are examined under the conceptualization of the future section.

In the interviews the three components emerged as important links drawing attention to the differences between cohabiting couples. For some couples the relationship itself is the foundation for all aspects – the reason to move in together, finances, future intentions, etc. – these couples are referred to as *relationship couples*. For other couples, however, the relationship plays a secondary role and instead residential (housing) aspects are ultimately driving the cohabitation; these couples are referred to as *residential couples*. To conceptualize and identify a couple in one of the two categories (conceptual ordering) I examine how both members of the relationship discuss the various different aspects (formation, maintenance, and conceptualization of the future). By combining these aspects, of the twenty-seven couples in my study nine can be identified as *relationship couples* and thirteen as *residential couples*. The classification is based on the combination of these aspects; for instance, when a couple discussed the majority of aspects in a residential fashion they were classified as residential even if a few aspects were discussed in regard to the relationship. Three couples discuss both residential and relationship aspects equally and therefore cannot be accurately placed into one of the two categories. An additional two couples cannot be classified as *relationship* or *residential* because the two members of the couple did not match; one member emphasized residential aspects and the other emphasized relationship aspects.

COHABITATION FORMATION

The first aspect used to highlight the difference between a *relationship* and a *residential* couple is cohabitation formation. This refers to two key aspects at the

beginning of the cohabiting relationship: why the couple moved in together and what discussion occurred prior to moving in. For relationship couples moving in together is driven by the relationship, as these couples discuss how cohabiting will allow them to spend more time together and to test things out for marriage. Relationship couples also discussed cohabiting prior to moving in together and what it meant for the relationship. On the other hand, residential couples discussed non-relationship aspects for why they moved in together, such as financial and housing needs. Additionally, the majority of residential couples did not talk about cohabitation prior to moving in together and those who did discuss it did not do so in the context of the relationship.

Residential Couples: Reasons to Move in Together

Household status is increasingly becoming an instrumental good, in that it is a means to various ends and not an end in itself (Burch & Matthews, 1987). In this sense, cohabiting is a means to other ends (financial sharing, domestic labor sharing, companionship, etc.) rather than an end in and of itself. For residential couples the goal is not to cohabit for the sake of cohabitation itself or for the relationship, but rather cohabiting served other functions. Residential couples emphasized two different reasons for moving in together. The primary reason mentioned was financial, as this was identified by eight of the thirteen couples. Previous research indicates that household formation is impacted by economic components. Among young adults in their twenties, the cost of housing and potential labor earnings have a direct impact on whether individuals remain with parents, choose to live with a roommate, or live separately

(Haurin, Hendershott, Kim, 1993). Other researchers have also found that pragmatic reasons, particularly to save money on rent and other living expenses, are why some cohabiting couples move in together (Manning & Smock, 2005; Sassler, 2004; Smock et al. 2006). Many residential couples in my study discussed how it was cheaper for the couple to share the rent or mortgage at one place instead of paying at two separate places. As one twenty year-old female recognizes,

There's not really any sense of paying his house payment and my rent, so we ended up just moving in together because it was kind of a waste of money to pay my \$400 rent and his house payment, so we just ended up moving in together.

In addition to finances being a primary reason mentioned by the couples, many of them identified it as being the most important reason when they decided to move in together. According to a twenty-one year old male, “*when we moved up here we knew it would come into the situation of either living apart or living together and financially it made sense to live together. So it was one of the main reasons that we moved in together too.*” Another twenty-one year old male provides the same reasoning behind why he decided to cohabit.

We kind of reasoned, well, I was either over at her place all the time or she was at my parent's house with me. It just seemed like financially, instead of her having to pay rent at a place; actually what happened was that she moved into my parent's house with us and then we decided that instead of us having to pay separate rents since we were going to be together all the time, we were hanging out with each other more than with our friends, it'd just be better. I think that was the biggest decision, or like the biggest deciding factor.

The second residential reason identified by couples for why they decided to start cohabiting related to a need for different housing for one or both members of the couple.

Sassler's (2004) qualitative interviews also indicated the importance of housing needs leading toward cohabitation. In my interviews, housing needs encompasses a variety of different aspects, including needing somewhere to live, opportunities for either work or school within the community, or roommate-related problems. All of these reasons indicate something outside of the relationship that is impacting the couple's decision to move in together.

The most common housing-needs reason to move in together was because either both or one of the partners needed somewhere to live; this was identified by seven of the thirteen couples. For instance, one twenty-one year old female talked about how when both returned from serving in Iraq for the Army neither person had a place to live so they decided to move in together.

I think because when we came home everybody had to find a home – an apartment or a house, nobody had a home, and we'd been together so we thought we'd just do it again. It wasn't like it would have been here where you would have actually had to make that decision to do that, but when neither of us had a home to go back to since we'd left that I think we were pushed, it was easier to move in.

There were additional couples whose current lease was ending and they needed to find a roommate or roommates to live with – their partner just happened to be that roommate.

As expressed by a twenty-year old female,

I didn't really know my roommate very well last year and his roommate is my best friend and they were going to live together and we all decided that we were going to live together – so it would be just the three of us. But then his girlfriend, my best friend's girlfriend, was going to move in with this other guy but then we all just ended up moving in together. I don't really know, we just ended up finding a five bedroom place.

Also, three of the seven couples who discussed reasons related to housing moved in together initially because one of the partners was losing his/her current place of residence and needed somewhere to live. In these situations, this most often included financial aspects as well and resulted in the person moving in with his/her partner and parents. *“We actually moved in together really early because his family has financial problems. So, the summer after our junior year of high school he moved in with me and my family and lived with us” (Nineteen year old female).*

In addition to needing somewhere to live, another residential dimension mentioned by five of the seven couples who discussed housing was in regard to the community and how it was beneficial for one person to either move there or remain there for school or work opportunities. As a twenty-one year old female highlights in her discussion of why it was a good idea for her partner to move and start living with her,

We talked about it a lot, I think that we both were kind of like, well, what are you going to do when you get home – are you going to live two hours away or are you going to live in Ames? He joined the army right out of high school so he hadn’t started college anywhere, didn’t really have a career started. He worked at the grocery store in his local town so I was like, well, I think that it would be good if you came to Ames and find better job opportunities for you. More benefits rather than just living with me, you’d get out of town and do something.

Satisfaction with roommates is an important component when assessing the overall perceived quality of the college experience (Dusselier et al., 2005; Lovejoy, Perkins, & Collins, 1995). Perhaps as a direct recognition of this, another residential dimension that led some of the residential couples to move in together was a negative roommate situation. Three of the seven couples who discussed housing moved in together

when one partner was having problems with a current roommate and moved in with his/her partner to get away from the roommate. As expressed by one eighteen year old female, “*My roommate, or like my old roommate and I didn’t get along, so it made it easier to go over to David’s all the time.*” In this situation, moving in together was not driven by the relationship, but rather it was about something else pushing the person out of their current housing situation and creating a need for them to find somewhere else to live.

Using a life course approach, Guzzo (2006) has identified the connection between cohabitation and other life transitions/events. Her research suggests that a fourth of cohabitations occur the same month as another event and up to 40% are connected when including events occurring in the two months before and after a union forms. Supporting this idea, residential couples often move in together because of the other things going on around them that have little to do with the actual relationship. Instead, the decision is impacted by external factors (life course events) such as finances and various housing needs.

Relationship Couples: Reasons to Move in Together

Another set of couples identified very different reasons for why they decided to start cohabiting, reasons directly tied to the relationship instead of the pragmatic reasons identified by residential couples. Relationship couples identified two different reasons for why they wanted to move in together – wanting to spend more time together and to test compatibility for a future marriage. In addition to financial reasons, Smock et al.’s (2006)

focus group research with young adult cohabitators also indicates the general motivation of wanting to spend more time together and to evaluate compatibility.

In my study, wanting to spend more time together was the primary reason identified by relationship couples; all nine relationship couples mentioned this reason. Often this idea was connected to long-distance relationships, either the couple began cohabiting to spend more time together after having a long-distance relationship for a period of time or the couple moved in together to prevent a long-distance relationship from occurring.

After experiencing a long distance relationship for almost two years, one couple decided to move in together so that they could spend more time together. As explained by a twenty-one year old female,

He actually was overseas in Iraq, so that was part of the main reason why we moved in together because he was gone on deployment for 22 months. So out of the 2 years and four months that we've been dating he's been gone most of the time, so it's been an over the phone relationship, kind of.

Her partner, a twenty-one year old male, talked similarly about their situation and why they wanted to move in together: *"We'd been apart a lot and it was kind of aggravating. We wanted to spend more time together."*

Also related to the idea of a long-distance relationship but in a desire to prevent one from occurring, one thirty year old male talked about the options that he and his partner considered.

We had talked about it. About staying at her grandparents' house for awhile because she didn't want to get an apartment or something like that because she didn't want to waste money on something that you're not going to own. So we talked about living there as an option. Because, well,

I'm from Iowa Falls so it was easier for me to do that than to move back to Iowa Falls and then be driving down here all the time to see her because that's a distance. So, we kind of talked about that and how we were going to make it work living together and that was about the only option that we thought of.

A similar idea was expressed by other couples who decided to move in together so that they would not be apart for the summer, as they were concerned that this may negatively affect the relationship. Therefore, for relationship couples the decision to cohabit was based more on the actual relationship and wanting to spend as much time together as possible

Another reason identified by two of the nine relationship couples was moving in together to see if this person was someone that he/she wanted to be with for the rest of his/her life. As one thirty-six year old male remarks about when he first moved in with his partner eight years ago, *"I just figured that we were going to figure out if this was the person that I wanted to be with for the rest of my life and not really saying that, okay, I'm going to put her through some hard times but hard times pop anyways."* In Smock et al.'s (2006) research, evaluating compatibility was expressed by both males and females; however, females were more likely to tie this directly to marriage whereas males tied it to the potential for a long-term commitment. Therefore, while testing compatibility is related to the relationship it also highlights the idea that (at least for males in Smock et al.'s study) this compatibility is not established prior to cohabitation and the relationship may be playing less of a role than it appears for why the couple decided to move in together. While my research did not suggest the same gender difference, this does

highlight the importance of distinguishing between evaluating compatibility for marriage and for a long-term commitment (which many would argue that cohabitation already is).

Overall, relationship couples identified very different reasons to move in together compared to the residential couples. Among relationship couples, wanting to spend more time together or evaluating compatibility motivated the decision to cohabit. Residential couples discussed pragmatic reasons related to finances and housing impacting their decision to move in together. Given the desire to understand the meaning of cohabitation and where it *fits* within the larger family system, this is an important distinction to make.

Residential Couples: Discussion Prior to Moving In

Within the scholarly literature and popular discourse more generally, there is the assumption that cohabiting is directly connected to the relationship and future marital plans. For instance, in response to the statement: “It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along,” fifty-eight percent of high school female seniors agreed in 1997-1998 (Thorton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). This suggests that there is not only an increase in acceptance of cohabitation, but, acceptance to such a degree that people view cohabitation before marriage as a good idea. In addition, the results from a nationally representative sample of adults ages 20-29 indicate that sixty-two percent agreed with the statement, “Living together with someone before marriage is a good way to avoid an eventual divorce” (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001). Both of these results suggest a common assumption that cohabitation is and should be used in a direct path towards marriage. However, only ten

of the thirteen residential couples in my study had actually discussed marriage at all prior to moving in together. What was and was not discussed before moving in further highlights the differences between relationship and residential cohabiting couples.

Not only were residential couples not discussing marriage prior to cohabiting, but nine of the thirteen residential couples claimed that they did not even talk about *cohabiting* prior to moving in together. “*We didn’t talk about it; I think that it was just something that we both assumed*” (Twenty-one year old male). For many of these couples this was in connection to the more informal nature of the cohabitation. Since six of the cohabiting couples are what I refer to as informal cohabitators (discussed in the previous chapter) and another eight started their cohabitation that way, moving in together was something that simply *happened* more than something that was intentionally planned, at least in the context of their relationship. Instead, moving in together was to fulfill a housing-related need and/or financial relief. However, taking the relationship to the next step (as often assumed with cohabitation) was not intended or discussed by some of the couples. As a twenty-one year old male indicates,

We started living together, I don’t know, it kind of happened like I just stayed up in her room when we lived in the dorms. So it kind of started there and then during the summer she lived in Freddy and I lived at my parents, but I always went up there and stayed the night up there.

A similar idea was expressed by a twenty-two year old male,

I woke up and she wanted to go get some stuff because she kept staying over and one drawer became three and then all my clothes were either hung up or folder on top of the closet and she had this whole drawer. So I didn’t say anything and the next thing I know all of her stuff from her old apartment is here. She just ended up moving in.

Not discussing cohabiting prior to actually moving in together highlights how for many of the couples cohabiting was not driven by the relationship or related to marriage, as presumed by the literature. For many, it really was not seen as a big deal, as it was about other pragmatic reasons more than the relationship per se. They didn't talk about moving in together and, at the same time, neither person had a problem with it when it started to occur.

While it was more common for residential couples to not discuss cohabiting at all, the discussion that did occur focused primarily on pragmatic aspects of living with another person. For example, as highlighted by one twenty-year old female, financial aspects were discussed in regard to moving in,

We had talked about it previously. We had split up last July for a couple of months and then got back together in November and we had talked about it when we first got back together that there's not really any sense of paying his house payment and my rent, so we ended up just moving in together because it was kind of a waste of money to pay my \$400 rent and his house payment, so we just ended up moving in together.

Other non-relationship components that residential couples discussed included needing a place to live and what the options were. Overall, while many residential couples had minimal discussion prior to moving in together the discussion that did occur was not in regard to the relationship or connections to future marriage, but rather focused back on aspects such as finances and housing-related dimensions.

Relationship Couples: Discussion Prior to Moving In

In sharp contrast to the residential couples, there were other couples (seven of the nine relationship couples) in my study who specifically discussed cohabitation prior to moving in together and the direct connection between cohabitation and the actual relationship. Regarding their discussion a twenty-seven year old male remarked,

We talked about how it was the best thing for our children and our family, well starting our family, or merging the families is probably better. That we couldn't do it apart because family is together all the time, so if we were going to be a family we had to be together all of the time.

Relationship couples discussion prior to moving in also involved talking about how the couple felt like they were *ready for it*, suggesting that for them moving in together did involve a next step in their relationship. This idea was suggested by a twenty-one year old female,

So, we just kind of like talked about and we were both coming here to go to school – we just transferred from (local community college) – and we figured that when we weren't at work and school we'd probably be together anyways, so we might as well move in and we both thought that we were ready to. We've been together and we both know each other pretty well.

Other couples talked about the potential impacts of moving in together on the relationship and what moving in together means for the relationship in general. For instance, in deciding to move in together after experiencing a long-distance relationship one twenty-one year old female noted,

So we both decided and we talked about it a lot – and we're like, are you sure you want to do this because everyone says that it's going to ruin it and it's not going to work out and we're just going to fight – so we talked about it a lot and we finally decided that yeah, it's better to see each other everyday after this long of a wait.

Overall there is a clear contrast between the two groups of couples regarding the discussion that occurred prior to the couple moving in together. For many of the residential couples there was virtually no discussion at all and the discussion that did occur was in relation to pragmatic components, not focused on the actual relationship. On the other hand, relationship couples did discuss cohabitation prior to moving in together, as it was seen as a significant transition in the relationship and something that would have potential impacts on the relationship. The relationship couples were also more likely to discuss future transitions, such as marriage, prior to moving in together as well.

Regarding cohabitation formation, there are a variety of different components impacting the decision that people make to move in with their partner and what discussion, if any, occurs prior to making the transition. My research indicates that there are two distinct groups of cohabitators, those who move in together for pragmatic reasons and those who move in together because of the relationship (wanting to spend more time together and to test compatibility for the future). As mentioned previously, however, there are a few couples who fall between the two groups. Additionally, I classified couples as residential or relationship based on their overall stance across all three aspects (formation, maintenance, and conceptualization of the future). Given these two components, it is important to note that there were some couples who indicated both pragmatic and relationship components regarding why they moved in together. For some of the couples there was not simply one reason to cohabit, as indicated by a twenty-two year old female moving in was about both finances and the relationship,

We thought that we'd both save money if we found an apartment together and it would be the next step in our relationship to see if it'd work before marriage because a lot of people that I know that moved in after they got married they'd start fighting a lot and find out things that they didn't like about each other and it didn't work out. So, we were like, well, we better find out if this works and if it works we'll move on from there and if not we'll go our separate ways.

For a few couples the discussion prior to cohabiting also included both pragmatic and relationship components. According to one twenty-two year old female, she and her partner discussed a variety of different components when faced with the decision to cohabit,

What had happened was we hadn't originally planned on getting the sublease, but this friend of ours approached us and said if I can find an apartment that you guys approve will you move in with me. Will you be roommates so that we can get a decent price on this. And we're like, well, if you can find it before the deadline to cancel our dorm contracts than yeah. And he did. So, there was like a few days of this really intense conversation of can we do this, are we ready for this, can we afford it, and that was really what it came down to it. Not even that there was talk about doing we want to do this, but can we afford it, is it the right thing to do financially.

While it important to recognize that regarding cohabitation formation some of the couples identified and/or discussed pragmatic and relationship components, the majority of the couples could be appropriately identified as being either residential or relationship couples. Recent researchers have begun to recognize the role that finances (Manning & Smock, 2005; Sassler, 2004; Smock et al. 2006) and housing (Sassler, 2004) are playing with cohabitation. While this is an important first step, considering the large relationship focus currently found within most of the cohabitation literature, my own research highlights the need to explore both pragmatic and relationship components motivating

couples to move in together as a possible key characteristic distinguishing different types of cohabiting couples.

COHABITATION MAINTENANCE

Once a couple has moved in together there are a variety of day-to-day aspects of the relationship and the living situation that highlight the differences between residential and relationship couples. During the interviews distinctions between couples became apparent when discussing aspects such as how the couple handles finances, what each person learned about the other when moving in together, division of household labor, what terms the couple uses to refer to one another and the presumed appropriateness of the terms. The presence of additional roommates is also discussed in regard to residential couples. These components build upon the cohabitation formation discussion to highlight the distinction between residential and relationship couples. As with the cohabitation formation, the aspects in combination with one another suggest that there are different types of cohabiting couples – those who emphasize the relationship and those who focus on residential components.

The cohabitation maintenance components highlight the fact that for the residential couples the day-to-day aspects of living together reflect more of a roommate than a relationship-emphasized situation. Throughout the interviews, residential couples made frequent comparisons about their current cohabitation and living with other roommates. This comparison highlights the fact that for many people cohabiting is more of a residential rather than a relationship component. They see living with their romantic

partner in a similar light as living with another person in general. As indicated by one nineteen year old male, *“It’s important to live with someone else so that you can figure out if you can handle it, like when I moved in with my best friend I couldn’t stand it.”* A thirty year old male makes a similar comment by noting, *“If you’re living in a house and you need a roommate to help pay for the rent you need to have somebody live with you – it’s probably not healthy to live by yourself – you have somebody to talk to and hang out with.”* As indicated by these males, cohabiting is seen as something comparable to living with other roommates in general.

The comparable aspect between living with a cohabiting partner and living with a more general roommate is also suggested by others when discussing how to handle the day-to-day aspects of cohabiting. According to a twenty-one year old male, the fact that his partner had lived with a roommate previously made it easier for them to know how to structure the day-to-day aspects of their cohabiting situation – as they already had a model to go off of.

It was just expected that we would both share the tasks just with everything else. We share bills and everything like that. So, no, not really. Just because I think that it would have been different if it were her moving out straight from living with her parents than me moving out straight from living with my parents, but since she’d lived on her own she already had an idea of what she needed to do and I kind of got that idea just by the way her and her sister did things and the way I did things around my house.

A twenty-one year old female suggests the same comparison regarding how to handle the financial division, *“I was kind of used to paying bills in half, just because with my old roommate we split everything in half and with me and her we just kind of bought our own groceries and then common stuff we just took turns on. So, that was kind of what we just*

do too.” Making comparisons between living with their current cohabiting partner and living with other roommates in general highlights a clear residential understanding to the situation. For residential couples, the same residential (roommate) type of approach is felt by exploring the other components of cohabitation maintenance as well.

Residential Couples: Finances

While the majority of social policies assume that unrelated individuals who share a residence, such as through cohabitation, do not combine their incomes (Kenney, 2004) previous research on how economic resources are actually divided has been limited (Avellar & Smock, 2005). The research that has been done has suggested that cohabiting couples pool income less than married couples (DeLeire & Kalil, 2005; Heimdal & Houseknecht, 2003; Kenney, 2004). In addition to marital status, Heimdal and Houseknecht find that current and past relationship experiences in general impact income organization among cohabiting couples. For instance, if an individual has been married or in a cohabiting relationship previously this has an impact on how they handle finances in their current cohabiting relationship. The presence of children has also been found to have a strong impact on how finances are divided (Kenney, 2004; Vogler, 2005).

As discussed regarding cohabitation formation, for residential couples finances play a large role in determining why the couple initially moves in together. The impact of finances, however, continues to highlight the difference between residential and relationship couples, as suggested by looking at how couples handle the financial division of aspects such as rent (or mortgage) and bills. Similar to the impact that marriage has on

wealth (Waite, 1995), cohabitators recognize that many of the household goods and services can be shared so that the cost to each individual is lower than if each one purchased and used the same item individually. In my study, couples are classified as residential when they emphasized the importance of splitting equally the financial components associated with living together. This was discussed in reference to the monthly bills, including rent (or mortgage) and utilities, as well as groceries. In connection to this, previous research suggests that many people indicated that it was important for their cohabiting partner to be economically stable; although a higher percent of women express this concern than men (Smock et al., 2006). In my study, all of the residential cohabiting couples reported that they split the financial aspects directly in half with each person contributing equally. As one twenty-one year old female indicates, for some couples this was an intentional act and something specifically discussed beforehand,

I don't like the idea of him like paying for anything just because he's my boyfriend. I like the idea of splitting things evenly and we talked about that as a big part of moving in together. Like if we did ever break up and move out like if you buy something you don't buy things together, you either buy it or the other person buys it that way it's easier to split up at the end. I know that it's kind of weird to talk about that like that – if we break up – but I'm very like, I don't want to run into that problem, so we'll just do it that way. So we split everything evenly, rent, groceries, utilities.

Also indicating the intentional nature of the financial division, a twenty-one year old male explains their situation as such, “*We keep track of all expenses for the house, such as rent, bill, any food we buy for the house. We keep track of all of that and then at the end of the month we just divide it.*”

While some couples did discuss the financial split prior to cohabiting, for other couples this was simply something that was assumed – similar as to what occurs when you move in with a roommate. People typically do not sit down and discuss with a roommate that the rent and bills will be split in half, as this is a shared understanding already established. As indicated by a twenty-one year old female,

Interviewer: The whole situation with deciding about money and stuff, did you guys talk about that before moving in?

Participant: No, not really. We just kind of like assumed, half/half. It wasn't like a discussion or anything.

For most residential couples deciding how to handle the financial aspects associated with cohabitating was an easy decision to make. Most had lived with other people prior to moving in with their partner, so they simply handled finances the same way that they had previously with roommates. As explained by one twenty-one year old female who had lived in an apartment with her sister previously, “*I was kind of use to paying bills in half, just because with my sister we split everything in half and with me and her we just kind of bought our own groceries and then common stuff we just took turns on. So, that was kind of what we just do too.*”

While residential couples indicated a 50/50 division when it came to the fixed monthly financial aspects, for some couples this same division was not as consistent or direct in all aspects of their situation. While splitting the rent and utilities were ‘easy’ to divide in half, many of the residential couples had a looser division when it came to groceries. According to one twenty year old female,

Rent, my parents pay my half and he pays for his half and his mom helps out occasionally. But, so he pretty much pays his with loans. And our

other bills we just split even and with other expenses, like groceries and stuff, we both just kind of pitch it wherever and kind of who ever has the money at the time pays for it and if he pays for this, I'll pay for that. It's usually not too big of a problem, just whatever happens happens, but, yeah, we probably pay about equal amounts.

A less clear 50/50 division was also indicated by the couples when it came to paying for dates and other luxuries, as among many of the residential couples there was the assumption that males would pay. This idea, which was also supported by Vogler's (2005) findings, is suggested by a twenty-one year old female who says, "*So we split everything evenly, rent, groceries, utilities. Well obviously if we go out to dinner or something he'll usually pay for it because guys are that way, they like to pay that, so I just let him.*"

Among couples with shared children, Kenney (2004) finds that 73% of married couples said that they put all of their money together, whereas only 52% of cohabiting couples did. In addition, similar to the residential couples in my study, many of the cohabiting couples indicated that they used a 50/50 allocation of expenses. However, Kenney also points out that this does not necessarily mean that both partners' incomes are available to the household. For instance, if one individual makes more money than the other by contributing to half of the household expenses this individual will still have more individual money left over at the end. This same idea is present among the couples in my study as equality is determined by overall contribution without taking into consideration each individual's actual financial status. For example, there were some couples where despite the fact that one person was receiving financial support from parents and the other person was not, each person was still responsible for paying half of

the monthly expenses. Despite this indication that equal contribution may not necessarily constitute equality at the individual level, the importance lies in the perception of the couple. Residential couples stress having a 50/50 division when it comes to finances, as this is seen as the best option (or in the case of those who simply assumed – the only option).

Relationship Couples: Finances

In comparison to the residential couples who emphasized their intentional 50/50 split for monthly financial responsibilities, those classified as relationship couples discussed the importance of sharing finances in the context of the relationship. In my study, three of the nine relationship couples actually had shared banking accounts; as indicated by one nineteen year old female,

Our money is in a joint account anyways, so kind of, we just put money in it and then if he needs money he takes it out. So his rent and stuff, we don't really determine whose money is whose. So, if he takes money out for rent it could be my money or it could be his. But, we go out and buy groceries together. Everything that we buy we buy together, it's not really a this is my money and I'm using it to pay or this is his money and he's using it to pay, unless it's like, I don't tell him I used money to buy a present or something like that.

Even among the relationship couples who did not have legal financial connections, as described by the previous quote, there was still a shared understanding of the financial components of the relationship. Cohabiting couples have been recognized as more egalitarian and more likely to negotiate decision-making (Jamieson, 1999). While residential and most relationship couples consisted of both partners contributing

financially, there was a shared dependency idea behind relationship couples. Each person's financial situation was considered regarding the overall financial contribution to the relationship. As described by one twenty year old female,

I do not make as much as he does now so he has been paying more of them, which is not, it doesn't cause a problem in our relationship because we understand that – hey, you make more and you're going to have to pay a little bit more if we want to be able to live.

Another twenty year old female also explains,

Interviewer: So, how do you guys deal with bills and rent and stuff like that?

Participant: We pay most of that with our extra financial aid and then just whatever, mostly that's rent and then our utilities he usually pays for our cable and then we split up paying the electric, because he doesn't have a cell phone bill because his parents pay his cell phone and I have my own cell phone bill and that's like \$100 a month, so that adds up to about the same as our electric and cable would be.

Interviewer: And when it does come to the rent and putting financial aid towards that, are you both putting the same amount forward?

Participant: No, because I just go to (local community college) now, and only do federal loans and he does the partnership loans too, so he gets a lot more than I do. So, we just do that with his financial aid.

Interviewer: Is your financial aid going towards it at all?

Participant: No, because mine basically just pays for my classes and books and that's it.

Having a shared banking account, therefore, is not the only way in which the financial organization reflects a relationship couple rather than a residential couple. The distinction lies in taking into consideration each person's individual situation when figuring out how much each person will be contributing to the financial aspects of the cohabiting situation. In addition to understanding that since, in the majority of situations, both people do not have exactly the same individual financial situation that each person

will not actually end up contributing the exact same amount to the overall cohabiting relationship.

Previous research indicates that it is important to recognize that cohabiting couples are not a homogenous group, as there are differences between how cohabiting couples with shared children, post-marital cohabiting couples, and young (pre-marital) couples handle financial allocations (Kenney, 2004). Supporting this idea, the three cohabiting couples with shared children all share finances as relationship couples. However, there are also clear differences among the other twenty-four couples suggesting that other factors besides the presence of children or previous marital status impact the financial division. Money is recognized as a direct indicator into other aspects of a couple's life together (Vogler, 2005). Supporting this notion, my research suggests that the way in which couples handle the financial allocation associated with cohabitation highlights the overall differences between two distinct groups of cohabitators – residential and relationship.

Residential Couples: What was learned?

In order to learn about the experience of living with each other, I asked all the cohabitators, both those who moved together primarily for residential reasons and those who moved together primarily for relationship reasons, about what they had learned about their partner after moving in together. Residential couples tended to identify more *trivial* things that they learned about their partner and that they believed their partner learned about them. I refer to these aspects as trivial since they tended to be aspects that a

person would learn from living with simply anyone, even if that person was not your romantic partner. The aspects are also trivial in the sense that they are surface-level things that someone learns about another person; they do not reflect an in-depth relationship where someone learns about who their partner is on a deeper, more emotional level.

Among residential couples, the most commonly mentioned thing that people learned related to cleanliness, either that their partner was a messier or cleaner person than they realized, or related to cooking. Ten of the thirteen residential couples in my study identified one of these housework-related components. As indicated by a twenty-one year old male, *“I found out that Nicole didn’t know how to cook and she was a little messy. She didn’t clean her room that much and she had never done dishes before because her mom always did the dishes.”* A nineteen year old female also notes, *“He’s a neat freak. I like myself not too neat, I can get messy sometimes. And he likes to pick up after me, which is kind of annoying. He’s very neat and that’s something that I wouldn’t have known.”*

Among residential couples, another commonly mentioned learned thing was habits, as this was mentioned by five of the thirteen couples. Habits refers to the little things about a person on a day-to-day basis, but similar to cleaning and cooking aspects habits lie at the surface level of any relationship. As described by a nineteen year old female,

I learned a lot about his habits, about his cleaning, his grooming habits. And just stuff that goes along with that you don’t ever realize, you don’t

know what time he takes a shower everyday or this is how he cleans the room and stuff like that. Just the little stuff that you would never know.

Similarly, a twenty-year old male said that he learned, “*Habits that she has, just small things like that – what she likes, what she dislikes, stuff like that.*” When discussing what the person learned about their partner when moving in, residential couples discussed aspects that a person would learn about any roommate that you had for a period of time. These are surface-level, trivial components that do not reflect the deep relationship connection assumed to exist among cohabiting couples.

Relationship Couples: What was learned?

When asked the same question, relationship couples stressed more personal components that they learned about their partner or things that they learned about their relationship or themselves in general from living together. This reflects that deeper connection that is presumed to exist when couples make the transition into cohabitation. Some relationship couples described how they had learned about more personal aspects of their partner’s personality. As indicated by a twenty-five year old male,

I learned how understanding he was. In the beginning of the relationship I didn’t realize that he was very, well... I hid a lot of things because I didn’t think that he was going to understand it and accept me for who he was. But I learned that he didn’t mind, he didn’t care. I learned that he was very, very patient and again understanding.

Not all of the relationship couples, however, reflected on positive learned things as a result of their cohabitation. As described by a twenty-one year old male,

She would probably say that she learned that she doesn’t think that I communicate very well with her, but I think I do, so that would be one. She

would say that she notices that we're aren't as more affectionate with each other, like go out on dates and do those sorts of things aren't as important. Which I think it is important, but we are already spending more time together so I would think that would be more of an affectionate thing then the way you spend time together. Just sitting there and doing homework, that's spending time together, but I don't think that would be considered affectionate either.

In addition to learning about their partner, among the relationship couples many people talked about learning about themselves through the cohabiting relationship. As pointed out by one twenty-one year old female,

There's a lot of things about me that have changed since we first started dating. I used to be much more controlled and closed, because it's what I learned to do in my family and with the previous boyfriend I had learned that I didn't cry and I still absolutely hate crying, particularly when I have no reason, but I feel more comfortable crying in front of him now because he's been so supportive. He's been so great. And to put it bluntly I've become more feminine since we started dating, I get nicer clothes. I enjoy wearing fancy things and I'm not afraid of it as I used to be, because I didn't grow up with fancy things except on special occasions. So there's a lot that he's learned about me that he's kind of brought out about me because I never would have let it out if it hadn't been for him.

Through her discussion of what she thinks her partner learned about her, this participant suggested that she also learned a lot about herself through the relationship. Both types of learning, however, reflect a deeper level than that indicated by residential couples.

The third potential aspect of relationship-oriented learning relates to the relationship in general, where couples learned about their relationship (often becoming more serious) as a result of cohabiting. One twenty-one year old male reflects that he learned: *"How good we are for each other."* Another twenty-one year old female reflects about how cohabitation made their relationship become more serious and led them to realize that, *"We're getting older now and not just messing around and having fun, this is*

starting to get serious.” In connection to both individual and relationship-level aspects, another twenty-one year old female discusses what she learned when she started cohabiting with her partner,

He is a lot more laid-back and comfortable with us than I thought he was. We had had conversations about marriage and engagement and that kind of stuff before he moved up here and it was always far in the distance kind of conversations and everything. I think part of that was because we hadn't been together long enough to really be sure that this was what we wanted and that we wanted to be together, so it was hard for him to look beyond just a short period of time. And now that he has been up here and we've been together a lot more he's become a lot more comfortable with that and I guess, it's turned over from being really all about if or someday maybe kind of changed to when or in the future kind of statements. So I learned a lot about how he was feeling about us and thinking about us once we actually moved in together.

Overall, relationship couples in my study learned about different aspects of their partner, themselves, or their relationship compared to the residential couples who tended to stress surface-level components of cleanliness, cooking, or habits. This indicates a deeper, more emotional connection present between the relationship couples due to the emphasis placed on the relationship and not on the residential (housing) components. The distinction also highlights the fact that simply because a couple is living together does not automatically create this type of personal connection. For some couples, what was learned is more comparable to the aspects that one would learn about any roommate.

Residential Couples: Division of Household Labor

Another component that emerged in the interviews to indicate a relationship versus residential distinction among cohabiting couples is how the couple handles the

housework. Couples were asked to discuss how the various daily chores (cleaning, cooking, etc.) were handled by providing detailed descriptions of who does which chores, as well as how this had been decided. Similar to the financial division, among residential couples there is an emphasis on equality regarding household labor. For these couples, equality was described as each person picking up after themselves and then sharing equally in all other tasks. This idea of equality is highlighted by one twenty year old female,

Usually we try to keep like picked up after ourselves. When we use dishes, put them in the dishwasher right away, clean the cat litter everyday, we just usually take turns doing that. And then if it ever gets to the point where it's really messy or like just there's lots of stuff that needs to be done we usually take a night and both just sort of tackle everything. Usually that's like once a week or so, because we usually try to keep it picked up.

Additionally, a twenty-one year old male describes how he and his partner handle the division,

Interviewer: How do you guys handle the housework and stuff like that?

Participant: It's split pretty even.

Interviewer: Are there certain things that you do more of and she does more of?

Participant: Not really. Vacuuming, scrubbing and doing dishes and that sort of thing we pretty much both contribute the same.

Similar to the financial division found among residential couples, the couples do not indicate any consideration of individual factors such as time or preference for certain chores over others – there is simply an equal division being reported.

Not only do residential couples emphasize equality, but for many of them this is an important aspect of sharing a residence. Research indicates that compatibility of

college roommates, involving factors such as cleanliness, is a factor in students' satisfaction with their college experience in general (Ogletree et al., 2005). In a similar fashion, residential couples suggested the compatibility found within the relationship regarding both people being able to afford the rent and both people being relatively clean. As a twenty-one year old male indicated, "*She's cleaner than I expected when I first met her, which is nice as I'm kind of a clean freak myself. So in that way we're really compatible.*" In this sense, residential couples handled the division of household labor similar to the way in which roommates would. Each person is seen as responsible for their own chores, which results in an equal division as each person is contributing the same. In order to maintain this desired level of equality, however, compatibility must also be established.

Relationship Couples: Division of Household Labor

Equality with housework does not automatically constitute a residential couple, as there were some relationship couples who also stressed equality and both contributing. However, as the couples discussed equality in the interviews there was a clear distinction in the way in which equality was understood by the couple. Among residential couples equality had an individual-level focus in that each person was responsible for his or her own *mess*. On the other hand, for relationship couples equality had a group-level focus where each person was contributing equally by helping each other out. Research suggests that among married couples a specialization often occurs regarding housework, where each person can develop some skills and neglect others. This is seen as increasing

efficiency for the couple (Waite, 1995). Relationship couples utilized a similar type of efficient specialization. This type of mutual dependency is indicated by a twenty-one year old female who said,

We both try to do our fair share when we have spare time we just kind of pick up and do our stuff. But there are certain things that I prefer to clean that I usually like to do and he usually likes to do the kitchen and the bathrooms and that sort of thing. So when we clean the house he does half and I do the other half and we both just pick up after ourselves.

In a similar fashion, another twenty-two year old female talked about how she and her partner handled the housework,

A lot of it just goes by what we do and don't like to do. He's minorly germaphobic, so he prefers to do a lot of the cleaning as far as like cleaning the bathroom, cleaning the kitchen. If it's just minor stuff that needs to be done like wiping down the microwave or the stovetop than I can do that no problem. But like once every week or two we'll actually do a full out vacuum, scrub, clean. He's better at doing the laundry than I am so he does the laundry, like wash and dry. But he hates folding it, so that's something that I do. Who's ever leaving first thing in the morning takes out the trash. Dishes are my thing since he's usually the one that cooks. And that's just kind of the way that it goes, it's that there's a lot of stuff that whoever comes upon it first does it, but there's other stuff that's just – well, you're better at it, or I hate his particular thing, so can you do it.

For many of the couples (seven of the nine relationship couples) equality involved one person doing the majority of the cleaning and the other person doing the majority of the cooking. According to a nineteen year old female,

He cleans up, like I said he's the neat freak. I pick up most of the big things and he'll vacuum and fluff pillows and all that stuff. So I don't do most of the cleaning... I haven't cooked in awhile; we were just talking about that last night. But I do cook; he doesn't really cook and I don't really want him to cook because he doesn't know how to cook. So I do most of the cooking if we're making dinner or we eat out. He likes me to cook though, that's one thing that he stated; that he likes my cooking. And I think that's one thing that we talked about before.

Therefore, there is still a component of equality found among many of the relationship couples; however, the equality reflects a dependency on one another for the overall housework where one person takes charge of a specific task and the other person takes charge of a different task. This type of interdependence is seen as a key characteristic of romantic relationships (Brehm et al., 2002).

Regarding equality it is essential to point out the importance of perception and what people are using as the standard for comparison when discussing equality (South & Spitze, 1994). In addition to using this for understanding equality, it is also important to look at individual perceptions and the comparisons that are being made in order to differentiate between residential and relationship couples. Residential couples tended to base their division off of previous roommate situations and discussed using that as the standard for how to handle housework within their cohabiting relationship. This idea is suggested by a twenty-one year old male in his discussion of how they divided things out similar to how his partner had handled housework when she lived with her sister.

It was just expected that we would both share the tasks just with everything else. We share bills and everything like that...I think that it would have been different if it were her moving out straight from living with her parents than me moving out straight from living with my parents, but since she'd lived on her own she already had an idea of what she needed to do and I kind of got that idea just by the way her and her sister did things and the way I did things around my house.

On the other hand, relationship couples tended to compare their division to other married couples. This type of comparison is highlighted by a twenty-two year old female,

Interviewer: What sort of expectations did you have about you living together?

Participant: I expected I would be pretty much doing all the housework kind of stuff, but he's helped out somewhat with the laundry and the dishes. But I still do the majority of it. But I wasn't really expecting much because we kind of lived with each other beforehand and I had learned most of his quirks, so I really didn't expect anything different.

Interviewer: Did you talk about how you were going to handle housework before you moved in together?

Participant: Not really, just maybe, okay, we'll do what we can when we can.

Interviewer: Do you like the fact that you do more than it?

Participant: Yeah, I kind of was brought up with my mom doing most of it and my grandma doing most of it, so I kind of figured that was how it was supposed to be and it doesn't really bother me.

Therefore, who the couple is using as their basis for comparison has significant implications for not only how they see their own relationship division but also on the larger classification of their relationship as residential or relationship.

While there were relationship couples who emphasized the equality in their relationship, there were other relationship couples who recognized that they did not have an equal division of household labor. Previous research has found that across all situations women spend more time doing housework than men; although, there is slightly more equality in a cohabiting than a married household (Batalova & Cohen, 2002; Seltzer, 2000). Research has also suggested that even among couples who claim to have an equal division regarding housework that an in-depth look at how they discuss housework suggests that women are actually doing more (Maher & Singleton, 2003). This gendered division of housework is clearly articulated by a twenty-one year old female,

We had talked about our expectations for each other, like with living together. I was going to do like most of the cleaning inside and he was going to take care of the yard and snow and things like that. It just made

more sense, besides he doesn't really know how to do the laundry or things like that.

Besides gender, other relationship couples based their decision of who does the housework on time availability. Within the division of household literature, time availability theories assume that the person having more time available will do a larger share of the household labor (Mikula 1998). For example, a twenty-two year old male explained how his partner has more time than him to devote to housework,

She does the majority of it. I'm taking 18 credits this semester and I have a job and I'm looking for a fulltime job right now, so I have a lot of interviews and stuff. And she has 12 credits this semester, so she has Tuesdays and Thursdays off, so she does a lot of the cleaning. I try to when I'm there; take the trash out or something.

Overall, regardless of whether the relationship couples saw their division of household labor as equal or not there was a clear dependency component where the couples used an efficient specialization approach. With the relationship couples who emphasized equality they were both contributing to the overall household by taking on specific chores that then the other person would not have to do. Interdependency also existed with the relationship couples who did not indicate equality and instead divided up the housework based on gender or time availability. Regardless of the specific route taken, the approach is different than the residential couples who indicated an individualistic focus where the person is not actually depending on their partner to complete housework or having their partner depend on them.

Residential Couples: Terms used and the Appropriateness of them

Previous research has indicated that we do not currently have an appropriate term to refer to cohabiting couples. Despite the fact that large surveys often utilize the term “unmarried partner” research indicates that this term is not often understood by actual cohabiting couples, who do not refer to themselves in this way (Manning & Smock, 2005). While I also found that typically couples do not refer to themselves as partner, given that only two couples (one of which was homosexual) referred to themselves in this way, there were a range of terms used. When asked in the interviews what terms the couples used to refer to one another and to introduce one another to other people, there was a clear difference between the terms that residential and relationship couples used. The residential couples tended to ignore the cohabiting factor of their relationship by using the terms *boyfriend* and *girlfriend*, despite the fact that by cohabiting their relationship is technically different than other boyfriend/girlfriend relationships. All thirteen of the residential couples referred to themselves as boyfriend/girlfriend and saw this as being an appropriate term to describe the relationship; in other words, they did not have a problem with the term nor saw it as symbolizing anything significant about the relationship. In fact, a few couples even saw boyfriend/girlfriend as being the term that they preferred as they saw the alternative term as taking their relationship down a step. As a twenty-one year old female indicates,

Participant: I know one time when we first moved in he kept referring to his friends as his roomie – he’s be like, oh, well, I have to check with my roomie first. And one of his friends was like, dude, don’t call her your roomie. But sometimes he’ll joke around and say it.

Interviewer: So you prefer girlfriend?

Participant: Yeah, I prefer it.

In addition, there were couples who used the terms boyfriend/girlfriend because they saw the only alternative as wife/husband and did not feel that this was appropriate for their relationship. As indicated by one thirty-six year old male,

Interviewer: What term do you use – do you call her your girlfriend?

Participant: Yeah

Interviewer: Do you think that's an appropriate term for your relationship?

Participant: No, not really. I don't really say girlfriend either. I mean, if I'm introducing her to somebody I usually just call her Nicole or this is my baby's momma – no (laughing). Well, if she's with me they'll think that we're together.

Interviewer: Do you ever call her your wife?

Participant: No, what? A lot people will say things like – how's your wife doing – and I'm like what? And they're like, okay, you're girlfriend.

Alright, she's good. I don't know if that's being rude or not.

A similar idea was expressed by a twenty-two year old female who said, *“His friends call me his wife, but I'm like, no, I'm his girlfriend and they're like, you're practically married anyway, and I'm like, no, I'm not.”*

Therefore, among the residential couples the term boyfriend/girlfriend was seen as the best term to describe their relationship. For some this was because they saw the alternative as taking the relationship down a level (roomie, friend, etc.) and for others this was because they were not ready to take it up a level to the status of husband/wife. Regardless of the specific reason though, boyfriend/girlfriend was seen as the *right* term to use for their relationship. As one twenty year old female puts it, *“I guess, I don't really know what else I would call him.”*

Relationship Couples: Terms used and the Appropriateness of them

While residential couples used and preferred the terms boyfriend/girlfriend for their relationship, relationship couples either did not use the term or were not happy with it but struggled to find a *better* term. Recognizing that nine of the couples were engaged (although not all of the engaged couples referred to one another as fiancé), there were other non-engaged couples who still referred to themselves as either fiancé or husband/wife. According to a twenty-six year old female, “*He calls me his wife and I call him my husband. We are pretty much married, we just aren’t legally.*” Another twenty-one year old female explains why she and her partner refer to each other as fiancé this way,

Participant: We call each other fiancé because it’s easier than trying to explain that we’re going to get married but we’re not officially engaged yet, because that explanation always just takes forever. So we say that we’re engaged, we call each other our fiancé and that works out pretty well.

Interviewer: When did you make that transition?

Participant: Six months, maybe a year ago, it was just one of those things that we’d both done it a couple of things and we’re at home one night and we’re like, you know, it’s just easier. If people really want to know we’ll explain it, but in the meantime.

Interviewer: So, did you not like using the term boyfriend?

Participant: It didn’t seem deep enough really because boyfriend has this implication that it could end at any moment. That at any given time there’s a chance that it’s not going to continue. And it was one of those things where if you tell people that you’re boyfriend and girlfriend but you’re living together they immediately have that assumption where you’re not actually serious about it and this and that and the other. But if you tell them you’re engaged and living together then they take you a lot more seriously. And I was just getting sick of people looking at me like I was whore.

Compared to residential couples, among relationship couples there is a clear difference in not only the terms being used to refer to one another but also in the perceived appropriateness of the chosen term. For residential couples the terms boyfriend/girlfriend are used and either not thought about at all or seen as being the most appropriate term (better than alternative terms). Relationship couples do not like or use the term boyfriend/girlfriend and, instead, the couples have chosen to use terms which signify to them and others that the relationship means more than simply a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship.

Other Roommates among Residential Couples

College students and young adults more generally, are faced with a variety of decisions. One of those decisions involves with whom to live. Should you live with your parents? In the dorms? With a roommate off campus? With a romantic partner? In my study there were a variety of different housing situations as some people lived with their romantic partner and their parents, their children, or a plutonic roommate(s). Four couples lived with one set of parents when they initially began cohabiting and three couples currently live with their biological children. An additional ten couples have lived with other non-related roommates and nine of the thirteen residential couples still currently do. In the course of making the decision of whom to live with my study suggests that it is possible for you to not be choosing from exclusive categories. In the case of residential couples, living with a roommate and living with a romantic partner are in many ways virtually the same thing. As discussed, with residential couples the

emphasis is on the household rather than the relationship, on practical arrangements rather than enduring ties and associated emotions.

The presence of other roommates (particularly plutonic friend roommates) is another aspect that indicates a residential relationship, as this only further highlights the fact that for many couples their cohabiting status was based more on residential than relationship factors. The vast majority of the couples who lived with other roommates saw this as a positive thing and by no means hindering the relationship that they were having with their partner. As discussed by a twenty-one year old female who lives with both her sister and partner,

I have a really, really good relationship with my sister. We thought it might be kind of awkward, like I thought it would be awkward for him. But, he actually, we were talking about this the other day, but he's really happy that she's there. And one more person to split the rent with. She likes to cook. We all do a good job of every third week it's your turn to the dishes and he likes that there's another person between our different work schedules, there's another person to let the dog out to go to the bathroom. So he's kind of thinking in a practical way he really likes having her there, but he also said that since she is just working right now, that there's another person to talk to when I'm doing homework.

As you can see from her discussion, the fact that there are three people in the home is seen as a positive thing – one more person to split the rent, one more person to share the housework – suggesting a residential/roommate status among the three of them, rather than a couple plus *third wheel* mentality.

Other couples even went as far as seeing the other roommate(s) as having a positive impact on their relationship. According to one twenty-two year old male,

It makes it easier. My roommate is hilarious though, we walk down in the morning. The only problem that we have is that he likes to walk around in

his underwear, so that's kind of weird. My girlfriend, she'll get up and go downstairs to get a glass of water or something and he's playing guitar hero in his underwear, standing there playing video games. So that's probably the only thing, everything else is fun though, with me and her I don't think it would be the same thing. It let her adjust and have friends too because all of my friends are her friends too. It's hilarious. We like it, we both like it. It makes it easier. If we have a serious conversation about anything and he'll walk in and he's like, oh, don't be mad and he'll start hugging people like right in the middle of it and we really can't get mad anymore. He lightens the mood a lot with any kind of problems.

Therefore, having another roommate present in the house is most often seen as being positive not only for the day-to-day living aspect but also for the overall relationship.

While the presence of other roommates did not automatically constitute a residential relationship, it is a component primarily associated with residential couples. This is especially true for the couples who live with friend roommates (as opposed to parents who children) and take an overwhelmingly positive stance on the situation.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE FUTURE

The third area that highlights the difference between residential and relationship couples is their conceptualization of the future. In the interviews, both types of couples were asked about their plans for the future. While the initial focus was on marital intentions, for many couples whether cohabitation would continue in the future also emerged as an important component. In the conceptualization of the future aspect, therefore, I explore the couple's future plans regarding cohabitation and the relationship in general.

Residential Couples: Future Cohabitation Intentions

Research has suggested that, in comparison to married couples, cohabitators are typically more ambivalent about wanting a future with their current partner. A result which has been attributed to the couple's decision to cohabit instead of marry (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). However, this ignores the fact that for many couples the cohabitation is not about marriage or necessarily future commitment more general; instead it is about residential factors. As a result of the residential emphasis placed on why they were living together, for many of the couples in my study cohabiting was something that they knew would end in the near future (and not as a result of moving into marriage). Two of the thirteen residential couples that I interviewed were actually only living together for the summer, so when they initially moved in together there was a definite shared assumption that it was a temporary (three month) situation. Both of these couples were completely fine with the idea that living together was only temporary. In fact, as one nineteen year old female indicates, *"I thought this was good because it was summer time, so it was temporary and if something does happen then I'm not like stuck. I can drop my summer classes and move home if that was what I had to do."*

In addition to the two couples who intentionally were only cohabiting for a set period of time, there were four other couples (out of the thirteen residential couples) who knew that they would be not living together in the future even though they still planned on being a couple. While the research on cohabitators living apart for reasons other than breaking up has been largely neglected in the literature, Binstock and Thornton (2003) find that living apart for reasons other than discord accounts for more than one-fifth of all

first transitions out of cohabitation during the first six months of living together. Their research also indicates that cohabitators who experience periods of living apart for reasons other than discord (school, work, family, etc.) continue to identify themselves as involved in a relationship and in many cases resume cohabitation at a later time. In my study, the changes in cohabitating status for the four identified couples was going to be impacted by an external factor such as one person traveling abroad for an upcoming semester or graduating and moving to a different location. As discussed by a twenty year old female,

He's already done an internship through the company that he's going to work for, so he definitely won't live here when I'm living here at least for that semester or maybe that year. He'll definitely like right after graduate move and start working.

For these couples while they had not moved in necessarily knowing that cohabiting was going to be a temporary status for them, at this point they knew that in the near future they would not be cohabiting.

In addition to the residential couples who knew that their cohabiting status was temporary there were others who were unsure of what would occur in the future, as it was not something that had been explicitly discussed. Some of these couples were unsure of the future given differences in planned graduation dates; however, other couples were simply unsure of future cohabitation given their uncertainty of the situation in general. In discussing what will occur when his partner graduates at least a year before him, a twenty-one year old male highlighted definite uncertainty regarding future cohabitation. Despite his desire for them to continue cohabiting (and get married in the near future), he

was not sure of what will actually occur regarding future cohabitation as it was not something that have explicitly discussed.

Participant: I think that we're going to do it (get married) after I graduate. I have a year left; so, a year at least – a year and a half.

Interviewer: When does she graduate?

Participant: She graduates in May.

Interviewer: Is she going to stick around here then?

Participant: I think she wants to, as far as finding a job. I think she wants to since I'll be here. I don't know. I hope she does. We haven't talked about it a lot.

Another twenty-one year old female also indicated the uncertainty surrounding her future cohabitation with her partner, given her potential opportunity to go to Colorado for graduate school.

At first I kind of got the impression that, oh, we'll talk about that if it happens, and I think that he said that because I asked him that on the phone. I want to increase my chances of getting in that would be really cool. I like Colorado and I visited the school out there. But then like a couple of weeks after that he was, I don't know how that came up, but I don't know if he thought I was like being mean, but he said that he thought we could work it out and he would move out to Colorado with me. But that was he said now, I don't know if something changed and he got a really good job offer here or how that would change it, if he'd up and leave it or what. We haven't talk about that; we should probably talk about that.

Therefore, among the residential couples, cohabitation was something that was occurring at the given moment; however, whether it was going to continue in the future was either unknown or there were intentions to move out in the near future. Despite the uncertainty about future cohabitation, though, all of these couples still had intentions to remain as a couple. Therefore, it was not their relationship status that made them question their future cohabitation status because cohabiting was not driven by the relationship; it was focused on residential factors.

Relationship Couples: Future Cohabitation Intentions

In comparison to the residential-oriented couples, relationship-oriented couples planned to continue cohabiting. This was often despite the fact that there were some external components that could have changed their cohabiting status (such as one person graduating earlier than the other). For these couples, living together was driven by their relationship and therefore they were willing to have one person wait for the other to graduate before moving to a new location together. In relation to how her partner will be graduating a semester before her, a nineteen year old female discussed their intentions for cohabiting in the future,

He's gonna plan on following me to grad school wherever I go because he knows that I'm interested in going South, just because I've always wanted to. And that's good for him because he's a landscaper so he's like, well, you're gonna make more money anyways, so I'll just follow you. So, he's planning on sticking around for the next coming summer and the fall school year until I find out if I get into school and which case we'll just. Well, if I don't get in we'll just kind of go somewhere, but that's what he suggested. He suggested that too, where you're gonna make more money and I want to be together, so I'm gonna follow you. My job's everywhere.

A twenty-two year old female also described a similar situation with her relationship where they will be moving together for one person's job,

He's trying to find a job in Omaha with Principal. He's from that side of the state and I'm from closer to Iowa City, so I'm kind of leery because I don't want to be that far away from my mom, but if it's good for his job and he can find a job that he really wants then I'll go there. Since I don't really have a job in mind then I can pretty much go wherever he gets a job. We plan on being together no matter what.

Therefore, in comparison to the residential couples, the relationship couples have intentions to cohabit in the future. Despite the fact that for many of these couples this involves one person sacrificing for the other person's education or job opportunity this is not really seen as a sacrifice, as the goal is to remain cohabiting. Cohabitation for these couples is seen as part of the relationship and they want to continue to live together.

Residential Couples: Future Marital Intentions

The majority of cohabitators expect to marry or have plans to marry their current cohabiting partner, a result which has led researchers to suggest that cohabitation is best viewed as a precursor to marriage (Brown, 2000; Lichter, Batson, & Brown, 2004; Manning & Smock, 2002). Younger cohabitators are especially likely to report future marriage plans (King & Scott, 2005). However, in my study, despite the fact that not one person said that 'no' they did not think that they were going to marry their current cohabiting partner, there was a clear range in how definite the plans were to get married. There were two residential-oriented couples (out of the thirteen) who were very unsure of their future marital plans to the point where the couple had not actually discussed marriage at all. Recognizing that they have not talked about marriage, an eighteen year old female discussed her future marriage plans, "*I don't know. It's just too soon. I know that things are going really fast with moving in, but I haven't thought that far ahead.*" A similar story was described by a twenty year old female in response to the question – Do you think you and your partner will get married?

I have no idea. I think that I honestly would for sure because we are very, very, very good together and I think the main aspect of it is that our relationship reminds me a ton of my parents and my parents' relationship is so perfect. Not necessarily perfect, but so successful and they're so happy and even though all the troubles, it's like never even crossed my mind that they would ever split up or anything. But, I'm open to the idea that people do break up. I guess I can't really say; I'm not even 75% sure that we will get married. I mean I definitely would want to right now if we were at that stage, because I couldn't think of anybody like better or replacing him; but I'm just kind of being a realist about it.

Therefore, for these residential-couples, despite the fact that they are currently cohabiting with their partner, this by no means indicates that they have intentions to marry their current partner.

The majority of residential-oriented couples were a little surer of their future marriage plans, as it was maybe something that had been discussed on occasion. However, it was still something that was seen as a possibility in the future at some point and not something that the couple had immediate plans to do. Many young cohabitators are not seriously considering marriage as an option when they decide to move in together (Manning & Smock, 2005). Sassler's (2004) research finds that only a third of cohabitators had discussed future relationship goals prior to cohabiting and plans for marriage remain abstract. My research supports this idea and also suggests that, at least for residential couples, cohabitation is not significantly associated with marriage. As a twenty-one year old male indicated regarding when he sees himself marrying his current partner, *"Probably a little bit after we've graduated and settled down, where we're finally going to be with our jobs – wherever that ends up being."* The same type of uncertainty about when the couple will get married is also suggested by a twenty year old female,

Well, after college I think would be fine. Well, I would only be 22, that's kind of young. I don't know. I haven't decided yet whether I want to go to graduate school yet or not. He's not planning on it, but if I would then I wouldn't want to get married right away, so maybe 24. I just want to see what we both end up doing and then figure it out.

As well as by a twenty-one year old female,

Well, I know I said that I at least wanted to know what I was doing after graduation and now I'm thinking, well, that's coming up fast, now I would at least want to have a year of vet school under my belt if I get in, so I keep pushing it back. So I would say in 2 or 3 years I wouldn't be surprised if he proposed and if living together works out good.

Overall, there were twelve couples who suggested this level of uncertainty regarding future marital intentions. While they could see themselves getting married to their current partner it was not something that had been explicitly discussed by the couple, at least on a regular basis, for there to be a shared understanding of whether or when this would occur. As a result, even when they thought it would happen at some point it was not something that they knew exactly when it was going to occur. Instead, there was a loose desire to get marry at some point “*as long as we're still in the relationship we're in*” (Male, 20 years old).

This uncertainty regarding relationship future also impacts the day-to-day aspects of cohabitation. Research (Desai, 1992; Treas, 1993) has suggested that the expected continuity and stability of the relationship is an important factor that influences whether and how couples allocate their budgets. Therefore, since residential couples are less likely to have concrete plans for future cohabitation and marriage they are also less likely to share finances and instead opt for a 50/50 division. In many ways, residential couples'

conceptualization of the future is similar to couples that are just dating and not living together.

Relationship Couples: Future Marital Intentions

The relationship couples, however, intended to get married or get engaged in the near future. Nine of the couples in my study were actually engaged at the time of the interview and had dates set for when they would be getting married; therefore, their marital intentions were very concrete. Another six out of the nine relationship couples were very certain in their intentions to get married – marriage had been discussed on numerous occasions so there was a shared understanding between the couple that they would be getting engaged and married in a specific time frame. As indicated by a nineteen year old female,

He'll say things like, well, he calls me wifey and he'll say things like, oh, when we get married. He'll say, when we get married this and that will happen. Just little things and we'll talk about it. We've talked about it a lot. We've talked about dates, but we don't have a specific date set right now. But we know that we will get married.

A twenty-two year old male also described his definite plans to propose to his current cohabiting partner,

I'm going to let her get done with school first, do that for her mom and have a job lined up before I even propose. I plan on proposing in July of next year, that's when all of our families are going to be together. Then we'd be engaged until she graduates and we'd figure it out after that.

As suggested by these two quotes, there are clear plans between these couples that engagement and marriage will be occurring in the near future. There is a level of certainty

about the intentions, not only for marriage but also for future cohabitation that is not heard among the residential couples. The relationship couples support the emphasis found within the cohabitation literature on the connection between cohabitation and marriage. However, the fact that many of the couples in my study were very uncertain about the future cohabitation and marriage, or knew that they would not be cohabitating in the future, suggests that for many couples cohabitation is not driven by the relationship but rather focused on the residential, more immediate factors.

DISCUSSION

Previous cohabitation literature (Smock, 2000) has classified cohabitation into three types (transition to marriage, alternative to marriage, and alternative to singlehood), which emphasizes the assumed connection between relationship progress and cohabitation. In addition, since most young adult cohabitators report expectations to marry their current partner, there is the assumption by researchers that cohabitation is being used as a precursor to marriage. However, both of these assumptions fail to recognize that for many cohabitators living together is less about the relationship and more driven by other residential (housing) factors. My research highlights the importance of these *other* factors impacting why people move in together, how they handle the day-to-day aspects, and their plans for the future. I have conceptualized the two types of couples as *relationship couples* and *residential couples*. Relationship couples follow the assumptions made by most previous researchers by recognizing the connection between cohabitation and the relationship (including future marriage). The residential couples,

however, place very little emphasis on the relationship in general and instead discuss aspects indicating more of a roommate-type of situation. The distinction between these two types of cohabiting couples is highlighted by examining cohabitation formation, maintenance, and conceptualization of the future.

Residential couples moved in together for financial and housing-related reasons. Many of the couples did not discuss cohabiting prior to moving in together and the discussion that did occur focused on financial and/or housing-related aspects. The relationship and the idea of taking things to the next *step* was not a reason for moving in together for these couples, nor was it discussed. Once living together, residential couples handled the day-to-day aspects of living with another person similar to roommates, in fact many of the residential couples made comparisons between living with their partner and living with another roommate. In addition, many of the residential couples currently have (or used to have) additional roommates present in the home with the couple. Residential couples emphasized the importance of equality by sharing 50/50 when it came to the financial aspects of rent (mortgage) and bills and with the housework. When asked what each person learned about the other upon moving in together, residential couples discussed surface-level components similar to what one would learn about a roommate – housework-related and/or habits. Residential couples referred to one another as boyfriend/girlfriend, seeing this as the most appropriate term for the relationship. Regarding the future, there was a lack of definite plans. Many of the residential couples were unsure of not only future marriage but also future cohabitation, as living together

was not see as directly tied to the relationship. Living together was based upon the other residential factors associated with convenience and finances.

On the other hand, relationship couples discussed moving in together as a result of the relationship status. They wanted to spend more time together and to evaluate compatibility for future marital intentions. Cohabiting was driven by the relationship and not about other residential factor; therefore, the impact of moving in on the actual relationship was what was discussed beforehand. Regarding the day-to-day aspects of living together, relationship couples approached issues differently than residential couples. Financially, relationship couples had a *shared* emphasis through either shared banking accounts and/or taking each individual's financial situation into consideration when deciding how to handle paying bills. A 50/50 division was not used. Upon moving in, relationship couples learned significant things about their partner, themselves, and their relationship. The division of household labor had a shared emphasis similar to how finances were handled. For most of the relationship couples both people were contributing to the housework; however the contribution had a couple focus rather than an individual focus. In other words, each person was not picking up simply after themselves but instead was taking on a share of the housework to make their partner's life easier as well as their own. Relationship couples believe that the terms boyfriend/girlfriend trivialize the cohabiting relationship and instead often use the terms fiancé or husband/wife even when these are not technically correct. Regarding the future, relationship couples have clear future cohabitation and marriage plans as the relationship is what led the couple to move in together initially.

It is also important to note that for three of the twenty-seven couples transitions could be seen where the couple's discussion indicated movement from *residential* to *relationship* over the course of the cohabitation (these were all couples who had been living together for at least two years). The meaning of things is not static; it is continually evolving through interaction. When people interact with others their responses may challenge the meaning that the individual has, which creates the opportunity to modify the meaning and interpret things differently (Blumer, 1969). Karp, Lytle-Holstrom, and Gray (2004) examined the meaning that parents attach to their child leaving home for college in the near future. The results highlight the fluid nature of meanings by showing that the parent's perceptions are constantly changing, varying across context and regarding persons' social attributes. Lewis, Datta, and Sarre's (1999) research supports the idea that the meaning of cohabitation can change over time for some cohabiting couples. Based on qualitative interviews with British cohabiting couples, she finds that some couple had started cohabiting for pragmatic reasons but had grown into relationships characterized by strong commitment and seriousness. Jamieson et al. (2002) also finds that relationships can progress and that people's views of cohabitation and marriage often change over time. This also highlights the need to recognize that while a significant portion of the couples in my study can be classified as *residential* that this by no means indicates that these couples will remain this way (although it does not dismiss the possibility either). While some may transition into being a *relationship couple*, others may break up entirely. In addition, the results of my study do not indicate that having a

relationship-oriented status automatically constitutes a happier or more stable cohabiting relationship.

For many cohabitators relationship transitions occur quickly, as Sassler's (2004) research found that over half of cohabitators move in within six months of initiating a relationship. My research suggests that for some of these cohabitators moving in, especially when it occurs so quickly, may be due to residential (housing) factors and not actually about the relationship progressing to a new stage – as cohabiting is not driven by the relationship for all couples. This would also help to explain why Sassler found that for many cohabiting couples the relationship became more serious after the couple moved in together rather than prior to. Supporting this, I found that residential couples did not talk about marriage prior to moving in together, as the relationship or its future was not the basis for moving in together. However, for some couples the relationship became more serious after moving in together. Despite the fact that the relationship was not the reason for moving in, does not mean that over the course of cohabiting the couple will not grow closer and become more serious.

While some couples may transition over time from emphasizing residential factors to relationship factors, research suggests that most cohabiting unions are short-lived, with about one-half ending within one year and over 90% ending within five years (Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006). In addition, most cohabiting unions end by dissolution of the relationship rather than marriage (Lichter, Qian, & Mellott). This suggests, and is further supported by my own research, that for many couples cohabitation is not used as a stepping-stone to marriage. While there are aspects of cohabitation that reflect it being

part of the dating process (these people are in a relationship), there are also additional external residential factors that have a larger impact on the cohabitation decision, day-to-day aspects of life, and future plans.

My research builds upon the current ‘meaning of cohabitation’ typology (Smock, 2000) by expanding this classification to include more than simply the connection between cohabitation and relationship progress (especially in relation to marriage). Researchers have indicated the difficulty in categorizing cohabitation (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004), which is perhaps a result of focusing primarily on marriage to understand what cohabitation means. I, instead, expand upon the classification by exploring the connection to a variety of other dimensions including reasons for moving in, discussion prior to, the day-to-day aspects of living together (finances, division of household labor, etc.), as well as future cohabitation and marital intentions. My *relationship* and *residential* couple classification fits nicely with the current *precursor to marriage* and *alternative to singlehood* couple types identified in the ‘meaning of marriage’ typology. Given that all twenty-seven couples in my study had *intentions* on getting married in the future (discussed in the next chapter), none of the couples can be accurately classified as *alternative to marriage* couples – none of the couples were opposed to marriage or saw themselves using cohabitation *instead* of marriage. I expand upon and support the idea that couples can be classified as belonging to the *precursor to marriage* or *alternative to singlehood* categories. Specifically, my *relationship* couples are either currently engaged or have direct intentions on getting married as their relationship is at the core of why they decided to move in together in the first place and

the basis for how they organize the day-to-day aspects of the relationship. *Residential* couples in my study also fit with the *alternative to singlehood* couples where although marriage may be in the distant future it is not the basis for why the couple moved in together nor does it impact how things are organized; instead, residential (housing-related) aspects dictate these components. My study takes this current classification one step further, as what it means to be part of the *precursor to marriage* or *alternative to singlehood* typology is expanded and defined in a new more encompassing way to include other dimensions besides relationship progress.

Part of the concern found within the family decline perspective (Cherlin, 2004; Popenoe, 1993) regarding cohabitation stems from the ‘meaning of cohabitation’ debate and whether cohabitation is replacing marriage. However, my results suggest that, at least for residential couples, cohabiting is not driven by the relationship and instead is focused on residential (housing) factors. As a result, in many ways residential cohabiting couples more closely resemble roommates than married couples. Other researchers have attempted to determine whether cohabitation is more similar to marriage or other forms of non-family living, such as roommates. For instance, Goldscheider, Thornton, and Young-DeMarco (1993) found that for young adults cohabitation lacks the stability found in marriages, suggesting the cohabitation is more like a roommate than a marriage situation. Further supporting this idea, they find that cohabitation is rarely a route out of the parental home (compared to marriage) and cohabitation leads to higher return rates than marriage. Researchers have also attempted to compare cohabitators and married couples (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995). In doing so, the comparison tends to

indicate that cohabitators have lower relationship quality than married couples. My study explains the results of these other studies by suggesting that for many couples cohabitation is something drastically different than marriage and reflects more of a residential component than a relational. The residential basis behind many couples moving in together has obvious roommate-like connections.

Cohabitation has become part of the societal norm, as living together is an expected part of the life course (Smock et al., 2006). While recognizing this, my research also highlights important distinctions between cohabiting couples. Some couples do live together because of relationship factors – taking the relationship to the next *step* and trying things out for marriage – as assumed by the literature. However, many couples are moving in together for reasons completely outside of the relationship (residential/housing aspects) which impacts how the day-to-day aspects are handled and the future is conceptualized. It is important to recognize this diversity among cohabiting couples. In addition, the prevalence of residential couples provides possible insight into why cohabitation has become widespread (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004) and why most cohabiting unions are short-lived (Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006). Recognizing that not all cohabiting unions are based on the relationship and connections to marriage has the potential to provide additional understanding about cohabitation and needs to be further explored.

CHAPTER 6.

COHABITORS' "MEANING" OF MARRIAGE: A GENDERED STORY

The 'family decline perspective' put forth primarily by Cherlin (2004) and Popenoe (1993, 2005) argues that the institution of marriage is in decline. This assertion is based on the growing prevalence of cohabitation, increases in nonmarital childbearing, the high divorce rate and rising age at first marriage, as these are seen as indicators that marriage is less important today than it was in the past. According to this perspective, people are turning away from marriage due to other 'family' options and because it has been increasingly difficult to maintain happy and stable marital unions. Marriage and the traditional family have been associated with fewer problems (e.g., delinquency, poverty) than other families, such as single-parent and stepfamilies; therefore, marital decline is seen as problematic (Cherlin, 2004; Popenoe, 1993, 2005). Despite the fact that some researchers have seen the recent changes in marriage as benign or even beneficial (Coontz, 1992; Scanzoni, 2001; Stacey, 1996), the family decline perspective continues to play a role in how we view recent family changes. There is the need to apply symbolic interactionism to this discussion in order to better understand not only the meaning of marriage, but also to understand the development (process) of this meaning (Gillis, 2004).

Cohabitation expectations have become part of the foreseen future life trajectory for many people today. Manning, Longmore, and Giordano (2004), find that adolescents expect to cohabit and marry in the future. Although adolescents are more certain about their marital expectations, they are including cohabitation as part of their future plans.

While it is important to examine individuals' intentions to cohabit, it is equally as imperative to recognize that not all cohabiters actually intended to cohabit. Therefore, while the majority of adolescents say that they are either "probably" or "somewhat" likely to cohabit, even the one-quarter who say that they do not "at all" expect to cohabit may still end up cohabiting (Manning et al., 2004). Among those who do intend to cohabit, they rarely see cohabitation as a substitute for marriage. Therefore, despite the assertion found within the 'family decline' perspective regarding increases in divorce, delays in the timing of marriage, and the potential deinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin, 2004), adolescents and others still see marriage as part of their future plans.

In my sample, all fifty-one young adult cohabiters had intentions of marrying their current cohabiting partner (the one homosexual couple isn't certain that they will be allowed to marry in their lifetime, although they would choose to if they could). While nine of the couples were currently engaged, there were additional couples who had plans to get engaged and/or married in the near future (discussed as *relationship* couples in the previous chapter). The other couples had much looser, less defined, plans to get married, but the intentions were still there for these couples.

Since the majority of cohabiters expect to marry or have plans to marry their current cohabiting partner (Brown, 2000; Manning & Smock, 2002), this often leads researchers to conclude that most cohabiters perceive cohabitation as part of the marriage process. Despite the fact that Manning and Smock (2002) recognize that marriage intentions do not exist for all cohabiters, they still place emphasis on the connection between cohabitation and marriage. In other words, researchers (et al. Brown, Manning &

Smock) are making a quick jump to assume that just because cohabiting couples may have 'plans' to marry their current partner this automatically means that their decision to cohabit is connected to these marital plans. Foremost, as discussed in the previous chapter, for many couples cohabitation is less about the relationship and more about residential factors. In addition, my research suggests that even when cohabitators have 'plans' to marry their current partner this does not necessarily mean that marriage is a part of why they decided to cohabit in the first place. This was discussed in connection to the difference between residential and relationship couples.

Despite the concern about the increased acceptance and prevalence of cohabitation voiced by Cherlin and Popenoe, research indicates that the significance of marriage remains high or may have even increased. Compared to 1980, in 2000 individuals were more supportive of the norm of lifelong marriage (Amato et al., 2003). Also, the majority of Americans believe that people who marry are happier than people who are single (Axinn & Thornton, 2000). Furthermore, eighty percent of Americans say that being married and having a family is very important to them, with the majority of young people expecting to get married (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). As a result, nearly 90% of people will eventually marry (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001).

Although the majority of cohabiters plan to marry their current partner, research suggests that slightly less than one-half of cohabitators actually do marry (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). This has been connected to the fact that cohabiting couples, compared to non-cohabiting couples, perceive fewer positive and negative changes resulting from marriage (McGinnis, 2003). Supporting this perception, Brown's (2004) research suggests that

transitioning from cohabitation to marriage does not create an increase or decrease in relationship quality. Related to this, recently there has been an increase in the number of cohabiting unions that have ended in dissolution rather than cohabitation. In the 1970s, 60% of cohabiting unions ended in marriage, compared to 33% in the 1990s (Smock & Grupta, 2002). We are also seeing an increase in serial cohabitation. To explore the connection between marital intentions and marriage my research suggests that the word “intentions” can be used to refer to a range of different levels of intensity – from the couple who has specifically discussed when marriage will occur and is working towards that to the couple that has not specifically discussed marriage but each individual believes that if things continue as they are that marriage could potentially be in the future. My higher percentage of marriage intenders may also be a result of my predominantly white sample, as white men and women are more likely to express marital intentions than black men and women (South, 1993).

In a world in which cohabitation has become the norm (Smock, 2000), yet the significance of marriage has remained high or even potentially increased there is a need to examine how young adult cohabitators view marriage. We know very little about what cohabitators actually think about marriage and how important marriage is to them. In other words, does the drop in the number of cohabitators who get married reflect a shift in wanting to get married? How important is marriage to cohabitators?

The first tenant of symbolic interactionism is that people act toward things based on the meaning of those things to them (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, it is important to examine the way that cohabitators view marriage in order to understand their actions in

relation to it. Also, as individuals come to understand meanings through social interaction, these meanings influence their participation in future social interaction and therefore the influence they have on others (Chibucos & Leite, 2005). The results of my study clearly support others (Brown; Smock & Manning) who have found that the majority of cohabitators do intend to marry their current partner. However, despite the current marital intentions discussed by the cohabitators in my study, only ten of the twenty-seven cohabiting couples actually discussed marriage prior to moving in together. This indicates that, for many couples, the decision to cohabit is not made with marriage in mind. This was discussed in relation to residential couples in the previous chapter. Additionally, there is the need to examine the meaning of marriage among individual cohabitators by exploring the way in which cohabitators view marriage, which my research does for young adult cohabitators. This contributes to the research by highlighting that despite the ‘family decline’ concerns expressed by Cherlin and Popenoe, marriage is still an important part of the perceived life trajectory for individuals even when cohabitation occurs first. The cohabitators’ perspectives on marriage are discussed in relation to the different perspectives of residential and relationship couples, as well as male/female difference.

MEANING OF MARRIAGE

Using a symbolic interactionist approach, I emphasize that behavior is based on individuals’ interpretations of the situation. Therefore, in order to understand the

behavior of cohabiting couples it is important to understand the meanings and interpretations behind that behavior.

People form and maintain meanings about marriage that may be influenced by, may influence, or have a reciprocal relationship with experiences before marriage that may also have implications for what people bring along with them into marriage...the way people think about and define the institution of marriage has implications for behavior regarding that institution. (Hall, 2006:1443)

Hall's research on how people define marriage and act in relation to that definition highlights the importance of understanding the meaning of marriage to explore the influence on marital behavior and subsequent marital success.

Through exploring the meaning of marriage (how marriage is perceived and conceptualized) a clear difference between residential and relationship couples, as well as gender differences emerged. Previous research has suggested that males and females do not necessarily report the same costs and benefits associated with marriage (South, 1993; Waite, 1995), which highlights the possibility that the factors associated with the meaning of marriage would also be different. To explore this area further I asked my respondents various questions related to how they view marriage – what it means, what aspects they associate with marriage, etc. First, the importance of living together before marriage is highlighted. Expanding from the 'conceptualization of the future' discussion in the previous chapter, there were some distinctions in the way individuals who were in residential versus relationship couples discussed marriage. Additionally, females talked about marriage in relation to future children, relationship steps, tradition, maturation, wedding, and others desires. For males, marriage was tied to seriousness, a nonchalant

stance, and negativity. These are not mutually exclusive aspects, however, as many of the participants (especially females) talked about more than one aspect associated with marriage.

IMPORTANCE OF COHABITING: A FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

Attitudinal research has shown that there has been increased acceptance of cohabitation, particularly that which occurs when the couple plans to marry. The majority of young adults approve of nonmarital cohabitation (Axinn & Thornton, 2000; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001) and view living together before marriage as a good way to avoid a divorce (Martin et al., 2003; Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001). Young adults are not the only ones changing, as Davis, Smith, and Marsden's (2003) research suggests that older adults are also becoming increasingly accepting of cohabitation.

In comparison to general population samples, the cohabiting females in my study were even more likely to emphasize the importance of living together before marriage. When asked what they think about cohabitation in general, the majority of female respondents linked their thoughts on cohabitation to marriage. All nine of the females involved in a relationship couple and ten of the thirteen females that were part of a residential couple said that cohabitation was a good thing to do before marriage. There were two primary reasons that female respondents stressed the importance of cohabiting prior to marriage. First, this was a way for the couple to learn things about one another prior to marriage. As a nineteen year old female discussed,

Well, I like it [cohabiting]. It makes it easier I think. Well, we're committed to each other, we obviously don't date anyone else and I kind of have the feeling that we're going to get married someday. So it's just easier to learn now his little habits to get use to them that way if we end up getting married I don't find out too late and want to get out.

Similarly, a twenty year old female said,

I think it's a good idea honestly, I know that I would never want to get married before I lived with someone because you learn things about them that you never would have discovered otherwise just because you're not around them in certain situations, like when you're not living together. I think it's a good idea; you just get to know people better. You get to know aspects of their personality that maybe you wouldn't have found out about otherwise.

Learning these things about your partner through living together beforehand is seen as a way to make marriage easier. A nineteen year old female suggested this idea as she said,

I think it's actually like a good idea. If you think that it's going to be a serious relationship I think it's important because you learn so much about the person. Like I've learned so much about him since we've moved in together and I probably wouldn't have had the opportunity had we stayed in separate places. And if we're going to actually get married it's something that we know about, it's not going to be a struggle when we get married – if we do.

Even females who were part of residential couples and talked about learning trivial aspects (such as those related to habits and cooking/cleaning) still saw cohabiting before marriage as a good idea in order to learn these trivial aspects about your partner that you would not know if you got married without living together first.

The second reason that females saw living together before marriage as important was to test things out prior to getting married. This was seen as a way to prepare yourself for marriage and to make sure that you were making the right decision before actually getting married. According to a nineteen year old female,

I actually think it's [cohabitation] a good thing to do, especially before you get married because a lot of people get thrown into it – they just want to get married and haven't been living together and they live together and it's a really, really rude awakening for them and I think that happens sometimes. So I think it's a good thing to test it out.

A thirty-one year old female suggested the same thing as she said, “*I like it [cohabiting] in the aspect of two people who are living together before getting married to know if they're compatible in that aspect.*”

Similar to White and Popenoe's (2001) survey research where people agreed with the statement “living together with someone before marriage is a good way to avoid an eventual divorce,” some respondents also made connections to cohabiting in order to prevent a divorce. As a twenty-six year old female indicated,

I think that people should live together to see if they can co-exist in one house, instead of getting married and it not working and then the kids get ripped apart and everything falls apart. You have to make sure that you can love the person that you're with after all the little annoyances, the irritating things that they do, and morning breath and all that stuff. To be able to sit back and say, oh, well, I still love him.

Other respondents saw cohabiting as a way to prevent getting married in the first place – so one step before the potential for a divorce. Suggesting this, a twenty-one year old female said,

Participant: I think it's good and bad. I guess because you can really see how the person's going to be like because if you're going to get married then you're going to live together for the rest of your life. So I guess it's good because you can see how it's going to be like and maybe you can decide, like this isn't going to work or it is. So I think in a way it helps.

Interviewer: What would be bad about it?

Participant: I guess, well, I guess the bad part would be seeing how the person really is. But I guess that wouldn't be that bad because then you can get out before you're married if it's really that bad.

Also supporting the idea of not getting married in the first place, a nineteen year old female said, *“I think it’s a good idea so people will get use to each other and find out everyone’s quirks and then when they move in with each other after they get married they won’t be like, oh shit, I shouldn’t have done this.”*

Females in both types of couples—residential and relationship—saw living together before marriage as an important thing to do and would advise others to cohabit before marriage. Although they did not recommend rushing into cohabitation they would advise others who were serious about the relationship and could see it potentially leading to marriage to live together. This was seen as a way to learn about the other person and to test things out to see if getting married was the best decision.

Ironically, females who were part of a residential couple were more likely than those who were part of a relationship couple to say that they would advise others to not rush into cohabitation. Seven of the thirteen residential couple females mentioned this, while only one of the nine females who were part of a relationship couple emphasized this. Given that, as discussed previously, many of the residential couples themselves did not talk about cohabitation or marriage beforehand and moved in together for residential (housing-related, financial) reasons as opposed to relationship reasons it is interesting that they were more likely to emphasize the opposite of this for others. As a twenty year old female who was part of a residential couple indicated, *“Maybe I don’t think it’s healthy for your relationship if you haven’t been dating very long because I think it’s a lot at once. But, I think for us it’s good.”* This then suggests that while they may have rushed into cohabitation or not necessarily based their decision to move in together on future

marital intentions, they would not automatically recommend that others follow in the same path.

FEMALES' CONCEPTUALIZATION OF MARRIAGE

Future Children

Research suggests that having married biological parents is better for children than having a single parent or a stepfamily situation (Jamieson et al., 2002). Recognizing this, the importance of marriage in connection to future children was highlighted by eight females, all of which were part of residential cohabiting couples. Perhaps as a result of the non-relationship focus found with these cohabiting couples, they saw marriage as necessarily to have children. Therefore this was also discussed in the context of having a traditional family, as get married prior to having children was emphasized for having children in a cohabiting context was not acceptable. As indicated by a twenty-one year old female,

Kids are really important to me and I want to have kids and I don't think that it's fair to a child to raise them in not a traditional home. My brother have a baby and now lives with his girlfriend, who's also the baby's mom, and I just think it's awkward – how do you explain that to the child. I'm all for a traditional family.

A similar idea is expressed by a nineteen year old female, “*I feel like I have to get married before I start a family because I do want my kids to grow up in that two-parent household where mom and dad are married, like I grew up in – that's what I want for my kids.*” Research has indicated that childbearing preferences of young women affect their choice between cohabitation and marriage, with wanting many children (e.g. four

children) increasing the likelihood of choosing marriage over cohabitation. This same effect is not present for young men (Barber & Axinn, 1998); supporting this only one male in my study mentioned future children at all in the interview.

For the females in my study the importance of marriage is directly tied to their desire to have children and how the two events are connected. Some of the females had a difficult time separating marriage and children when discussing marriage, as a nineteen year old female indicated, *“Every time I say marriage I see kids, I connect it with kids. So I don’t think it’s just being married.”* The desire and intent associated with children was so strong for these females that the meaning of marriage was directly tied to these future children.

Relationship Steps

Eleven females in my study talked about how marriage is one of the steps that you take in a relationship. This was seen as a key aspect of marriage for females who were in both residential and relationship positions. You date for a period of time, cohabit (in their case) and then eventually get married. As a twenty year old female said, *“I don’t want to just date someone; I feel like there are steps in life that you have to take. Dating is a step and so is marriage, so why not take the next step.”*

In addition to being one of the steps, marriage is seen as the final step that you take in a relationship as it adds reassurance to the relationship. According to a twenty-one year old female,

There is something about the marriage ceremony that makes things more final. And we both whenever we've talked about it have said that we always wanted to get married and it's not something either of us have ever really been able to put our finger on. It's not like anything would really change, but it's something that we both really want to do. Because even if we were to do a justice of the peace wedding. We're both really faith based people and we believe in a God and this and that and the other. And we believe that marriage is blessed by God in a certain way, so not having it just makes me feel kind of incomplete.

Similarly, a twenty-one year old female said, *"I guess it's more official; the commitment is more official and the chances of him moving out tomorrow aren't very good. So it's more official."*

Previous research has suggested that when women negatively assess their cohabiting relationship, they are more likely to break up. However, men are more likely to remain in the relationship and only decrease their likelihood of marrying their current partner (Brown, 2000). Connected to this by explaining why the females would be more likely to end the relationship, in my study the females talked about how getting married is a necessary last step. As indicated by a twenty-one year old female, *"I think marriage is like the next step and then you're done and if you don't get there then you don't know what's going on. It's important to take the next step."* Therefore, for these females marriage is associated with the steps that occur in a relationship. These steps are seen as necessary to create certainty about the permanence of the relationship and feelings of assurance for the people involved.

Tradition

Represented by both residential and relationship couples, nine females talked about how getting married is what you are ‘supposed to do’ and equated marriage with tradition. They saw it as part of the traditions and expectations that exist in our society and/or their family. According to an eighteen year old female,

Participant: I think marriage is just a piece of paper. I don’t think it will change anything in our relationship.

Interviewer: What is the reason to get married then?

Participant: Just because it’s the traditional thing to do and it will make other people happy.

Taking a more optimistic stance on the traditional aspect of marriage, a twenty year old female said, *“I think it’s the whole fact that I grew up in the church, first of all. The whole fact of when you find somebody that you love and you’re going to be with that you get married and that’s just the way I was brought up in the church and by my parents.”*

For many of the females, getting married was something that they had always assumed they would do. They had never questioned it; it was simply what you did once you got older. As discussed by a twenty-one year old female, *“So when I was little it was just, this (getting married) is what will happen later on, I’m going to find him and marry him and live happily ever after.”* Similarly, a twenty-one year old female said,

I guess the idea of legally and even on a spiritual level becoming one body is something that’s been instilled in me from a very young age. When I was really little I always saw my aunts and uncles as units, never as separate people, and until I was much older I didn’t hear the stories of what they had done before they were married or where they had been in their life before getting married.

From a very young age these females had been socialized to believe that marriage was something that would occur, as opposed to something that could occur.

In addition to being what you did when you got older, many of the females discussed how it was simply what you did when you found someone to love. As a twenty year old female indicated, *“If it’s somebody that you want to be with for the rest of your life and you see yourself with. Like if you can picture the rest of your life and that’s the person you picture it with than that’s a reason to get married.”* Therefore, getting married was the traditional thing that a person did once they got older and found a person to love. The females had never questioned whether they wanted to get married or would get married in the future, as it was simply what you did. As a twenty-one year old female explained, *“I found the person that I want to be with forever and it only makes sense to get married; like that’s what you do.”*

Maturation

The maturation meaning of marriage represents the increases in responsibility and *growing up* that nine females discussed. This concept was more prevalent among females who were involved in a residential couple situation, as females from relationship couples were less likely to identify changes that would occur with marriage. For the females who identified this concept it existed in two different ways. For some females there were changes that they would have to make once they became married. In response to the interview question - What would be different if you two were married and not just living together? – A twenty-two year old female responded,

I would definitely need to grow up because he seems a lot more mature than me with responsibility and just like just holding to what he says he's going to that next day and I'll be like, well, I can just do it tomorrow. So I think a lot of it would be me growing up, especially, like this wouldn't even have to be with him, but like in general, once I have kids and stuff I would obviously have to grow up. I think that's probably would be the biggest change because right now like I know that I'm my own person and he's not depending on me and I'm not depending on him. So I can like have fun and whatever and he can do what he wants too, that's kind of how I looked at it this summer. But I can definitely see it, even if we lived together for real just the two of us, me having to do my part and stuff, like us cooking for each other and things like that. I would definitely have to put in a lot more work.

Other females also discussed changes that they would need to make suggesting the alleged traditional aspects associated with married. When discussing what will change once she and her fiancé are married a twenty-one year old female said,

I'm definitely going to have to clean up my act, I know, especially if we have kids in the next five or ten years I'm really going to have to shape up because it's going to be a really big challenge bringing a baby into the mix and I know that once we get jobs our schedules will be a little more balanced and not such crazy hours. So definitely working on my organization, preferably firming up roles, deciding who cooks dinner, we can't continuing cooking our own individual meals constantly because that's just a waste of time sometimes.

Therefore, for these females marriage is equated with increases in responsibility and other traditional aspects. As a result of these connections the females talked about changes that they would need to make to live up to this meaning of marriage.

Second, the meaning of marriage and its ties to maturation was connected to the perception of others for some females. According to a twenty-six year old female,

Participant: I'm afraid that when people get married, the relationship goes to shit. I mean, everything's great before they get married, everything's going perfect and then once they get married it's like everything has to change, they have different rules and different ways that

they're supposed to act because they're husband and wife versus boyfriend and girlfriend and it's put so much pressure on the relationship and then people are like, well, when's the baby coming, when are you going to start that. Well, I mean, I just got married and I want to enjoy being married. I just think that scares me the most, everything changes once you get married and that worries me.

Interviewer: Why do you think things change?

Participant: Society. The way people look at things. We've been raised and taught. The wife's suppose to stay at home, take care of the kids, cook and clean and the husband's suppose to go be the breadwinner. Well, it doesn't always work that way. I want to work. I want to have a career and do all that stuff, so, I don't know.

On a similar note, when asked what would be different if she were married to her current partner, a nineteen year old female responded,

I think things would be a lot more, they would be more serious. I think the way we think about things would be a lot more serious. I think our friends would treat us differently on that level. I feel like we would have more time when we needed to be serious as opposed to having fun, and our friends would treat us differently in that aspect. They would treat us more serious than they were.

This suggests that other's perceptions of what marriage means have a direct impact on what the females equate with marriage. According to these females, others associate marriage with increases in responsibility and seriousness. This then impacts how they believe others will treat them and may impact their own actions and/or marital relationship.

Wedding

Another meaning of marriage for females is tied to the wedding ceremony, as weddings are seen as rituals where femininity is on display (Ingraham, 1999). Four females, all who were part of a relationship cohabiting couple (four of nine), connected

the meaning of marriage directly to the wedding and how marriage to them was intertwined with the wedding (in a similar way that marriage was tied to children for other females). The prevalence of this concept among females in a relationship couple situation as opposed to a residential may be due to the future-oriented focus of the relationship. As discussed in the ‘conceptualization of the future’ section of the previous chapter, relationship couples had a clearer vision of their future cohabiting and marital intentions. Therefore, a wedding is more likely to be in the near future for relationship couples, which would result in a more prominent connection between a wedding and marriage for these females.

The importance of having a wedding was mentioned by the females as a key reason why they wanted to get married. As described by a twenty-one year old female as her reason to get married,

I prefer to get married just because there is something about the marriage ceremony that makes things more final. Even if we were to do a justice of the peace wedding. We’re both really faith-based people and we believe in a God. And we believe that marriage is blessed by God in a certain way, so not having it just makes me feel kind of incomplete.

Also, a twenty-one year old female says,

I want to go through the ceremony with the witnesses and have people part of it and get it final and I think part of that is it would help me not be a worrier and to be not open-ended. I guess when they say you tie the knot I guess I see that more as not as tying each other together, but as finishing something, kind of closing the circle.

For her, the desire to get married is connected to the wedding, but also connected to the symbolic meaning behind the wedding. In addition, as was discussed regarding following the ‘steps’ in a relationship, a wedding was also seen as something that provided

reassurance of the relationship. Therefore, for these females having a wedding was an important part of getting and being married.

Others' Desires

While the impact of other people was already discussed regarding the perceived *maturation* needed when you get married, six females also talked about how their meaning of marriage was tied to others in a different way. While females who were involved in both relationship and residential couple situations related marriage to others, those who were part of a residential couple were more likely to relate this to showing other people that you love each other. As a twenty-one year old female indicated, *“Marriage is just like an announcement of your love that you want to be together with each other for the rest of your lives.”* A thirty-one year old female suggested a similar idea as she said, *“It’s probably more the idea than anything to say that, yes, I have a husband. I think that it’s more of committing thing that it tells people that, yeah, these people are committed, that they actually got married.”* As these females indicated, getting married is connected to others and wanting to send a specific message about your relationship.

For some of the females the connection to others was even stronger, as the meaning of marriage for them was less about showing love and more about getting married for other people. These other people want you to get married and it is what you are expected to do; therefore you get married. This type of connection to others was more common among those involved in a relationship couple arrangement; perhaps again tied

to the fact that relationship couple females were less likely to see changes that would occur due to getting married. As described by a twenty-six year old female,

Honestly, my reasoning for getting married is to make my grandma happy. I mean, we're already married, we already have a marriage; it's just a piece of paper. But, he's [her partner] never been married and he's never had a family, he's always been on his own, so, it's like a defining point in his life, he gets to achieve something that he's always wanted, so that's why he wants to get married. Me, to keep my grandma happy.

As she suggests, for some females the meaning of marriage is directly tied to the impact of others and wanting to either show your love or simply to fulfill the expectations of marriage set by the significant others in your life.

IMPORTANCE OF COHABITING: A MALE PERSPECTIVE

As discussed previously, the vast majority of female respondents made direct connections between cohabitation and future marriage. When asked “What do you think about cohabitation in general?” most females tied their answer to marriage. The males, however, were less likely to make this assertion. Only two of the thirteen males involved in a residential couple situation and three of the nine males who were part of a relationship couple mentioned living together as good to do before marriage (although since this was not something explicitly asked about in the interviews it is possible that more males did hold this attitude).

For those who did connect cohabitation with marriage the reasons were similar to those mentioned by the females. As a twenty-two year old male indicated, it is a way to test things out before making the decision to get married.

I think it's a good idea to do when it's at the right point in the relationship. I think you get to know each other a lot better that way and I think it's really important before marriage so that you can sort of test out the waters and be like, wow, this is what it's going to be like when we're married.

Connected to this, cohabiting was also seen as a way to learn about your partner before deciding to actually marry her. Supporting this, a thirty-six year old male said, *"I think it's a good idea because you get to find out those things that you wouldn't even know about the person instead of getting married and then finding out that you know, I don't like this person because they bite their toenails or something."* Not only with helping to decide to get married in the first place, but it was also a way to learn about your partner and what was to be expected with marriage. *"[It] makes less surprises after marriage because you know the daily habits and what they're going to be like in the morning and how they sleep at night"* (twenty-three year old male).

Taking it one step further, cohabiting was also a way to prevent getting married and having it end in divorce. According to a nineteen year old male, *"I think it's [cohabiting] a good idea, you know before you take that big final step [marriage]. Because divorce is a really big final step and you don't really know anything about anyone before you live with them."* Therefore, living together before marriage is a way to figure out if this is the person that you do want to marry, which will also help to prevent a future divorce.

While some males spoke about the importance of living together prior to marriage, as mentioned previously, the majority did not make this connection. Instead, many males saw other reasons why cohabitation was a good thing for a couple to do.

Males who were involved in residential couple situations talked about how living together was beneficial for the relationship in general. As suggested by a twenty year old male, *“Before this I thought it was stupid, but like when it’s actually happening, I don’t know, it seems like it just makes everything easier for the relationship.”* Similarly, a twenty-one year old male indicated, *“It’s nice. I mean, it’s nice to be around the person all of the time and it’s nice to not have the hassle to go between two places – to have one place that you call home.”*

Another reason not related to marriage that males thought it was a good idea for a couple to cohabit was tied to the support provided through living together. For some this was related to emotional support, as a twenty-five year old male indicated, *“I think everyone needs support and I think before I met [my partner] I didn’t have any of that, I didn’t have any support, I didn’t have anyone backing me up and being there for me or with me. I think that it’s very important.”* For others cohabiting provided financial support.

I think it’s a good idea. If you know the person or if you’re the kind of person that can take someone and change them. If you know somebody and start living with them and then you notice things that sort of irritate you and that you can’t deal with that then it’s probably not for you. But I think overall it’s a pretty good thing, if you’re living in a house and you need a roommate to help pay for the rent, you need to have somebody live with you – it’s probably not healthy to live by yourself – you have somebody to talk to and hang out. (thirty year old male)

Therefore, while not all males tied their approval of cohabitation directly to marital intentions living together was still seen as a positive aspect of their life that provided various benefits.

Notably, similarly to female respondents, there were males who discussed how cohabiting should be taken seriously and that you should take your time when deciding to live with a romantic partner. Suggesting this, a twenty-two year old male said,

I think it's [cohabiting] good, it just depends on if you can handle it or not. It takes a real strong-minded person to do that and you've got to realize that this is it, no, like, well, fun still, but if you were I guess, I don't know the word for it, but going out and partying and bringing different people home and all of that. You've just got to be committed to do it and something that you really want to do. And if you're past previous lifestyle involved a lot of different people all of that has to stop, has to be cut off. I guess it's just the maturity.

Similarly, a twenty-two year old male indicated, *"I think you need to be committed already and have a strong commitment and a strong relationship before you try to do it."*

Interestingly, while females involved in a residential couple situation were more likely to emphasize the seriousness of moving in together for males it was those in a relationship couple that highlighted this aspect.

MALES' CONCEPTUALIZATION OF MARRIAGE

Seriousness

Not only was the seriousness of cohabiting discussed, but males also stressed the seriousness of marriage. In the interviews, eight males (from both residential and relationship couples) talked about equating marriage with *seriousness*. The seriousness of marriage was discussed in two different contexts in the interviews. Some of the males talked about marriage being a serious step that a couple takes and others talked about how getting married represents the seriousness of the relationship. While marriage is

equated with seriousness for these males for some the seriousness comes before the marriage and for others it comes as a result of it.

In connection to the seriousness associated prior to marriage there is discussion by males of marriage being a “step.” Other research has also suggested that for a significant minority of men cohabitation is viewed as a step towards marriage (Smock et al., 2006). However, unlike the females who discussed marriage as the next step in the relationship in the sense of progressing from dating to cohabiting to getting married, for males the “step” concept was more connected to seriousness. According to a twenty-three year old male, *“I think marriage is a really big step and something that you need to definitely think about in the long term before you consider getting married.”* Males stressed how getting married was something that should be taken seriously and that making the decision to get married was not a simple decision to make quickly. In response to the question “What do you think about marriage?” a twenty-two year old male responded,

Something you don't want to enter into lightly. We just had, her roommate just got married from Frederickson Court this past summer and they're already divorced. Like a month from the day they got married. So, I don't know. Rude awakening. I would never want to jump into that type of situation.

In addition to the seriousness of marriage, males involved in residential couples also indicated that getting married highlights the seriousness of the relationship. A twenty-one year old male talked about how marriage is about, *“Actually making that commitment to somebody instead of just going through it right now where we're just kind of hanging out and having fun. Making the relationship on a higher level.”* Also supporting this idea, a twenty-one year old male suggested, *“I think the stability of the*

permanent relationship is what marriage is all about, providing that's what you're both ready for. Marriage represents a lifelong commitment." As both of these males suggest, by getting married it takes the relationship to a new level of seriousness with a significant commitment. Since residential couples are less likely to have this same time of seriousness and commitment with cohabiting it is understandable that they would associate marriage with a significant change.

According to a twenty-two year old male, marriage enhances the seriousness of more than just the relationship, *"I think it (getting married) heightens the seriousness of everything, probably all. It makes you work hard, makes you fight harder because you know you actually have to fight for each other, but you should."* Therefore, there is a reciprocal relationship between marriage and seriousness where marriage itself is serious, but marriage also represents the seriousness of the relationship. With this in mind, the males saw marriage as something that should not be taken lightly as marriage means seriousness.

Nonchalant Stance

While some of the men stressed the seriousness associated with marriage, other males approached marriage with a very different attitude. In their discussion of marriage, eight males held a very nonchalant attitude towards the whole idea of marriage and what it meant for the relationship. The prevalence of this attitude was more prominent among males involved in a residential couple situation, perhaps in connection to their similar attitude taken towards cohabitation (as discussed previously in 'cohabitation formation').

For instance, despite the fact that he and his partner are engaged and will be marrying within a month a twenty year old male answered the following questions with,

Interviewer: What do you think about marriage?

Participant: I don't know.

Interviewer: Well, what do you see as being good about marriage?

Participant: I don't know.

Interviewer: But you two are engaged and getting married, right?

Participant: Yeah.

A thirty-six year old male also suggested a similar attitude as he said,

Interviewer: What do you think would be different if you two were married and not just living together?

Participant: I don't know. I think it would be the same. I don't think. It can't get no worse, I don't think. I really don't know

In connection to this type of nonchalant attitude, there were males who accepted the idea of permanently cohabiting and not getting married. While these males were not opposed to getting married and all of them did believe that they will still get married at some point in the future, they were okay with it either way. In other words, if their current partner wanted to continue to cohabit and not get married, they would not oppose.

The primary reason that these males were okay with not getting married was because they did not necessarily see the point in getting married. As one twenty-two year old male indicated, "*Marriage brings tax benefits and a marriage license, but really it's more of a formality than anything else.*"

Previous research has suggested that cohabiting couples perceive fewer positive and negative changes resulting from marriage than non-cohabiting couples (McGinnis, 2003). Supporting this, seven males (five of which were part of relationship couples) felt like their relationship was already similar to a married relationship; therefore, they did

not think that things would actually change with a marriage. As a twenty-two year old male explained,

We basically act like we are married right now. I'm an accounting major and I'd say that it's probably not the best financial decision, but it [permanently cohabiting] wouldn't bother me. We go everywhere together. She goes to the store, I go. She goes to her mom's house, I go.

While he recognizes that financially some aspects may change, he does not see any changes with the relationship and, as a result, would be okay with not getting married and simply continuing to cohabit. A similar idea is expressed by a twenty-three year old male, who said, *"I don't think there's that big of a difference between marriage and cohabiting as long as we're together."* Whether it is discussing the potential changes associated with marriage or the process of deciding to get married, it is clear that these males take a very nonchalant stance on marriage.

Negativity

The final meaning of marriage suggested by the males was one of negativity, as nine males discussed aspects of this nature. This negativity stems from the perceived negative changes that are associated with marriage. Since males involved in residential couple situations are more likely to see changes occurring when moving from cohabiting to marriage this aspect in general was more prominent with these males (seven of the nine who discussed negativity). Despite the fact that Thornton and Young-DeMarco's (2001) attitude research shows dramatic shifts regarding both men and women expressing more positive attitudes and beliefs regarding egalitarian family relationships and

responsibilities, there continues to be a strong gendered division of labor. Recognizing this, there continues to be a gender difference between the perceived cons associated with marriage. Research indicates that young men see marriage as requiring them to be successful at their career, hold a steady job, and give up their individual leisure pursuits. The same kinds of cons to marriage are not seen by young women (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995). In addition, more men than women made a point of stressing the advantages of an easier exit associated with cohabitation and described entering their cohabiting relationship in terms of 'try and see' (Jamieson et al., 2002).

Although my research does indicate that some females also perceive negative changes associated with marriage, as discussed regarding the maturation meaning of marriage, the males' approach is more negative. Females discussed changes associated with an increase in responsibility and growing up from a more neutral approach, with it simply being part of getting married and not necessarily bad or good. Males, however, saw the changes as aspects of negativity intertwined with marriage. Supporting this idea, as he thinks about what would change if he were married a twenty-two year old male said, *"I think I'd have even less free time and going out with the guys would be even more of a fight. I think money would be a bigger issue because I've made the impression to her that she doesn't handle money very well and she thinks I'm a tightwad."*

Smock et al.'s (2006) research also suggests that men are more likely to express concern about a perceived loss of freedom associated with cohabitation. Specifically, the men saw a sacrifice in autonomy and personal space, privacy, and interactions with friends. In my own interviews, many of the males discussed how they would have a loss

of free time as well as more responsibility and pressure if they were married. A thirty year old male indicated that, if you get married,

You're stuck. More responsibilities. Things might get too relaxed around the house and you might let each other go – like gaining 30 lbs or stuff like that where you become too comfortable in the relationship and you're just like – you're stuck with me now, it's on paper, you can't go anywhere and so you just change you whole attitude and stuff like that where you become a totally different person.

Suggesting a similar idea a twenty-one year old male said, *“The biggest con to it is that you have to sacrifice, to some degree, some of your personal ambitions and personal goals if it will cost the marriage. You have to work that out.”* Overall, for these males marriage is associated with what they see as negative aspects such as increases in responsibility and decreases in personal time. These perceived negative components of marriage are seen as something that occurs with a marriage. This is a different approach to changes than that voiced by the females, as females took a more neutral stance and were more likely to discuss changes that they would undertake rather than changes that would happen to them (as alluded to by males).

DISCUSSION

Symbolic interactionism suggests that the meanings that underlie behavior are ultimately more important than the behavior itself in order to understand the situation, as the value of that interaction or behavior for the individual ultimately depends on their subjective meaning (Clarke, 1997). In my study, all of the males and females saw themselves getting married in the future and intended on marrying their current

cohabiting partner (although there was a range in intensity regarding these intentions). However, the interviews suggest gender differences in the meaning of marriage. First, females were more likely to emphasize the importance of cohabiting prior to marriage as this was connected to trying things out and learning about your partner. Females also conceptualized the “meaning” of marriage as based on future children, relationship steps, tradition, maturation, wedding, and other’s desires. While males were less likely to stress the need to live together before marriage, they still saw cohabiting as a beneficial dimension for the relationship and to provide aspects of support. When discussing marriage more generally males were more likely to identify only one “meaning” of marriage – seriousness, a nonchalant stance, or negativity.

As discussed in the previous chapter regarding the conceptualization of the future, relationship couples are more likely to discuss marriage prior to cohabiting and have concrete marital intentions. Despite this, all of the couples in my study did have intentions on getting married; none of the couples saw themselves as cohabiting instead of marrying. There were, however, some differences in the way that males and females involved in residential and relationship couple situations conceptualized the meaning of marriage. For females, those involved in a residential couple were more likely to associate the meaning of marriage with future children and maturation. The connection between marriage and a wedding was the only aspect that more relationship couple females identified. The other aspects (relationship steps, tradition, and others’ desires) were equally discussed by females from both relationship and residential couples.

Overall, many of the differences represented by the females reflected the perceived changes associated with marriage that residential couples were more likely to identify.

Recognizing that there are fewer associated meanings of marriage discussed by the males in my study, important relationship versus residential distinctions still emerged. While males in general were less likely to emphasize the importance of cohabiting prior to marriage, males involved in residential couple situations did discuss the benefit of cohabiting for the relationship in general – as this provided convenience and support. Residential couple males were more likely to take a nonchalant stance towards marriage in general, perhaps as a reflection of their similar attitude towards cohabitation being based on pragmatic rather than relationship factors. Similar to the residential couple females being more likely to see changes associated with marriage, these males also highlighted connected changes; although taking a more negative approach toward the changes than females expressed. A final distinction between the two types of cohabiting couples is that residential females and relationship males were more likely to emphasize the importance of not rushing into cohabitation (which is more consistent with what relationship couples actually did).

Addressing the Family Decline Perspective

The ‘family decline’ perspective put forth by Cherlin (2004) and Popenoe (1993; 2005) has argued that increases in cohabitation have contributed to a decline in the prevalence and importance of marriage, which is problematic for society as a whole. Previous research, however, has shown that most cohabitators expect to marry (Brown,

2000; Manning & Smock, 2002) and the significance of marriage remains high (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). All of the cohabitators that I interviewed had intentions on marrying their current partner; although a range of intensity levels regarding intentions were expressed.

The various meanings of marriage expressed by the males and females contribute to two different aspects of the related cohabitation literature. First, the marital meanings highlight reasons why marriage has remained significant, leading to the 90% marriage rate (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). For many cohabitators, especially females, getting married was an important part of their life trajectory. Marriage was something that they had always assumed that they would do, as it was part of the steps one takes in a relationship and provided feelings of reassurance about the relationship. Although Jamieson et al.'s (2002) research found that the majority of cohabiting respondents did not see a significant difference between cohabitation and marriage, for the majority of cohabitators in my study marriage was seen as significantly different than cohabitation. This is in direct opposition to the concern regarding cohabitation's impact on marriage found within the 'family decline' perspective. With the exception of the males who took a nonchalant stance towards the meaning of marriage and females who discussed getting married for other people, most intended on getting married because it would be different than simply cohabiting. It has been suggested that cohabitators must feel that marriage will change their lives in order to get married (Bumpass & Sweet, 2001) or that something must change prior to marriage in order for the couple to get married in the first place (Smock et al., 2005). Neither of these two assertions are directly supported by my

research, as the difference between cohabitation and marriage is not necessarily about perceived changes. Particularly for those who simply want to get married due to the traditional notion behind it and/or because of the relationship steps conception, perceived changes are not involved. While some of the cohabitators did discuss things that would potentially change once they got married, these were both positive and negative changes. These were not things that needed to change in order for the couple to be motivated to get married.

The second contribution of my research on the meanings of marriage is that it sheds light on why there has been an increase in serial cohabitation and why more cohabiting unions today are ending in dissolution rather than marriage (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Smock & Gupta, 2002). While other researchers have attempted to explain this by exploring the perceived positive and negative changes associated with marriage (e.g., McGinnis, 2003), by only connecting the meaning of marriage to perceived changes this ignores other components identified in my study. Clearly there are a variety of different meanings of marriage held by cohabitators; as a result people are cohabiting for a variety of reasons, many of which are not directly tied to marriage (as discussed in the previous chapter). Even though all of the cohabitators in my study had intentions of marrying their partner, there were a variety of different explanations behind this. For some, this was due to the perceptions of others. As discussed by some of the females who attached the meaning of marriage to *others' desires* getting married was less about them and their relationship and more about making others happy. Among males, a significant number held a nonchalant attitude towards marriage in general with not seeing the point in getting

married. Other males expressed negative feelings towards marriage as they saw getting married as decreasing their personal time and increasing responsibility and stress. Even though the individuals still saw themselves as getting married in the future, one can easily see how these meanings of marriage could lend themselves to cohabitation dissolution rather than marriage. In addition, research has indicated that among married couples a convergence of attitudes often occurs due to the influence of one spouse on the other (Kalmijn, 2005). If this same type of convergence occurs among cohabitators it may cause, for instance, a male's negativity to impact a female's stance on marriage and lead to the couple not marrying.

Overall, despite the assertion put forth by the 'family decline' perspective (Cherlin; Popenoe) my research indicates that cohabitation is having very little impact on marital intentions and the significance of marriage. Others have suggested that where cohabitation fits into the larger family system may differ for men and women (Brown, 2000; Smock et al., 2006). While all cohabitators in my study had intentions on getting married in the future to their current cohabiting partner, my research does suggest that marriage may mean something different for males and females and for those involved in residential versus relationship couple situations. Although longitudinal data is necessary to show actual future behavior, even those who held a nonchalant attitude towards marriage, stressed perceived negative associated aspects, or discussed getting married for others still saw themselves as getting married in the future. None of the cohabitators in my study had intentions on cohabiting instead of marrying, which would have suggested that cohabitation is *replacing* marriage (as presumed by the 'family decline' perspective).

Furthermore, the majority of cohabitators stressed the significance of marriage though a discussion of its seriousness and what it signified to them and others, such as reassurance of the relationship status. This then suggests that cohabitation is seen as significantly different than marriage and, therefore, the institution of marriage is not in decline as marriage still holds an elevated place in the perspective of cohabitators.

Gendered Stories

The distinct gendered stories highlight the need to explore possible reasons for the differences and the larger significance of them. Gender identity has a profound influence on societal relations, as an individual's gender identity has the opportunity to be produced in many different realms of life.

Every physical surrounding, every room, every box for social gatherings, necessarily provides materials that can be used in the display of gender and the affirmation of gender identity. But, of course, the social interaction occurring in these places can be read as supplying these materials also. (Goffman 1977:324)

Despite the importance of gender as present in virtually all aspects of one's daily life, research on the connection between cohabitation and gender has been minimal and focused primarily on components associated with the transition from cohabitation to marriage. For instance, cohabiting men's economic status is associated with entry into marriage, but cohabiting women's are not (Sanchez, Manning, & Smock, 1998; Smock & Manning, 1997). As a result, men's earnings are positively associated with entry into both marriage and cohabitation (Clarkberg, 1999), although the connection between men's economic status and marriage has weakened (Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004). In addition,

couples who follow a traditional division of household labor are more likely to marry than those who utilize an egalitarian model (Sanchez, Manning, & Smock, 1998). In many ways, however, these connections between cohabitation and gender only begin to scratch the surface as to the role that gender can play in relationships.

Doing gender is a concept coined by West and Zimmerman (1987) and relates specifically to the creation of gender in and of itself. While the concept has many different aspects associated with it, the applicability of it to my research lies in how males and females use their gendered stories of marriage to create their gender. Gender is created through interactions with both men and women being active participants in its creation. “One’s gender is not simply something one ‘is’ but rather, it is something one does in interaction with others” (Fenstermaker, West and Zimmerman 1991:293). Therefore, the respondent’s gendered meanings of marriage highlight how gender is created through interaction.

Interactions found in relationships, such as cohabitation, reflect the gendered meanings associated with specific behaviors and roles. Culturally, a wedding and marriage are associated with femininity (Ingraham, 1999). Boys and girls are typically socialized in a culture and family environment in which they learn about gender characteristics, including women portrayed as more ‘relational’ than men (Hays, 1996). Stemming from this, males in my study were more likely to take a negative approach towards marriage. Although females did discuss some aspects associated with changes that could be construed as negative, their approach was different than the one voiced by the males. Males talked about changes that would be happening to them once they got

married, such as increases in responsibility and decreases in free time. Females, however, talked about internal changes that they would need to make. Even though some of these did suggest an increase in responsibility, they were not necessarily viewed as negative, more as simply something that needs to happen. Additionally females discussed how others' perceptions of what marriage constitutes could lead to changes; however, this was more of a concern that it *might* happen rather than that it *would* happen (which is how the males saw things). Connected to this gendered perception of negativity and change, previous research has indicated that women are more likely than men to see the ultimate goal of cohabitation as marriage (Smock et al., 2006).

Another interesting gender difference that reflects the larger cultural stereotypes, which are often present as one *does gender*, involves how marriage takes the relationship to a new level. For males, this new level is one of seriousness and something that they stressed should not be entered into lightly. While females do not argue that marriage should occur carelessly or without thought, the same attention that males gave to the idea of marriage being an important, serious decision does not occur. The idea of taking the relationship to a new level for females is about taking it to a new level for others and for themselves. As discussed regarding the *others' desires* meaning of marriage primarily, but also with *tradition* and *wedding*, getting married follows the expectations set out by others and sends a specific message to others about the relationship. In addition to this, for females getting married also takes the relationship to a new level for themselves. As found with the *relationship steps* and *wedding* meanings, marriage provides feelings of reassurance about the relationship and its future for the females.

In general, females were much more likely to connect their own meaning of marriage to *significant others* and *generalized others* (Mead, 1934). For most females, significant others were family members such as parents and grandparents. These important people in the females lives were discussed regarding the *tradition* meaning of marriage, *maturation*, and *wedding*. Generalized others refers to those in society as a whole and the larger cultural expectations surrounding marriage and weddings. For instance, in a society in which most (90%) people eventually marry (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001), there is the expectation that you will get married. The majority of young people expect to get married (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), and are likely to expect that others will also get married. Recognizing this, females talked about the *tradition* meaning of marriage and how getting married is simply “what you do” as you get older. Overall, females were much more likely to discuss fulfilling the expectations laid out by the significant others in their lives, as well as generalized others.

The gendered meanings discussed are not mutually exclusive; females were especially likely to discuss more than one meaning of marriage. For instance an eighteen year old female discussed meanings connected to *tradition* and *others' desires* as she said,

Participant: I think marriage is just a piece of paper. I don't think it will change anything in our relationship.

Interviewer: What is the reason to get married then?

Participant: Just because it's the traditional thing to do and it will make other people happy.

Males were less likely to hold more than one meaning of marriage and the meanings themselves were more restricted. This highlights the added complexity present for

females as they discuss the meaning of marriage or perhaps the enhanced confidence for males about their marital meanings. The males did not need to explain their marital intentions through a discussion of numerous meanings, as one meaning fulfill the full explanation for most.

Another important assertion of the *doing gender* perspective is that gender exists at the individual and institutional level. Gender is viewed as something accomplishment through interaction, as such our focus changes from viewing it as internal to the individual to something at the institutional level (West and Zimmerman 1987). In other words, although individuals “do” gender, “the process of rendering something accountable is interactional in nature, with the idiom of accountability deriving from those institutional arenas in which social relationships are enacted. Hence the accomplishment of gender must be seen as located in *social situations*” (Fenstermaker, West and Zimmerman 1991:294). Therefore, while the specific focus of my research lies within the individual gendered stories related to the meaning of marriage, the gender relations and inequality reflect the larger insitutional components of the same.

Given the increased prevelance of cohabitation, it is important to explore the meaning of marriage for cohabitators in order to understand the impact that cohabitation is having on marriage. The ‘family decline’ perspective put forth by Cherlin and Popenoe suggests that cohabitation is having a negative impact on the institution of marriage. My research, however, suggests that for young adult cohabitators cohabitation is seen as something inherently different from marriage. As a result, the cohabitators still have intentions on marrying as cohabitation is not being used instead of marriage. Gender

differences regarding the meaning of marriage are also suggested by my interviews, which are connected to the larger *doing gender* perspective.

CHAPTER 7.

PERCEIVED PERCEPTION OF SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Our sense of self is influenced by our perception of how we think that others see us (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Therefore, an individual's sense of self as a cohabitor is influenced by their perceptions of how they think that others see them. As Mead pointed out, however, it is important to recognize that not everyone will influence a person in the same way. In other words, others' attitudes may not really matter to your sense of self if these other people are not significant in your life. Building off of this Mead referred to those who do have an impact as *significant others*. The perceived attitudes of significant others towards cohabitation may be an important part of how an individual sees themselves as a cohabitor or even the choices that they make to cohabit in the first place, and what that means for them. Previous research has indicated that parents' attitudes toward cohabitation impact their young adult child's attitudes (Cunningham & Thornton; 2006). Using symbolic interactionism, Peterson, Stivers, and Peters (1986) examined the influence of significant others by looking at who influences the career decisions of low-income black and white youth. Supporting the importance of parents as a significant other, results indicated that parents were the most frequently recognized influencer.

In my study, the majority of respondents recognized their parents as significant others in their life. Their parents were the people about whose attitudes regarding cohabitation they were most concerned. Respondents were asked directly about their parents' attitudes and their partner's parents' attitudes. However, they were also asked if there were others who had impacted their decision to move in, who they talked to prior to

moving in, who they didn't want to know they were cohabiting or who they were nervous to tell. Even when asked specifically about others the majority of people did not recognize any other people whose attitudes they took into account in their decision to cohabit. This chapter explores the perceived attitudes of parents and additional significant others whose attitudes influenced the cohabitators decision-making.

PERCEIVED PARENTAL SUPPORT

There has been growing acceptance of cohabitation, as only 36% of adults in the 2002 U.S. General Social Survey disagreed with the statement, "It is alright for a couple to live together without intending to get married" (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2003).

However, research also indicates that younger generations are more accepting of cohabitation than older generations (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Despite this, the vast majority of respondents in my study indicated that their parents were okay with the couple living together. According to the respondents, thirty-eight sets of parents are okay with the couple cohabiting. While ten of these sets of parents were not okay with it in the beginning, they are now. Individuals from both residential and relationship couple situations discussed the acceptance of their parents. In my study I did not talk directly to the parents of cohabitators, instead I relied on the information provided by the respondents about their parents. While it is certainly possible that someone may think his/her parents are okay with cohabitation and the parents are actually not okay with it, from a symbolic interaction perspective this *perception* of the truth has more influence on behavior than the *actual* truth (Mead, 1934). In the context of socialization within the family, research has indicated that the individual's perception of others' behaviors are more important to

that individual and their self-concept than the actual behavior of others (Peterson & Rollins, 1986).

There were a variety of different reasons provided as to why parents were okay with the couple cohabiting that can be connected to residential- and relationship-related aspects (as discussed previously). These reasons offer insight into not only why parents would be okay with their individual child cohabiting, but also why there has been an increase in acceptance of cohabitation more generally.

Relationship Reasons

Similar to the relationship couples discussed in the previous chapter, for some of the couples the acceptance expressed by their parents focused on the relationship. This relationship foundation had two different dimensions. First, some of the cohabitators talked about how their parents were fine with them living together because of the relationship that existed between the cohabiting couple. This reason was more common among relationship couples, as their parents understood the seriousness of the relationship and its potential for permanence. A twenty-one year old male talked about how even before he and his partner officially moved in together,

I would stay the night at her place or she could stay the night at our house. It was kind of like living together but not really. I think that's one of the reasons why they (his parents) were pretty accepting of it too, it's just that we both were, we both care about each other a lot and consider each other in everything we do. I think that they understood that as well.

A similar story was expressed by a twenty-one year old male,

They know about the relationship that we have and they didn't think it was a big deal, they thought it would probably be better for both of us. They

thought it was probably a good idea to do. They definitely weren't against it.

The parents support the relationship in general and see it as a positive thing; therefore they accept the couple's decision to cohabit as well.

Also related to relationship dimensions and more common among relationship couples, others talked about how due to the relationship that existed between them and their partner's parents the parents accepted the couple living together. *"I've spent a lot of time with their family now and it's just sort of like they're my second family. So now I think that they know we're going to get married someday and it's not as big of a deal (20yr female)."* Similarly, a twenty-one year old female said,

His parents have really liked me even from when we were just friends... I love them to death. They're both really nice people and we're getting along really well. So, yeah, they had no problem with us moving in together. His whole family's pretty cool with it.

These two aspects (the couples' relationship and the relationship between a cohabitor and his/her partner's parents) indicate that for some parents acceptance is a result of positive relationships which provide feelings of reassurance.

Residential Reasons

Whereas some of the parents' perceived attitudes were based on the relationship status, other cohabitators talked about their parents' acceptance of them cohabiting by focusing on residential factors. Similar to what was discussed in the relationship versus residential couple chapter, the emphasis is not placed on the relationship. This was more commonly discussed among residential couples where factors such as support, finances, and growing up were emphasized.

Some cohabitators talked about how their parents were happy with the support (emotional and physical) provided by the couple living together.

[Her dad has] always been more laid back about the topic and was like, I'd rather you moved in with Jeff when you go up there, I'd feel safer if you live with him. He was always the one that was more reasonable about things. (21yr female)

This suggests that living with another person (especially a male if you are a female) provides an added level of security not found when living alone.

Other parents were happy with the cohabiting situation because of the financial benefit that it provided. For some, the financial advantage was for the parents, as a nineteen year old female discussed,

They (his parents) love it. I don't want to be mean, but they're not very motivated people. And I think they like not having extra people in their house. They're a lot older. His mom is like 68 and his dad is 71, so they're a lot older. I think it helps them financially because they don't really have much money.

Financially, the benefit could also be for the actual cohabitators. Combining both financial and support dimensions, a twenty-one year old male discussed why his partner's mom accepted their decision to cohabit,

She ended up bring it up to [his partner] that it would probably be a good idea if we moved in together just because it's good to have support and to have somebody else that you're sharing the financial costs with. So, parents-wise it really wasn't a big deal for them.

An additional residential reason why parents were accepting of their son or daughter cohabiting was related to growing up. Although some parents expressed concern that their child was growing up too quickly (which will be discussed later), others thought that cohabiting would help them grow up and this was seen as a good thing. A nineteen year old female supported this idea in her discussion of her partner's mom, "His mom,

she loves me, so she's like, yeah, that's great. She wants him out of the house so that he can be responsible." Overall, these aspects highlight the residential, rather than relationship, factors that parents used as the basis for why they accepted their child cohabiting. In many ways, these residential factors are something that could be provided by any roommate and do not require a cohabiting situation. For instance, the perceived financial benefit of cohabiting is also provided by having a plutonic roommate.

PERCEIVED LACK OF PARENTAL SUPPORT

While most people felt that their parents accepted their decision to cohabit, there were three parents who did not agree with the couple cohabiting and an addition ten that had negative feelings about it in the beginning. Residential couples were more likely to discuss parents having negative feelings about their cohabitation decision. Although Smock et al.'s (2006) qualitative research suggests that women are more likely to recognize social disapproval of cohabitation, my own research does not support this as men and women were equally as likely to identify a lack of parental support. Anderson and Snow (2001) emphasized the importance of looking at the context of inequality at the micro-level to understand how individuals interpret and respond in social interaction. Recognizing the presence of stratification systems within society, they were interested in understanding the consequences of this for the individuals who interpreted these *differences* as meaningful in their lives. While their focus was not primarily on the impact of these interpreted meanings within the family, connections can be made to relationships in general by examining how these different interpretations are influenced by interactions and influence future interactions. In this sense, when cohabitor perceive that others see

their cohabitation status as *different* this may influence not only their interactions but also their perception of themselves as a cohabitor.

Similar to why some parents were okay with cohabitation, there were a variety of different reasons why others were not okay with it. These reasons touch on concerns regarding cohabitation and marriage. Specifically, there was discussion of parents being against living together before marriage, residential-related concerns, relationship-related concerns, and believing that their child is too young to cohabit. It is also important to note that while some of these concerns were strong enough to lead to disapproval by parents, for others they were simply expressed concerns. In this sense, the concern did indicate to the cohabitor a lack of parental support; however, it was not strong enough to suggest disapproval of cohabitation.

Against living together before marriage

The main reason that respondents' parents were against cohabitation was simply because it meant that you were living together before marriage. This was a reason only discussed by residential couples. According to a twenty-one year old male, "[My parents are]) from the belief that you should get married first, old school I guess. I don't think they are that comfortable with it, but I guess they'll get used to it." A twenty-one year old female also described her Mom as being against cohabitation, at least in the beginning,

Participant: My mom at first, I don't think that she was too into it. I'd like talk about him and like, oh we got a microwave or something like that and she just wouldn't say anything at all. She didn't help us move in. But she likes Tony and since then I think she's fine with it, especially since my sister moved in.

Interviewer: Did she ever actually vocalize to you her opinion?

Participant: No, that's not her type; she's more like tell my sister; that's how she goes about doing it. So I heard about it from my sister too, she didn't think it was a very good idea.

Interviewer: Any particular reason why?

Participant: The not being married part she wasn't too thrilled about and she just thought I was too young.

Religion is connected to approval of cohabitation, as research has indicated that cohabitators are less likely to be religious (Wilhelm, 1998) and many respondents tied their parent's lack of approval directly to their religious views. This idea is suggested by a twenty-one year old male, who talked about why he and his partner have not told their parents that they are living together,

Interviewer: Do your parents know that you two are living together?

Respondent: Nope

Interviewer: Why haven't you told them?

Respondent: We come from Catholic families, so cohabitation is a no.

Interviewer: So neither of your families know?

Respondent: Yeah

Interviewer: Have your parents explicitly told you that they are against cohabitation or is just an assumption since you come from a Catholic family?

Respondent: It's kind of hybrid of both. Like in conversations it's been made clear where their stance is on that, but I think they kind of don't expect it from us, so it's not something that's been a direct conversation.

A twenty-one year old female makes the same connection to religion in her discussion of why her partner's parents are against them cohabiting as she said,

Like I know his mom's like the organ player at the church and his dad's like the president of whatever they do at church, so like that's where it comes from. Because they did it to his older sister and her fiancé too, like they were always in separate rooms too until they got married and they're against them living together.

Overall, regardless of whether there is a perceived religious connection to the disapproval, many cohabitators believed that their parents were against them cohabiting because it involved them living with their romantic partner prior to marriage.

Residential Concerns

While some parents used residential aspects to support their child cohabiting, others based their concerns and disapproval about cohabitation on the same type of residential components. This was something also more commonly mentioned by residential couples. One thing that respondents indicated was parental concerns about the financial aspects of living with another person. According to a twenty-one year old male, *“[My partner] had some financial issues that [his parents] were kind of worried about and they were worried that we would have trouble paying for it and that she’d be able to hold up her side of being able to pay for things, finances, like rent and stuff.”*

In addition to financial concerns, another residential-related concern held by parents regarded the day-to-day aspects of cooking and cleaning. As described by a twenty year old female, *“His Mom, well she was just worried if we’d be able to handle all of it. Cooking and cleaning, she’s like, it’s a small apartment, but you’ll still have to take care of all of that and the bill paying.”* Generally speaking, although the parents had voiced these concerns they were seen as more trivial. Neither the financial issues nor cooking and cleaning aspects were seen as important enough to indicate parental disapproval of cohabitation. The parents, however, were concerned about the decision their child was making; whether it was the best one and if they were going to be able to handle the new responsibilities.

Relationship Concerns

Although the vast majority of respondents spoke positively about their partner's parents and their relationship with them, there were a few who discussed relationship concerns voiced by parents. One concern was that the couple was moving too fast in the relationship and that they should not move in together yet. Therefore, these parents were not necessarily against cohabitation completely, just concerned about their son or daughter taking this step in the relationship already. As residential couples were more likely to move in after a shorter period of dating or without discussing the impact of this decision (e.g., moving in because one person does not get along with their roommate and needs somewhere to live), it is understandable that parents would voice a level of concern. A twenty year old female suggested this in her discussion of what her partner's mom thought about them moving in together,

It took his mom awhile to get used to it because I think it was kind of a surprise because we hadn't really been dating that long and he already had plans, he had already signed a lease for this apartment and everything and they were just planning on him living there. So she maybe thought it was too soon.

Another concern held by parents was what the couple would do if their relationship ended and they were cohabiting. As described by a twenty-two year old male,

Respondent: I talked to my parents and they warned me, but, I chose to do it (cohabit) anyway.

Interviewer: What did they warn you about?

Respondent: The fact that if we broke up we would have one weird situation on us.

This type of concern indicates that the parents are not completely confident in the relationship and its future status. However, this may be a legitimate concern given that

there are more cohabiting unions ending in dissolution than marriage (Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006).

Too young to cohabit

While there were parents who expressed concerns about the couple moving in together as it was too soon in the relationship there were also parents who thought it was simply too soon for their son or daughter. Regardless of the specifics of the relationship, they felt that their child was too young to be living with a significant other. This concern was discussed by both relationship and residential couples, suggesting that some parents may have a hard time *letting* go of their son or daughter regardless of the relationship context. A twenty-five year old male suggested this idea in his discussion of his mom,

She believed that since he'd (his partner) came to my life I've changed and the fact is that I have changed. I changed before I even met him though. She knew me as a boy and I was growing into a man and she couldn't accept it. So it's not like she had an issue with (his partner), she just had an issue with me growing up and living with someone.

About the situation, his partner said the following, *"His mother did not like me for "stealing her little boy," and tried to make him dump me (thirty-five year old male)."* Even though the partner did feel that his mom also had a problem with him, the idea of being too young is apparent to both people.

For some of the parents, it was not simply living with a significant other that they felt their son or daughter was too young for, but living with another person and out of the house in general caused some concern. As discussed by a twenty-one year old male about his partner's parents, *"Her parents didn't agree with it so much at the beginning of our relationship but they are fine with it now. They felt like I was taking her away from her*

parents because she wanted to stay with me and they wanted her home.” Suggesting the same idea, a thirty year old male said the following about his partner’s dad:

Her dad probably wasn’t so happy about it at first, but after awhile her Dad came around. He’s a pretty cool guy, we talked about it. They were maybe a little bit iffy. Well they have two daughters; she’s the oldest, so I guess it was kind of rough on them to let her go. They weren’t ready for it.

Letting go was also hard for some parents to do as this meant that they would be seeing less of their child and they weren’t ready for that to happen. As a twenty-one year old female said about her parents, *“At first they didn’t like it because they were used to me being home all the time and spending time with them when I was back from Minnesota. So they kind of got upset because they felt that I didn’t come around anymore.”* Similarly, a nineteen year old female indicated, *“Of course, my mom wants me to stay home because I’m a little girl and you can’t move or I’m never going to see you.”* Smock et al. (2006) found that when discussing family disapproval of cohabitation, both men and women were more likely to focus on the woman’s family’s perception of cohabitation. My own research, however, finds this only to be true for this specific aspect of being *too young to cohabit* and not for the other reasons. Regardless of whether it is due to the specific cohabiting partner or simply moving out of the house and in with someone else in general, many parents were not ready for their child to cohabit as they thought they were too young.

“SECRET” COHABITATION

Although the majority of parents do know that the couple is cohabiting, some of the couples have not told their parents. There are seven sets of parents that do not know

that the couple is cohabiting. Of the twenty-seven couples in my study, this means that five couples have at least one set of parents that does not know they are cohabiting. Of these five couples, four of them were informal cohabitators and one couple was cohabiting temporarily for the summer. I use the term informal cohabitators to refer to couples who identify themselves as cohabitators – they spend the night together every night and having their personal belongings in a shared place of residence – but have their names on leases for two different rental properties. All five of the couples that have at least one set of parents that do not know they are cohabiting are residential cohabitators. Perhaps as a result of non-relationship focus of why the couple is living together it makes it easier to not tell their parents, as they can justify living together to themselves and others as based on these other residential (housing) components.

The couples who have not told their parents talked about how this has impacted their cohabitation status, in that they have remained informal cohabitators because of not wanting to tell their parents and/or because of the concern about how their parents will respond. Mead (1934) referred to this as *taking the role of the other* and highlighted how once a person is able to view one's self from the standpoint of others they can also predict responses and alter their behavior. As a twenty-one year old female described,

I think [we've kept our separate places] just to keep his mom quiet. He doesn't want to deal with her being like, well, you can't live together yet, you're not married. It's just easier. We both have our own apartments, which obviously from seeing that they can be, well, they live separate. Just to keep conflict down on that side, I guess.

When a couple hasn't told their parents that they are living together this is generally because they think that their parents will respond negatively.

They would just be like, that's unnecessary; you don't need to do that. Even if it was like another city or something, like would be like almost willing to pay for my rent or something to just have me be – like if I used that against them, like it will be so much cheaper – they'd be like, fine we'll pay half. (20yr female)

For the informal cohabitators especially, this perceived negative parental attitude has also impacted their decision to remain as informal cohabitators and not transition into more formal cohabitators with an actual shared lease. As a twenty-one year old male indicated,

Interviewer: Do you think that this (your parent's negative attitude towards cohabitation) is having an impact on you guys not getting your own place together?

Participant: Oh definitely, yeah. Family is something that's really important to both of us; we're both really close to our families and don't want to cause big disruptions and blowouts that would result in that. So that's definitely a big issue.

Similarly, a nineteen year old female suggested that she and her partner keep separate places, “*just for my parents' sake though, not of my own decision.*” By keeping separate places of residence and living as informal cohabitators, the couples are keeping their cohabitation a secret since they believe their parents do not approve.

Despite the fact that these five couples discussed how at least one set of parents does not know they are living together, many of them also talked about how they think that their parents do actually know and are just *pretending* to be naïve about the situation. “*My mom knows that he's around almost all the time and everything and so I would assume that they assume things, but you never know how much parents let themselves be naïve*” (21yr female). While the couple has not actually sat down and explicitly told their parents that they are living together, there is the assumption by the couple that the parents

do actually know. This assumption, however, is not strong enough that the couple will talk explicitly about their cohabiting status in front of their parents.

OTHERS AS SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Henry et al. (2005) used symbolic interactionism to examine how adolescents in remarried family households perceive the behaviors of their parents and stepparents and how these behaviors then relate to adolescent empathic concerns. Recognizing that individuals respond to their perceptions of family interactions, rather than actual family dynamics, the adolescents' perceptions of their parents' and stepparents' behavior are surveyed, not the parents or stepparents themselves. The research finds support for the influence of significant others regarding an individual's sense of self, with the results indicating that the parent, although not the stepparent, are a significant other in the adolescent's life. This highlights the importance of examining who individuals consider significant others, instead of making assumptions that certain people *will be* a significant other in the individual's life. While for the majority of couples, parents were the significant others impacting the decisions that they made and how they felt about cohabitation, for some individuals this was not the case. Five people (representing residential and relationship couples) talked about how they did not know whether their parents were accepting or not of their cohabitation, as they had not explicitly asked them nor were they concerned about what their parents thought.

I don't know what my parents think; I never really asked. I had a co-worker who was thinking about moving in with her boyfriend and she was like – how do you ask your parents, what do you say. And I'm like, I don't

know, I didn't even ask, I just kind of like, I'm making my own decisions, I'm going to do this and I just told them, like. I kind of was asking my Mom just to see what her opinion was, but I wasn't really asking her. I was like – so, I think that Chris and I are going to move in when he gets back and she was like, okay. She didn't ever saying anything I guess. She never really gave an opinion. I don't know if she didn't want to offend me or like grill me with questions about it. I don't know, they've never said anything. My dad's never said anything and he's usually strict and stern about stuff, so I think, I'm the baby of the family and they're old, so by the time they get to me they're like, whatever, just do whatever. (21yr female)

Since the respondent's perception of their parents' attitudes were explored in the interviews and not the actual parental attitude it is possible that the parents do hold strong positive or negative attitudes. However, when it comes to the impact on behavior these actual parental attitude are unimportant. What is important is the perceived attitudes and, as you can see, these respondents do not consider their parents significant others and, therefore, there is little if any impact on the cohabitor's behavior.

Some of the individuals who did not recognize their parents as having an influence focused instead on others identified as important and discussed the impact that these people had on their thoughts and actions regarding cohabitation. Other respondents who discussed parents as significant others recognized additional people who had an influence as well. Grandparents were the main *other* people discussed, as eleven people talked about telling their grandparents and/or being concerned about how they would respond. This was something that individuals from both residential and relationship couple situations mentioned. A twenty-one year old male said the following when asked if there were people that he did not want to know he was cohabiting,

My mom's side mainly, especially my grandma. It's not like I didn't want to tell them but I was more nervous about telling them than anybody else. Like everybody else it just wasn't a big deal, like my dad's side they're not

so Catholic and conservative and all that stuff. I just knew that on my mom's side I kind of thought they'd be more likely to not look well upon it.

The concern over grandparent's response was tied to the religious aspect discussed earlier and being against living together before marriage. As described by a twenty-one year old male, "*My grandma and grandpa are religious and they think that you should be married to live and have a baby together.*" Also highlighting the religious connection a twenty-six year old female said the following,

Religiously, I'm Catholic, I've been raised Catholic and like my grandma won't come to our house until we're married, she refuses, I mean, we're living in sin. So, traditionally, I do believe in God and I'm a religious person, so having premarital sex is a sin.

For some this concern was so strong that even though their parents knew they were cohabiting they were keeping it a secret from their grandparents. As indicated by a twenty-one year old female,

My mom's side of the family is very Catholic and my grandma still lives in town. She lives not even five miles away from where my parents live and my brother still goes there after school...But, I have no intention of telling them that we cohabit because, and it's not really a selfishness kind of thing, but I honestly believe that it would break my grandma's heart to find out that not only am I not going to church anymore but I'm, in her mind, breaking several commandments. I honestly think it would break her heart and I don't want to do that to her. I may not agree with her on a lot of things and I may not even like her sometimes, but I do love her and she did a lot of good stuff for me when I was growing up, for my family. So, out of respect for her, I've not told her.

In addition to an expressed concern over the response of grandparents, four residential cohabitators talked about friends either not approving of cohabitation or not wanting to tell certain friends because of the apprehension of how they would respond. This apprehension may be tied to friends not approving of the decision since it is based

on residential (housing-related), as opposed to relationship factors. A twenty-one year old female discussed her best friend's negative opinion about cohabitation by saying,

She just thinks that the gradual progression of things is that you date, then you get married, then you live together and have a child. So any things out of order there just kind of throw her off, but I guess that's just kind of normal for her and how her family does it.

Similarly, when talking about her friend, a twenty-one year old female said,

My friend Jon is my partner in an architecture project that I'm doing and stuff. We see a lot of each other and he and I are pretty much best friends...we work really well together and we understand each other and understand not only where each other comes from but how each other works and everything and that's why we enjoy working together. But, he is Methodist and very hardcore Christian with some of his other friends that he grew up with, but kind of to the point where he wears a chastity ring and that kind of thing and anytime that we have talked about it in the past, about marriage and everything, he'll make comments about people getting married young and different things. So, I guess in order to not have him against me, it's just better to keep him as much in the dark as we can.

Therefore, despite the fact that research indicates increased approval of cohabitation particularly among younger generations (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001) this does not automatically mean that all younger adults are accepting of living together before marriage.

Although it was more typical for respondents to talk openly about their cohabitation with their siblings (even if they were keeping it a secret from their parents), there were two residential cohabitators who indicated that their siblings do (or might) not approve. When asked if there was anyone that he didn't want to know that he was cohabiting, a twenty-one year old male responded,

Participant: Maybe my brother, right away at least. Because he lived with his girlfriend in college and he like hated it, so, I don't want him to give me advice and stuff.

Interviewer: What do you think he would say?

Participant: I don't know, probably that I'm making a bad decision.

Overall, for some cohabitators there were other people in their lives (particularly grandparents, but also peers and siblings) who were either blatantly against cohabitation or the cohabitor believed that they held a negative attitude and, therefore, they were keeping the cohabitation a secret from them.

DISCUSSION

Research has indicated growing acceptance of cohabitation; while this has been particularly strong for younger cohorts, approval of cohabitation among older cohorts is also increasing (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). While this is significant in its own right, understanding the reasons for this approval can be obtained through utilizing a symbolic interactionist perspective. Specifically, connections can be made to Cooley's (1902) concept of the looking glass self and Mead's (1934) generalized others.

Highlighted here is the idea that our understanding of the situation is influenced by our perception of how we think that others see us.

Self concepts develop in response to the reactions of others. The concept of self is a social product; it emerges as a result of the reflected appraisals of others which are transmitted during the course of social interaction. It is further argued that individuals define and evaluate themselves on the basis of how others define and evaluate them, as well as how they perceive others' evaluations of them. (Mboya, 1998:201)

Related to this, research indicates that perceptions of parental behaviors influence adolescents' self-concepts (Mboya) and adolescent's self-esteem is influenced by the

perceived appraisal and notions of the child's self-worth that parents give (Openshaw, Thomas, & Rollins, 1984). Therefore, an individual's sense of self as a cohabitor is influenced by their perceptions of how they think that others see them. Attitudes of others towards cohabitation may be an important part of how an individual sees themselves as a cohabitor or even the choices that they make to cohabit in the first place, and what that means for them. However, this assumption cannot be made without using symbolic interactionism within cohabitation research to truly examine this. For example, if a cohabitor believes that 'others' think they are doing the right thing (even if these 'others' are actually completely against cohabitation, according to their reported attitude), this perception will have a larger influence on the cohabitor's actions.

My research builds on our understanding of this by exploring the perceived perception of significant others, as the interviews stressed the impact of significant others as opposed to generalized others. Specifically, participants discussed the perceptions of their parents and other people close to them (grandparents and friends), not societal views in general. Understanding the influence of significant others and how they impact a cohabitators' sense of self will help to better understand behavior. Once a person is able to view one's self from the standpoint of others, they can predict these responses and alter their behavior to create a positive situation for themselves (Mead, 1934). Therefore, these concepts can be used to understand why one chooses to cohabit and assesses the situation in the way that they do.

According to participants, the majority of their parents were okay with the couple cohabiting. The perceived parental support was connected to relationship and residential factors which highlighted the reasons why the parents were supportive. A significant

minority of parents did not support their child's decision to cohabit, at least initially. The perceived reasons behind the lack of support were the parent's being against living together prior to marriage, relationship concerns, residential concerns, and a belief that their child was too young to cohabit. Although the majority of parents were aware that their child was cohabiting, there were some who were not. Many of the cohabiters who had not told their parents were living as informal cohabiters and believed that their parents would respond negatively if they knew.

Most participants identified their parents as significant others and the most involved people when it came to having an impact on their life decisions. However, some did discuss other significant people (grandparents and friends) whose cohabitation attitude was important to them. The importance of this attitude, however, was primarily due to the others' perceived negative stance on cohabitation. Similar to those who were keeping their cohabitation secret from parents due to a perceived negative response, some were working to keep their cohabitation hidden from other significant people as well.

In connecting the residential versus relationship couple distinction to the perceived perception of significant others clear differences emerged. While individuals from both types of couples perceived a considerable amount of parental support, of those who did not believe that their parents supported their decision to cohabit they were more likely to be part of a residential couple. Breaking this down further, relationship couples often discussed parental support related to relationship reasons; whereas, residential couples related it to residential (pragmatic) aspects. For those who perceived a lack of support from their parents, residential couples identified all of the reasons, except for being too young to cohabit, more often than relationship couples. Stemming from this,

residential couples were more likely to be keeping their cohabitation a secret due to the perceived lack of parental support. However, relationship and residential couples were equally as likely to not see their parents as significant others and identify other people as significant (grandparents, etc.). Overall, the differences between residential and relationship couples regarding the perceived perception of significant others match the components of the overall cohabiting situation. For instance, as residential couples are more likely to move in together for reasons other than the relationship and less likely to discuss cohabitation or marriage prior to cohabiting, it is understandable that significant others would voice concerns about the couple's decision to cohabit.

My research highlights the importance of looking at perceptions of attitudes rather than the actual attitudes of significant others. Sometimes the two attitudes are not the same, but the perceived attitude is what people base their behavior on (Mead, 1934). Although some of the respondents expressed concern about how their parents would respond, and for some this concern was so strong that they didn't even tell their parents, nine cohabitators (both residential and relationship couples) talked about how their parents had actually responded differently than they expected. According to a twenty-one year old female,

Originally my parents had always said that they didn't want me to move in with anybody until we were married, so I thought that was going to be an issue, but it wasn't because he's pretty much a part of our family now – we've been together quite a while and we both don't want to get married until we're done with school, which is still quite a few years for me.

Another twenty-one year old female was surprised by her mom's positive reaction, as she indicated,

My Mom always thought that, really she just thought that you shouldn't live with a boyfriend before getting married and also to wait until I was done with school before getting married – which I want to do to, so it's not like it's just hers. So, yeah, she was pretty strict about things, so she was my main concern and actually she's the one that brought it up to me – she's like, and are you going to be moving in with (her partner)? And I said, well, I wanted to talk to you about it first because I don't want to upset you, but yeah, she surprised me there because she's always been old fashioned about stuff. She was the only one I was worried about but she suggested it to me.

While it is possible for a parent to respond negatively to their child cohabiting even when the person expected them to respond positively, in my interviews when parent's responses were different than what was expected it was related to a more positive response than predicted. This suggests that parents do not always respond as their child predicts they will.

Parents were not the only people who responded differently than what the cohabitor's expected, as some respondents also talked about other *significant others* (such as grandparents) in their life responding more positively than expected. As indicated by a twenty-one year old female,

I was a little nervous about it [telling others] at first. Just because I was afraid that more people would react badly towards it. But, and I originally wasn't planning on telling anybody, but then my dad went ahead and told a bunch of his brothers and sisters, so that went straight out the window. But the thing is they were fine with it and they were supportive of it and they really thought it was great. They asked me questions about it, where are you living, what's it cost, how's the place, this and that and the other. Not only did it make me feel good that they were supportive of me, it made me start to feel more like an adult on that side of the family.

Similarly, a twenty-one year old female said,

My grandma's very Catholic and I wasn't really into telling her, actually either of my grandmas. But my dad told her. I thought I was going to get this big lecture, but she was just worried about – well, how are you going

to eat, you don't know how to cook; you can't eat out every night. And I was like, I know, we'll cook.

Another twenty-one year old female received a comparable reaction from her grandpa, despite her concern about how he would respond,

It was my Mom's dad that I was really concerned about because he's very traditional and old-fashioned and I didn't want him to think about his little granddaughter living with a boy. I was just uncomfortable, but my dad blurted it out one day and it really upset me, but my grandpa said that it was fine and that it's not a big deal and he's proud of me and he likes my boyfriend, so, it ended up working out.

Overall, the fact that others' responses did not always match the cohabitor's expectation highlights the importance of looking at the cohabitators perceptions of other's attitudes as opposed to the actual attitude (such as a parent), as a person acts on the perception.

Mead (1934) asserted that perceived attitudes impact behavior; therefore, the fact that the large majority of parents in my study were okay with the couple cohabiting may have indirectly led the couple to choose to move in together. It made it easier for the couple to move in together if they believed that their parents were supportive of the decision. As indicated by a twenty-one year old female about her partner's parents,

His parents had come up that weekend before classes and they saw his house and how horrible it was and everything. They just kind of looked at me and looked at him and he was like, yeah, I think I'm going to be cooking and hanging out at [his partner's apartment] a lot more often and everything. And they seemed totally okay with that just because of how bad the living condition was over there. And I think that was another thing that kind of made me feel a little more comfortable with it, that we weren't really hiding it from everybody. It was kind of out in the open, to a certain extent. It made me feel a little bit better that him being over at my place a lot wasn't going to be a big deal to them.

On the other hand, when cohabitators believed that their parents opposed cohabitation this led many of them to either not tell their parents or to become informal cohabitators, instead

of living together formally. It is also certainly possibly that those whose parents do not approve are not moving in together before marriage at all and would not have been part of my study. As a result, compared to parents in general, one can assume that my participants' parents have a higher than average acceptance of cohabitation.

Overall, the importance of my research lies in highlighting the need to explore cohabitor's beliefs about the perceptions of others, particularly significant others in their lives. While the majority of cohabitators recognize parents as significant others, additional others were identified and should not be ignored – as their perceived attitudes also have an influence. Also acknowledged is the increasing acceptance of cohabitation by older cohorts, which is significant given the emphasis by researchers on young cohorts (Axinn & Thornton, 2000; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). As Mead points out, these perceived perceptions provide essential insight into the behavior of cohabitators. In a world in which cohabitation has become the norm (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Stanley et al., 2004) it is necessary to explore the thoughts behind the behavior in order to understand the larger implications of it.

CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION

Important Findings

Cohabiting relationships are an important area of study given the increased prevalence of cohabitation, as researchers estimate that *most* young adults will cohabit at some point in their life (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). I have emphasized the need to explore the cohabiting relationship from a qualitative perspective, particularly one utilizing the insights drawn from symbolic interactionism. People act towards things on the basis of what those things mean to them (Blumer, 1969); therefore, in order to understand behavior we must understand meaning. Recognizing this, my research has explored meaning-making among young adult cohabiting couples regarding the meaning of cohabitation, marriage, and the perception of significant others. Through this we have a better understanding of the cohabiting relationship (what it means and associated behaviors) by hearing the *voices* of actual cohabitators.

Specifically, my research highlights three findings. My first finding was that two major meanings of cohabitation—cohabitation as relationship and cohabitation as residence—shape decisions to cohabit and the experience of cohabitation. The dominant scholarly conceptualization of the meaning of cohabitation focuses on aspects of the couple's current relationship and their anticipated future relationship. However, my study highlights another set of issues, those related to residence, that impact the decisions that cohabitators make. To highlight the different stories I discuss components related to cohabitation formation, maintenance, and conceptualization of the future. Prior

discussion and the reasons to cohabit are the core components of cohabitation formation. Cohabitation maintenance includes the day-to-day aspects of cohabiting such as the couples' financial decisions, division of household labor, what was learned about the other partner, the terms used to refer to one another, and the presence of additional roommates. Finally, the conceptualization of the future section examines the couples' future cohabitation and marital intentions.

My second finding builds upon the meaning of marriage literature by addressing the 'family decline' concern regarding how cohabitators' perceive the connection between cohabitation and marriage as well as the meaning of marriage more generally. In my discussion I utilize a symbolic interactionist approach to meaning which emphasizes subjective understanding and highlights the connection between meaning and behavior. My results suggest that young adult cohabitators are not using cohabitation in place of marriage, as all of my participants had intentions on marrying in the future. Instead, especially female cohabitators saw living together before marriage as an important first step to learn about your partner and assure future marital success. In addition to highlighting how residential and relationship couples view marriage, I also identify gender differences regarding the meaning of marriage. Many females recognized more than one meaning of marriage, as they discussed aspects tied to future children, relationship steps, tradition, maturation, wedding, and others desires. Males were more likely to identify only one meaning of marriage, as most fell into one of three groups – seriousness, a nonchalant stance, and negativity.

My final finding relates to the perceptions of *significant others*. Using a symbolic interaction approach, however, the *perceived* perceptions of others' meaning of marriage

are examined. In other words, cohabitators are asked how they think that others (such as their parents) feel about cohabitation. I found that most cohabitators felt that their parents and other significant others held a positive attitude toward cohabitation and I described their reasons for holding this attitude. I also found that some *secret* cohabitators hid their cohabitation from their significant others because of their perceived negative attitudes. Connections between the different perceptions of residential and relationship cohabitators are also highlighted in this discussion.

Limitations

While not wanting to de-emphasize the importance of my three findings, it is necessary to recognize and address some of the limitations of my research. The first limitation revolves around my sample selection. I used a convenience sampling method in which I sampled students from various sociology courses at Iowa State University. Although I did justify my use of this particular sample in the methods chapter, it still needs to be recognized as a limitation. Due to the fact that there is the possibility that students enrolled in these course at this particular college are not representative of college students as a whole or young adults more generally the results should be considered with this limitation in mind.

The second limitation is that I relied on volunteer interviewees rather than using a random sample to select them. Again, it is possible that I did not obtain a representative sample of cohabitators. There are a variety of different reasons why my specific volunteers may be different than those obtained through a random sample. For instance, it is possible that either respondents who have primarily positive relationships could volunteer or

respondents who have primarily negative relationships could volunteer. Although my results do not suggest a homogeneous sample, the majority of my respondents did believe that their parents held positive attitudes about cohabitation (at least currently, if not in the beginning), which could possibly be a result of my sample. Therefore, it is important to recognize this potential limitation and to take it into consideration.

Despite the potential limitations of a nonrandom sample, my study utilizes a grounded theory approach which does not require a random sample to conceptual ordering and build theory. Instead, interviews are conducted with an open coding approach where conceptual order and theory emerges as the interviews and transcriptions occur. The theory is continually built upon as the interviews take place until satiation occurs.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study raises a number of questions for future research. Cohabitation is a fairly recent topic in family sociology and particularly for qualitative research; therefore, future research in general is needed in order to test my findings. As the basis of this study was exploratory in nature, its purpose is to provide a glimpse of understanding in order to suggest to future researchers a better direction of where to continue the study of cohabiting relationships. I used conceptual ordering (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to make sense of the data and conceptualize meaning. Stemming from grounded theory, however, this could be taken a step further into actual theory development. In addition, while future qualitative research would also be beneficial, a quantitative look at the issue also has the potential to be important. My findings could be used to design a large quantitative study.

In addition, there are a few specific areas that arose in my study that I believe deserve further attention in order to reach a better understanding of cohabitation. First, while I found that there were two different types of couples – *relationship* and *residential* – regarding the meaning of cohabitation, this needs to be explored further. For instance, longitudinal research could examine the potential transition associated with these two different types of couples. Do residential couples become relationship couples eventually? Can relationship couples become residential couples over a period of time? There was indication of transitions in my study by some of the couples who had been cohabiting for an extended period of time, but longitudinal research is needed to address this further. In addition, to classify the two types, I explored aspects related to cohabitation formation, maintenance, and the conceptualization of the future. Building on this, future research could examine these aspects in connection with others to see what other components are important to understanding the meaning of cohabitation.

A second issue that needs to be expanded upon relates to the meaning of marriage. While all of the participants in my study indicated their intentions on marrying in the future, other researchers have not found this to be true. The connection between the meaning of marriage and marital intentions needs to be explored more closely. As in my own study, even among those who did not see changes (positive or negative) occurring with marriage or even males who held a negative attitude about marriage all still intended on marrying in the future. What is it about marriage that makes people want to get married, even when they are already cohabiting? In addition, the gender dynamics associated with the meaning of marriage among cohabitators necessitates further exploration. Generally speaking, researchers have only minimally explored the

connection between cohabitation and gender; therefore, this needs more attention.

Third, our understanding of the perception of others' attitudes about the meaning of cohabitation also needs further attention. While I focus specifically on the perceived perception of the cohabitators about the significant others in their lives, additional insight would be provided by exploring these perceived perceptions and the actual perceptions, in other words, interviewing both cohabitators and their significant others (such as parents). Many of the cohabitators in my study indicated that their parents or other significant others had not responded as they had expected. Recognizing this, insight would be gained by comparing the perceptions of both people. The impact of these perceptions on behavior also requires further attention. A longitudinal study, for instance, could explore how the perceived perceptions of individuals influence their initial decision to cohabit as it actually occurs (instead of simply asking respondents to recall the impact).

A final important area in need of future research involves the distinction between informal and formal cohabitators. While others have recognized methodological limitations with large surveys, particularly with the use of the term "unmarried partner" (Manning & Smock, 2005), my research suggests a new methodological area. Using a broad definition of cohabitation – "living together fulltime" – I allowed my participants to identify themselves as cohabitators. As family researchers, we need to decide whether this subjective understanding of cohabitation is desired or whether a more concrete definition is needed. Making this decision is vital given the impact that it can have on the presumed prevalence of cohabitation. If we include those who are informal cohabitators (living together fulltime without a shared lease/mortgage) the number of cohabitators will be larger than if we only include formal cohabitators who have shared leases/mortgages. More

research needs to be done to further explore the potential distinction between these two groups so that the best decision can be made.

Overall, my research is simply the start of developing a better understanding of cohabiting relationships and cohabitation more generally. I have emphasized the importance of qualitative research, particularly that which stems from symbolic interactionism, in order to get at the *voices* of actual cohabitators and their individual stories. While my research enhances the literature relating to the meaning of cohabitation, its connections to marriage, and the perceptions of others, this is simply the first step. In the literature review chapter I identified numerous unanswered questions stemming from previous research. While I have addressed some of these, other identified questions, as well as many not acknowledged, still remain. Hopefully, the ideas that I have presented will be expanded upon and an increased understanding of cohabiting relationships and their *place* in the dating/marriage world will be obtained.

APPENDIX A – RECRUITMENT FLYER

Are you part of a cohabiting relationship?

(Living fulltime with your romantic partner)

Are you interested in participating in a study on
cohabitation?

(Extra credit opportunities for many
Sociology courses)

**Interviews with you and your partner (approx. 45 minutes each)

If so –

Please send Megan an e-mail at:
meganf@iastate.edu

APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about how you first met your partner and started a relationship.
 Things to establish through this question:
 - How long were you dating before you moved in together?
 - Do you and your partner talk about cohabiting before moving in together?
 - Did you plan to cohabit, or was it something that just happened?

2. Tell me about your relationship with your cohabiting partner.
 Things to establish through this question:
 - How long have you been living together?
 - How did your relationship change when you moved in together? Good and bad changes
 - How has living together affected the romantic aspects of your relationship?
 - What was learned when you moved in together? Who learned more?
 - What things cause conflict in your relationship? How do you resolve them?
 - Tell me about the day-to-day experiences of your relationship.
 - How did you decide how to divide housework, money issues, bills, etc.?

3. What do you think about cohabitation in general?
 Things to establish through this question:
 - Is cohabitation a good thing?
 - Should people cohabit in general? Would you advise others to cohabit?
 - What are the pros to cohabiting?
 - What are the cons to cohabiting?
 - Did your opinion of cohabitation change after you started cohabiting?
 - What do you think your partner think about cohabitation?
 - What do your parents think about cohabitation?
 - Has their opinion changed at all after you started cohabiting?
 - Is there anyone that you don't or didn't want to know that you were cohabiting?

4. What do you think about marriage in general?
 Things to establish through this question:
 - What are the pros of marriage?
 - What are the cons of marriage?
 - What do you think your partner thinks about marriage?
 - What would be different if you and your cohabiting partner were married, instead of simply living together? What would be the same?
 - How important is marriage to you?
 - Would you breakup with your current partner if he/she told you that they did not want to ever get married?

5. Where do you see your relationship going in the future?

Things to establish through this question:

- Do you have plans to marry your current cohabiting partner?
- If so, when do you see this occurring?
 - How long is too long to cohabit?
- Did you and your partner talk about marriage before moving in together?
 - Have you talked about marriage since moving in together?
- What impact did cohabitation have on your marriage plans – was it an increase in your commitment and love to one another?

6. How do you refer to your partner?

Things to establish through this question:

- Do you see this as an appropriate term for your relationship?

Other questions...

Tell me about your decision to cohabit.

Is cohabitation what you had expected?

Do you think your parents would care if you just continued to live with your partner and never got married?

Why do you think cohabitation has become more popular in the past decade?

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