January 2011

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The ‘Ex’ Factor… Will They Be Friends? A Qualitative Analysis of Post-Dissolution Communication Among Former Premarital Cohabiting Couples

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ABSTRACT
This study explores the nature of the communication between former premarital cohabitating couples. Eight research participants (n=8) were interviewed to explore how and why they do or do not continue to communicate with their former partner since the relational termination. Four categories emerged from the qualitative analysis. First, couples “slid” into cohabitation for convenience-based purposes rather than deliberately decided. Second, they experienced a breakdown in or lack of communication before and/or during the disengagement. Third, the relational termination was a gradual process, and forth, the participants offered reasons for why they do or do not remain in communication with their ex-partner. An unexpected theme that emerged was the existence or possibility of a new partner negatively impacting friendship quality between the former partners.

The movie The Break-Up (2006) portrayed the difficulties a cohabiting couple faces when they break-up and must decide how to proceed, a scenario which according to Seltzer (2004) and Sassler (2007) has become more and more common in the past few decades. Seltzer asserted that, “Cohabitation before first marriage is now the behavioral norm” (p. 922). The National Survey of Family Growth (2006-2008) found that nearly half of all Americans (48.8% of men and 50.0% of women) had lived with a romantic partner at some point in their lives. Jayson (2010) reported that according to the US Census, the number of opposite-sex couples living together rose from 6.7 million in 2009 to 7.5 million in 2010, a 13% increase.

Existing studies on post-dissolution communication have explored several aspects of this phenomenon, but they had different purposes and looked at other factors than the present study. They did not differentiate between premarital cohabitating couples, non-cohabitating dating couples, and spouses. For this reason, along with the rising number of couples who cohabitate outside of marriage, this study focuses on whether and how a former premarital cohabitating couple continues to communicate with one another after relational termination. Using in-depth interviews with eight heterosexual research participants, the researcher used Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) constant comparative method to examine what factors influence whether or not former cohabitating couples remain in communication once the romantic relationship has ended. This study explores the connection, if any, between the nature of post-dissolitional communication and the reason for cohabitating, the reason for the relational termination, and/or the exit strategy employed.
Cohabitation

Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2008) proposed more and more couples choose to cohabitate before marriage or as an alternative to marriage for numerous reasons. They identified the most common reasons as: 1) a desire for more time together, 2) convenience-based purposes, 3) a test for the relationship, and 4) an opposition to the institution of marriage. Manning and Smock (2005) claimed that more couples tend to “slide” into cohabitation than “decide” to cohabitate, making it a non-deliberative, incremental process. These couples have reported that cohabitation “just happened” without either partner realizing the implications.

The rise in cohabitation may be closely tied to individuals marrying later in life than in the past (Newcomb, 1986; Sassler, 2007). Men and women now value individual development more than they used to. In the meantime, the need for close relationships persists; therefore, many individuals “settle” for cohabitation rather than marriage, whether temporarily or permanently. Past research suggests that cohabitation can serve as a balance between being single and being married. According to Newcomb, each partner perceives he or she has more autonomy than a married person but more connection to another being than a single individual.

Research has shown that premarital cohabitation leads to a higher divorce rate compared to couples who did not cohabitate prior to marriage (Newcomb, 1986; Phillips & Sweeney, 2005; Stanley et al., 2006). This may be attributed to relationship inertia, or the idea that some couples who would not have married end up marrying because they were cohabitating. It is difficult to terminate the relationship when a couple is cohabitating in comparison to those living apart because typically, constraints (e.g. financial dependence, few perceived alternatives, social pressures/obligations, etc.) will be greater, leading to a likelihood of a cohabitating couple maintaining rather than terminating the relationship simply because it is easier and more convenient. Thus, Stanley et al. (2006) and Surra and Hughes (1997) proposed that the relationship may progress toward marriage even if the couple is not ideally compatible.

Relational Termination & Post-Dissolutional Communication

Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1976) concluded that couples are more likely to end a relationship prior to marriage if they have lower levels of intimacy, unequal involvement, and fewer similarities (socially, physically, and intellectually). Cody (1982) added that dissatisfaction, inequity, incompatibility, and the desire to date others also play a large role in the fate of a relationship. According to Bouchard (2006), cohabitating couples are more likely than married couples to end a relationship even if it is still relatively satisfying. Married partners differ from premarital couples because they are more connected emotionally, structurally, socially, and legally, therefore, making it more difficult and life-altering to disengage (Cupach & Metts, 1986). However, while studies compare the satisfaction and termination of cohabitation to marriage, few studies delineate cohabitating couples from non-cohabitating premarital couples.
In a benchmark article, Baxter (1982) labeled four strategies an individual can take to end a relationship: withdrawal/avoidance, manipulatory, positive tone, and open confrontation. Cody (1982) then developed five new strategies, in relation to the previous ones: behavioral de-escalation, de-escalation, positive tone, negative identity management, and justification. Baxter concluded that the disengager will consider relationship closeness and the perceived cause of the relationship failure when selecting a strategy. Banks, Altendorf, Green, and Cody (1987) proposed that trust, dyadic adjustment, partner desirability, and social network overlap influence which strategy one employs.

Knapp (1984) and Duck (1986) suggested that the final stage of relationship development and deterioration is the ultimate termination of the relationship. However, researchers have recently argued that even though the romantic relationship may have dissolved, the relationship may be redefined and communication between the former partners may continue (Busboom, Collins, Giverts, & Levin, 2002; Foley & Fraser, 1998; Lannutti & Cameron, 2002). Lannutti and Cameron wrote, “The majority of the romantic relationships we experience will fail and some form of post-dissolutional relationship may emerge” (p. 166). When a couple disengages from the relationship, the partners face the decision of whether to continue their relationship on a different level or terminate communication with one another altogether.

Banks et al. (1987) put forth that a major factor influencing whether partners, both marital and premarital, desire to continue a friendship is partner desirability. Foley and Fraser (1998) also included convenience or necessity and/or the possibility of missing the friendship they had before or during the relationship. Busboom et al. (2002) employed social exchange theory to predict whether romantic partners will remain friends after a break-up. The frequency of resources is positively correlated to friendship quality, and satisfaction with resources considerably moderates the relationship between frequency of resources received and friendship quality. Barriers such as lack of support and involvement in a new relationship negatively affect friendship quality. In concurrence with other studies, conflict experienced while dating and the exit strategy selected surprisingly do not significantly influence friendship quality. While comparing the responses of homosexual participants to those of heterosexual participants, Lannutti and Cameron (2002) validated that, in both populations, personal variables are a powerful predictor of post-dissolutional relationships while structural variables and whether the ex-couple were friends before the romantic relationship began surprisingly are not.

The purpose of this study is to expand upon prior research and provide detailed insight into the process of post-dissolutional communication specifically for former premarital cohabitating couples. Through in-depth interviews, the researcher explored aspects of the break-up and the nature of the communication between former couples since they terminated the relationship to answer the following five research questions:

**RQ1:** What reasons do the relational partners offer for why they decided to cohabitate?
RQ2: Do the former cohabitating partners report that there was a specific event or turning point in the relationship or, instead, did it slowly dissolve, eventually leading to the break-up?

RQ3: Did the cause of the termination (reason for the break-up) affect how the former cohabitating partners communicate, if at all, after the break-up? If so, in what way?

RQ4: Did the disengagement strategy used affect how the former cohabitating partners communicate, if at all, after the break-up? If so, in what way?

RQ5: What is the nature of the former cohabitating couples’ relationships now that the romantic relationship has been terminated and they are no longer living together?

Methodology

The researcher used in-depth interviews (n=8) to gather detailed information regarding the cohabitation, relational termination, and post-dissolution communication from individuals who had been in premarital, heterosexual cohabitating relationships. Interviews were warranted to collect in-depth and open-ended responses.

Research Participants

The research participants for this study included eight heterosexual individuals who had cohabitated with their former romantic partner outside of marriage before terminating the relationship. The relationship disengagements took place between one month and three years from the time of the interview. Following Patterson and O’Hair’s (1992) relational depth guidelines, no restrictions were placed on the duration of the relationship or of the cohabitation so long as both partners perceived the relationship to be serious and exclusive. To recruit participants who met the criteria, the research used network, snowball, and purposive sampling.

The eight individuals who participated in this study, four females and four males, lived in various locations throughout the United States: California (two), Montana, Georgia, Illinois (two), South Dakota, and Minnesota. Six participants identified their race/ethnicity as being White/Caucasian, one as Korean/Caucasian, and one as Black. The average age of the participants is 26, ranging between 22 and 30. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to each research participant. Half of the participants were paired couples while the other half were individuals from separate relationships. Danny and Rebecca were one couple, and the second couple was Ryan and Emily; the former partners of Cassidy, Jonathon, Jordan, and Angela did not participate in the study. The average length of the relationships was 57 months (4.75 years), and the average duration of the cohabitation was 10 months. Seven of the eight participants were engaged at some point during their relationship. Half of the sample (four participants) remained friends with their former partner after the relational termination, while the other half (four participants) no longer communicate.

The researcher conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews with each of the eight participants separately. The researcher conducted seven of the interviews over the telephone due
to different geographic locations. The researcher interviewed only one participant face-to-face. Prior to the interviews, participants completed a brief survey questionnaire containing biographical questions and general items about the past relationship. The goal of qualitative, or naturalistic, interviews is to acquire in-depth information in an attempt to unearth the reasons behind what the interviewee is saying, especially when the information is intimate or private (Adler & Clark, 2003; Reinard, 2008). The researcher used a nondirective approach, which Stewart and Cash (2006) contended grants much of the control to the interviewee in terms of length of answers, interview climate, and so forth. The interviews in this study were semi-structured with a guide consisting primarily of open-ended questions regarding the romantic relationship before the termination, reason(s) for the termination, strategies chosen to disengage, reaction to disengagement, nature of communication after the dissolution, and so on. The shortest interview lasted only 15 minutes while the longest took one hour and two minutes.

The researcher employed the constant comparative method consisting of the following four stages: 1) comparing instances related to each category, 2) integrating categories and their properties, 3) setting the limits of the theory, and 4) creating the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105). The researcher noted specific words and general ideas that seemed to be common themes among all of the participants’ responses, such as having spent a great deal of time together or the term “communication.”

Findings

The researcher analyzed eight interviews (n=8) with Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) constant comparative method of qualitative analysis, identifying and comparing categories and the properties of each found in the data. The categories that emerged include: “sliding” versus “deciding,” communication breakdown, a gradual dissolution process, and the possibility of friendship. These categories will be discussed in the following sections.

“Sliding” Versus “Deciding”

Manning and Smock (2005) suggested that couples tend to “slide” into cohabitation in a nondeliberative, incremental process rather than “decide” to live together. Additional research conducted by Stanley et al. (2006) supported this idea. Rhoades et al. (2008) concluded that couples cohabitate for either internal reasons, such as desiring more time together, or external reasons, such as financial purposes. Comparable to internal and external reasons, Surra, Arizzi, and Asmussen (1988) identified two distinct commitment processes: relationship-driven and event-driven. A relational transition due to a relationship-driven (internal) reason will have more satisfying interactions and less risk of distress and relational termination than someone with an event-driven (external) reason (Stanley et al., 2006; Surra & Hughes, 1997).

The data collected from the interviews in this study are consistent with previous research presented above regarding the “sliding” effect in that cohabitation tended to “just happen” due to timing or other situational factors without an explicit decision or an internal reason. Most of the
participants began cohabitating as the result of some event, such as relocation or a roommate moving; in other words, they began cohabitating out of convenience. While some participants felt as though they were ready for the next step, their reasons for cohabitating tended to be largely convenient and external. This supports research by Rhoades et al. (2008) that listed convenience as the second most common explanation couples offer for cohabitating. Quotations from the interviews in this study are provided below to illustrate the reason(s) each participant offered for cohabitating and how, if at all, they discussed and made the decision.

Three of the research participants, Rebecca, Danny, and Jordan, began cohabitating due to relocation. Rebecca and Danny were in a relationship with one another, and she shared, “It was kind of what we both wanted, so it was kind of really assumed... There wasn’t a whole lot of talking about it. It was just the best idea.” Similarly, Angela’s cohabitation began out of convenience as well. She volunteered, “We decided to open a coffee shop, and it was very close to where he was living...so I moved in with him and his roommate when we opened our business.” This situation is unique because they opened a joint business; nevertheless, they did not actually deliberate about the decision.

Jonathon invited his former partner to move in with him because they discovered she was pregnant. Although he later learned that the baby was not his, they never actually talked about the decision to cohabitate.

Cassidy offered timing along with being ready to begin their lives together as the major reasons for cohabitating. She explained, “It was just kind of good timing...We were both ready to move to that next step...It was just kind of assumed...We didn’t actually sit down and talk about it necessarily.” Therefore, in agreement with Rhoades et al. (2008), the two most common reasons offered for cohabitating may have both been at play in this situation: a desire to spend more time with one another and convenience. Even so, they did not seriously discuss the decision.

The last couple is a partial exception to the idea of “sliding.” Ryan and Emily did discuss living together for a period of time prior, making it more than merely convenience-based. However, they began cohabitating when her roommate moved out, which shows that convenient timing played a role as well. Ryan said, “I guess it was more coincidental than anything, but it was something we had talked about prior to doing it,” and he later added, “We felt we were ready for that next step. We enjoyed being around each other a lot.” Emily shared, “We felt like it was time, like it felt right.” Hence, although they began cohabitating because the time was right, they discussed the decision because they both desired to spend more time together and wanted to move forward with their relationship.

The majority of these accounts strengthen the argument that many couples “slide” into cohabitation rather than seriously discuss it when they were ready, with the exception of one couple. This research supports the studies by Stanely et al. (2006) and Surra and Hughes (1997) that proposed “sliders” and those with event-driven commitment have a greater chance of experiencing distress and relational termination than those who take the time to think and talk about the idea of cohabitation.
Communication Breakdown

A breakdown in communication between the former partners before the break-up was also a common theme reported by the research participants. Although communication can never actually cease, the interview data revealed that the communication changed; the participants described a “lack of” and/or a “breakdown” in communication. In the time before and during the early stages of the break-up, all of the participants shared that there was a breakdown in communication. Examples are highlighted below.

Rebecca told the researcher, “He would leave at 7:00 p.m. and wouldn’t come home until 2:00 a.m. or 3:00 a.m. in the morning, and he wouldn’t communicate at all.” She further described the break-up: “I think he realized that he didn’t want to get married, and he didn’t know how to verbally tell me, so he went and had sex with another woman.” Danny, however, attributed the break-up to the fact that they had grown apart over time rather than to his infidelity, but he did agree that they did not communicate shortly before and during the break-up period.

In the same way, Jordan reported that his ex-girlfriend began staying out late, often with other men, without communicating the situation to him. He explained, “We always had problems with communication. We were both stubborn, and when we started talking about how we felt, it never went anywhere...We never really could talk about anything.” Jordan felt that poor communication was always their major downfall, and ultimately it led to the demise of their relationship involving a hurtful termination.

Jonathon blamed the break-up on the fact that he and his former partner both lied to each other, indicating a lack of honest communication. He remembers the break-up: “We both lied to each other a couple of times...There was a lot of arguing...the argument kind of carried on for awhile longer.”

Cassidy expressed how she felt there was unequal involvement in terms of communicating with her ex-fiancé about their relationship and their future. “In a relationship it should be open...and you should at least talk about it and weigh out the pros and cons together, and not say ‘No, I only want you to do this one thing.’”

Ryan and Emily both expressed that Ryan’s television habits hindered their communication. Emily said, “I could be having a conversation with him, and if the TV would go on, it was instantly...he would stop and was, like, completely not even listening anymore.” Ryan added, “Communication probably went downhill a little bit when we moved in just because we were to the point where we were close enough to talk to each other all the time, but we never did.” In terms of the cause of the break-up, Ryan revealed, “Mostly there was a communication issue. My interests weren’t the same as hers...so that kind of all worked into effect...” This goes along with the postulation by Hill et al. (1976) that having few similarities is a major reason why a couple may break up. Emily felt as though she and Ryan always had great communication except when it came to one issue: sex. She shared, “Even though he’s comfortable talking about
anything with me, like, I think [talking about sex] is uncomfortable for him.” This supports Hill et al.’s research which concluded lower levels of intimacy can lead to relational termination.

Angela described her communication with her ex-partner quite differently when they began living together. “Our commitment level went up drastically after we decided to have a business together and commit to live together...It was very dependent.” Angela felt that this connection and dependency was problematic for their relationship. Stanley et al. (2006) and Surra and Hughes (1997) contended that cohabitating couples may feel pressured or obligated to stay together even when the relationship is not great if they have resources invested in the relationship or financial obligations. Angela felt as though their relationship and their cohabitation had to work in order for the business to survive and to be able to afford her condominium. Further, a lack of honest communication when he cheated on Angela at the beginning of the relationship also played a role in the termination.

In summary, a breakdown in communication or a lack of honest communication throughout the relationship and especially before the termination played a role in the fate of the relationship and the ultimate disengagement. Interestingly, four out of the eight research participants claimed that one partner cheating on the other was a major factor in the relationship, if not the main determinant for the termination. Without further research, it is impossible to determine whether the breakdown in communication or the infidelity came first. On one hand, poor communication could have led to the infidelity, while on the other the infidelity may have resulted in a decrease in communication. However, sexual infidelity, dishonesty, or lack of trust has not been identified by past research as being a primary cause for relational termination. This discrepancy with past research should be investigated in future research.

A Gradual Dissolution Process

Baxter (1984) and Duck (1982) referred to relationship disengagement as a process that consists of different phases. Baxter coined the first phase the Intra-psychic, when one relational partner realizes his or her dissatisfaction and the desire to end the relationship. Many of the participants’ stories in this study included a relatively gradual break-up where one of the parties spent a great deal of time in the Intra-psychic phase. Baxter’s second stage is the Dyadic phase, which is when one individual announces to the other his or her wish to break up. A few of the participants also reported spending a moderately long period of time in this phase. The following accounts describe the relatively long dissolution process for each of the participants.

Emily shared that their sex life had been suffering for quite some time – years in fact – which in her opinion is one of the factors that lead to the break-up, along with having different interests. “I started being not that happy...So over the course of a month or so, and that might seem soon, but it had been a problem in our relationship pretty much the whole time.” Their dissimilar interests and intimacy issues drug along and eventually made Emily unhappy enough that she talked to Ryan about it, and they broke up. Ryan mentioned their time in the Dyadic
phase: “I’d say we talked about it for at least a couple weeks before we decided that it was a good idea to probably just split apart and live our own lives.”

Hill et al. (1976) listed unequal involvement as a reason for relational termination, which was the case with Cassidy’s and her ex-fiancé. She described the break-up as “a very long process... I kept trying to talk to him about it, and he wouldn’t want to hear it... I told him on several occasions, ‘You know I’m not happy.’” Cassidy began expressing her dissatisfaction with him in May; finally, she returned the engagement ring to him at the end of November.

In Angela’s relationship, “There were a couple reasons that [the break-up] was really building... We tried to work through things... It drug out for like a year until we had the conversation about breaking up.” After a year of trying to fix the problems of his dependency on her, she finally ended the relationship. The concept of relationship inertia introduced by Stanley et al. (2006) might shed light onto why Angela and her former partner held onto the relationship for so long when she clearly was not satisfied.

The remaining four relationships ended slightly differently than the previous because it seems that while they were a process, they also involved a turning point. Danny explained how his break-up with Rebecca occurred: “It was definitely a process... I guess it was kind of a downward spiral.” There was dissatisfaction with the relationship overall which carried on for some time. Rebecca felt as though the lack of communication and his dissatisfaction with it went on for a period of time before they finally broke up due to his infidelity. Danny had been employing Cody’s (1982) behavioral de-escalation engagement strategy, meaning he began to withdraw from the relationship and avoid his partner. However, Danny cheating on her was the turning point that actually ended the relationship. Therefore, in the end, it seems the break-up was imminent with a process leading up to it, but there was a specific realization (Rebecca finding out that Danny had been unfaithful) that actually caused the termination.

Jordan shared, “Things started getting weird, but we never really talked about it.” He reported that she began going out with other guys more frequently and decreased her communication with him. In a similar way as Danny and Rebecca, Jordan ended the relationship when he finally caught her cheating on him. However, there were issues leading up to it that drug out for quite some time. His ex-girlfriend began using Cody’s (1982) passive strategy of behavioral de-esclataion where she withdrew from the relationship but then turned to negative identity management, meaning she became inconsiderate and had no regard to Jordan’s feelings. Again, while it was an event that actually ended the relationship, there were problems beforehand that eventually brought about that turning point.

Jonathon is the exception to this pattern, as his break-up came about by a definite turning point: he found out the child was not his. They moved in together when they thought they were going to have a baby together, and they broke up once he discovered it was not his baby. While the arguing continued after the break-up, he had immediately decided to end the relationship. Although he admitted they both lied to one another throughout the relationship, this was the big lie that, in his mind, prompted the relational termination.
To recap, a few of the relationships ended due to a specific occurrence, such as a partner cheating or lying about a major issue. However, even in those relationships the participants reported problems prior to the incident that caused the break-up, consistent with previous research suggesting that terminating a relationship is a process. Barta and Kiene (2005) wrote that an individual’s physical infidelity may signal his or her first step in escaping an unsatisfying relationship. This means that had the individuals not cheated, the relationships likely would have ended eventually due to some other reason because at least one of the partners was not completely satisfied. Additional research is warranted to uncover the reasons the partners offered for cheating and to explore the connection between the period of time leading to the break-up and the final turning point.

What is different about relational disengagement of cohabitating couples and non-cohabitating dating couples is that those who cohabitate have the added factor of deciding how to proceed with living arrangements after termination, making the relationship similar to a marriage in that respect. In some of the cases, they remained living together for a period of time (no longer than a month) after the relationship ended; in others, they moved apart immediately. Additional research could explore how continuing cohabitation after relational termination affects, if at all, post-dissolutional communication.

**Possibility of Friendship**

In this section, the researcher discusses whether or not the former partners remained in communication after the relational termination and the justification for their decision. Banks et al. (1987) offered that partner desirability is one factor that influences post-dissolutional communication. Foley and Fraser (1998) added convenience or necessity and/or the possibility of missing the friendship they had before or during the relationship as influencers. The latter was the reason offered by the four participants who continued communicating regularly with their ex-partner at the time of the interviews: they still cared for the other person and did not want to give up the friendship they had developed, even if the romance was over. It is difficult to categorize and generalize this section because each former couple and the circumstances surrounding their post-dissolutional communication are unique with different factors at play. Additionally, the researcher allowed the interviewees to interpret what constitutes a “friendship” in order to determine whether they consider their former partner a “friend” according to their own standards rather than to a definition provided to them. Each participant’s post-dissolutional communication with their former partner is examined below.

Emily and Ryan are able to remain friends and still talk to and see one another frequently. Emily explained that it was slightly awkward immediately after the break-up because they were cohabitating. “[Living together] made it harder. He ended up just moving out three weeks later. The dragging it out after the decision to break up was the hard part.” During the break-up, they agreed to remain friends. Emily said, “We definitely did talk about it, and we made sure that both of us understood that we had both been an important part in each others’ lives.” They now hang
out with each other typically once a week at friends’ gatherings, and occasionally they speak on the telephone, send funny text messages back and forth, or comment on one another’s Facebook pages. Supporting Foley and Fraser’s previous findings (1998), the overarching reason they continue to communicate is that they spent so much time together, still care for one another, and do not want to lose the friendship they had during the relationship.

However, Busboom et al. (2002) proposed that a new relationship is a barrier to the friendship between two former partners. In concurrence, Emily and Ryan both predict that their relationship will change when one of them finds a new romantic partner. Ryan said, “Neither one of us are blind in the fact that if either of us gets into a relationship again that [our friendship] may have to stop eventually.” Emily added, “I would assume that when his weekends are filled with another girl, she might not appreciate me in his life.” She continued, “And I can understand and respect that, so I would give him the distance and whatever he needs...”

At the time of the interviews, Danny and Rebecca had similar thoughts on continuing communication, but it did not begin that way. Rebecca stated, “He always said ‘I still want to be friends,’ but at that point I was like ‘No, forget that. That’s not gonna work.’” Because of Danny’s actions and the pain it caused her, she did not have any desire to be friends with him. Rebecca’s initial attitude contradicts past research by Busboom, et al. (2002), positing that conflict experienced while dating and the exit strategy used do not influence friendship quality. It was not until nine months after their break-up that Rebecca reflected on her past relationship and decided she would be open to supporting him in his life and be there as a friend. She explained, “About a year to two years afterward it completely shifted, and he actually opens up to me more now than when we were together for the six years.” They send sporadic text messages about family and mutual friends or just to touch base and see how the other is doing. Danny described their present communication as always very general. They check in just to say “Hi” or on a birthday or significant event. Danny and Rebecca now consider themselves friends because they had been together for so long and still want to support one another.

In agreement with Emily’s and Ryan’s predictions and past research by Busboom et al., (2002), Rebecca believes that Danny’s new relationship drives a wedge between their communication. She expressed, “[His relationship] is something that I respect...but it does affect our friendship.” Further, Danny willingly admitted, “It is never easy if you have a new partner...No partner likes their current partner talking a lot with their ex.”

The existence of a new partner may be primarily what stopped the communication between Angela and her ex-fiancé. For the two years following the termination, they continued to communicate frequently because they “were both people in each other’s lives that had made a very big impact.” Unexpectedly, one day he asked her to not talk to him anymore. Angela shared, “He said he wasn’t able to move on in his relationship because he felt like he was still stuck relating to me, being friends with me, but just not really completely over me.” Angela would be interested in maintaining a friendship with him, but she does not have much choice in the matter and will respect his wishes by not contacting him. In agreement with Foley and Fraser
(1998), she did not want to lose his friendship; however in the end, as Busboom et al. (2002) proposed, the inclusion of his new relationship did create a barrier.

Jordan had a similar situation as Angela, only he was in the reverse role. He and his ex-girlfriend spoke sporadically after the break-up. Eventually they began hanging out again – having lunch, going bowling, meeting for drinks, and so forth. However, in the end Jordan decided remaining friends was not going to work because there was still physical attraction and she was with a new partner. He said, “I think when someone is with a new partner it is just that added factor that can make it harder.” Further, he realized that he did not like the person she had become, so he had no desire to continue communication with the person who hurt him so badly and showed no remorse for it. “When you spend [five years] with somebody and they do that to you, you just have to move on and you can’t be friends.”

At the time of the interview, Cassidy was also not speaking to her ex-fiancé. After she moved out, she thought it would be best to break it off cleanly and not communicate for awhile since it was still “too raw.” “I think just to move on and to have that closure...I knew that it wasn’t going to work for us to keep talking to each other.” This supports Busboom et al. (2002) that stated a former couple is less likely to remain friends when there is a lack of support in the relationship. However, Cassidy is open to future communication with him. She would be willing to see and talk to him at a mutual friend’s gathering after time passes, which also confirms Busboom et al.’s (2002) supposition that former partners would remain friends out of convenience or necessity. She added, “...but I need to make sure that both of us are completely healed before we start doing that.”

Jonathon and his ex-fiancé did discuss whether they could be friends, and they came to the conclusion that it would be too difficult. Until a month before the interview, they had been communicating through text messages, usually just to see how the other was doing. During that time, he continued to communicate with her because he was “still caring about her, and wanting to know that she is ok, and wondering what is new in her life.” He imagines that if either of them were to begin dating someone new, the other would not be very happy with it, also supporting prior research (Busboom et al., 2002).

In conclusion, the analysis of the data involving former cohabitating couples largely supports past research on post-dissolutional communication between former non-cohabitating dating couples and marital partners. According to Foley and Fraser (1998), a desire to hold onto the friendship developed before and/or during the romantic relationship is one of the main reasons former partners wish to remain friends. Likewise, four of the participants continue to communicate because they were so close to their partner during the romantic relationship that they do not want to lose contact completely. Others, however, are unable to maintain a friendship with their former partner for that same reason. They feel that there are too many emotions and memories that they cannot remain friends if they want to be able to move on and get over the relationship. This was a new concept not discussed in past studies, which justifies future investigation. Similarly, Busboom et al. (2002) offered that a new romantic relationship negatively affects friendship quality for former dating and married couples, an idea verified by
the data for cohabitating couples in this study. The participants shared that a new romantic relationship would hinder (or already had hindered) their communication with their ex-partner.

Discussion

This study yielded themes about the nature of former premarital cohabitating couples’ post-dissolutional communication. Using a semi-structured in-depth interview guide, the researcher interviewed participants (n=8) and analyzed the data using Glaser & Strauss’s (1967) constant comparative method. The analysis revealed four significant categories: “sliding” versus “deciding,” communication breakdown, a gradual dissolution process, and the possibility of friendship. These categories help to answer five research questions, which will be addressed in the following discussion.

RQ 1: The notion of participants “sliding” into cohabitation answers RQ1, the reason why couples began cohabitating. Six participants reported that they slid into cohabitation rather than seriously deciding to live together. The participants in this study began cohabitating due to relocating, starting a business together, a roommate moving, and discovering a pregnancy. Rhoades et al. (2008) considered these external reasons. Only one couple reported talking about cohabitating due to a reason internal to the relationship; they wanted to be around each other more frequently and felt as though they were ready. The results of this study support the postulation that “sliders” and couples who make decisions based on events rather than internal purposes are at greater risk for experiencing distress and relational deterioration (Stanley et al., 2006; Surra & Hughes, 1997).

RQ2: Seven participants believed their relational dissolution was a process, even when a single event or turning point finally caused the termination. The dissolution process went on for a few weeks in some cases to as long as one year. Even in the relationships that ended due to one single event (e.g. a partner discovery the other’s infidelity), the termination seemed to be impending as communication suffered and the couple became more distant. All eight participants shared that a breakdown in communication was a barrier to the relationship and, in most cases, was an influential factor in the relational dissolution. Couples experienced poor communication regarding topics such as a partner’s whereabouts, dissatisfaction with the relationship, and their future together.

Although past research has not reported that lack of trust, dishonesty, or infidelity are reasons why couples disengage, four participants offered a partner’s unfaithfulness and subsequent dishonesty as a major reason for terminating the relationship. Barta and Kiene (2005) posited that partners who cheat may do so as a way to show their unhappiness with the relationship rather than openly talking about it. The partners who cheated were presumably unsatisfied with some facet of their relationship, so the termination was likely inevitable even had both partners remained faithful.

RQ3 & RQ4: While some of the participants did not offer the reason for termination and the exit strategy chosen as influencers of the way they communicate after ending the
relationship, others did. One couple has thus far been able to stay friends because the termination was mutual and there were no hard feelings, indicating that the reason for and the strategy used in the break-up may affect communication afterward. Two participants disclosed that part of the reason they chose to end communication was because their former partners cheated on them. In these situations, the reason for termination (infidelity and dishonesty about it) influenced the decision to discontinue communication after relational disengagement. Therefore, while some individuals may or may not remain friends due to circumstances surrounding the reason for the termination and the strategy used to end the relationship, these factors do not influence the communication between other individuals. These findings highlight how the nature of the break-up can, but may not always, affect future interactions and the potential for a friendship.

RQ5: Four of the participants (from the two couples who participated) continue to communicate at some level with one another. One couple speaks quite frequently through text messages and Facebook, and they see one another typically once a week. The other couple communicates primarily through text messages or sometimes a phone call to see how the other is doing or to share news about family and mutual friends. Both couples remain friends because they spent so much time together and do not want to lose their friendship, which is in congruence with past research by Foley and Fraser (1998).

The remaining participants who were not communicating with their former partners at the time of the interviews are unable to remain friends because there is still physical attraction, they or their partner were hurt by the break-up, or one of them needs time to heal and move on with a new relationship. This may explain why only one partner in these relationships was willing and/or able to participate in the study, while the couples who continued communication are the two relationships in which both parties participated.

Therefore, post-dissolutional communication is very individualistic based on each couple and their unique circumstances. The sole reason former cohabitating partners offered as to why they do remain or would like to remain friends is simply because they had a significant impact on one another’s lives and wish to remain in contact to check in on each other once in awhile. On the other hand, the primary reason former relational partners may not want to continue communication is because they feel that they must completely let go of their past relationship in order to move forward with life and be able to develop a new romantic relationship. The existence or the possibility of a new partner was an interesting finding that emerged from the interview. Busboom et al. (2002) concluded that a new relationship may be a barrier to a former couple’s friendship. Even the participants who had not yet experienced this volunteered that their relationship with their ex-partner will change significantly when someone else enters the picture. Five of the participants said that they will respect any space the former partner may need in order to have a healthy relationship with his or her new significant other.

This study is important because it sheds light on the experiences of a growing population – dating couples who cohabitate prior to marriage (Bouchard, 2006; Sassler, 2007). The number of opposite-sex couples living together increased 13% from 6.7 million in 2009 to 7.5 million in 2010 (Jayson, 2010). Approximately one half of all Americans have cohabitated with their
romantic partner outside of marriage at least once (The National Survey of Family Growth, 2006-2008). In addition, romantic interpersonal relationships are a significant part of people’s lives and a relational termination can be one of the most stressful times in one’s life (Orbuch, 1992; VanderDrift, Agnew, & Wilson, 2009). What is more, according to past research couples who cohabitate prior to marriage are at greater risk for divorce than those who wait until marriage to cohabitate (Newcomb, 1986; Sweeney & Phillips, 2004; Stanley et al., 2006). Relationship inertia, explained by Stanley et al. (2006), offers a reason for this increased risk. It posits that couples may end up marrying even if they were not meant for one another simply because they were already cohabitating and had greater constraints, making it easier to stay in the relationship than to terminate it.

The results of this study are insightful to research in the area of interpersonal communication, as the researcher developed four emerging categories to explain the experiences of former cohabitating couples. Participants disclosed information on a personal topic, revealing that they “slid” into cohabitation, they experienced a breakdown or lack of communication, the termination was a gradual process, and finally, they explained the reasons for the nature of their post-dissolutional communication.

### Limitations of the Study

This section identifies limitations of the present study. One limitation of the interview method is that it relies heavily on the openness and cooperation of the interviewee. Although most of the participants seemed to have disclosed their feelings and past behaviors in great detail, there were a few who may have held back certain information. Keyton (2011) discussed the notion of social desirability bias, which refers to an individual’s desire to be socially accepted and maintain positive face. The potential for social desirability bias may have been exacerbated in this study because the researcher used network sampling, meaning the interviewer shared a mutual friend or acquaintance with each of the participants. However, network sampling was necessary in order to recruit participants.

The researcher strived to find couples where both former partners agreed to participate in order to provide a complete picture of their past relationship, as recommended by Masheter (1997). While half of the participants made up the full couple, the other half were individuals from separate relationships, representing only one half of that relationship. Therefore, the researcher only heard these individuals’ account, which may not have been an entirely accurate representation. Without hearing the other partner’s version of the story, the researcher is unable to determine which information is complete and which information is an inaccurate depiction or missing details of how everything happened.

What is more, because the setting of an interview is so vital and it is essential for the interviewer to build rapport with each interviewee immediately, speaking to the participants over the phone rather than face-to-face may have made a difference in the interviews. Although the researcher does not perceive it was a problem, as the three most detailed interviews were over
the phone, the participants were less able to detect her nonverbal signals that indicated she was attentive and genuinely interested.

Additionally, studies using grounded theory tend to be starting points and call for further testing with larger and wider samples. Researchers have pointed out that their studies were preliminary first steps in a long process of refining and further developing the models created (Thompson, 2008; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). The sample size for this study was rather small (n=8), so a follow-up study using a larger, more diverse sample is warranted. This study included a homogenous sample which was comprised of an entirely heterosexual and largely White/Caucasian population. The researcher was, however, able to recruit participants from various regions of the country. Nevertheless, a fairly homogenous sample may have been appropriate for such a small sample size. Had each of the individuals been significantly different from one another in some way, it would have been difficult to summarize findings and draw conclusions. Regardless, since the researcher did not use a random sampling technique, she is unable to generalize her findings to the greater population.

Suggestions for Future Research

There are several aspects of this study that would benefit from further investigation. First, future research should include a larger sample size and diverse populations to determine if this experience occurs differently in various ethnicities, ages, and so forth. As previously mentioned, it would be advantageous to interview both partners of a former couple rather than only one party to be able hear both perspectives and complement each interview to fill in the other’s gaps.

Future research could directly compare post-dissolutional communication between that of former premarital cohabitating partners and non-cohabitating dating partners and/or divorcees. Including participants of these two other populations would enable the researcher to compare and contrast the experiences of the different groups and determine what factors account for the differences and what remains the same among all three.

Yet another suggestion is to examine if people’s individual characteristics and personality traits affect how they disengage from a relationship and whether they continue to communicate with their former partner. For example, future research could examine whether factors such as an individual’s attachment level and predisposition to forgive influence their post-dissolutional communication.

Another area for future research is to compare the commitment status of participants to determine whether differences exist between former dating cohabitating partners and former engaged cohabitating partners. Since all of the participants in this study were engaged with the exception of one (who had talked with his partner about marriage), the researcher was unable to examine if there are any significant differences. Similarly, the duration of the relationship and of cohabitation could be more closely examined to see if any differences exist between relationships and cohabitations that lasted for a short or long period of time. In addition, future researchers can explore whether owning or simply renting a residence together affects on how
the couple proceeds after relational termination, as none of the participants in this study owned a residence together.

References


