Cohabitation and Attachment Theory: Analysis of College Students

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Abstract
Cohabitation is one aspect of the overall changes in family patterns occurring in the United States. This ever increasing trend implies an arrangement where a couple lives together in an intimate relationship without legal sanction. Most research on the subject has been focused on the effects of cohabiting relationships, upon marriage, for example (Kamp Dush et al. 2003, Smock 2000, Stanley et al. 2004). This study is concerned with why people choose to cohabit in the first place. Through a secondary data analysis of four studies on college students, data from 1,656 participants was analyzed to determine the relationship between representations of attachment and patterns of cohabitation. A total of 115 (7.4%) reported some type of cohabiting arrangement. Research on adult attachment assumes that the same motivational system which shapes the close emotional bond between parents and children is responsible for the type of bond that develops between adults in intimate relationships. These bonds are evaluated on a continuum based on the degree of secure, anxious, or avoidant behavior represented. While the term secure signifies one who is comfortable being close to others, anxious and avoidant suggest difficulty with intimate relationships. There have been studies on how representations of attachment affect college students, particularly as it relates to adjustment (Mattanah, Lopez, & Govern, 2011). However, to my knowledge there are no publications of research specifically analyzing the relationship between attachment and cohabitation. I hypothesized that those who demonstrate anxious attachment behavior would be more likely to cohabit, whereas those who demonstrate avoidant attachment behavior would be less likely. Surprisingly, I found few significant differences in representations of attachment and the choice to cohabit during college, suggesting that as cohabitation continues to become more common in our society, there are few psychological differences in those who make this lifestyle choice.
Introduction

Over half of today’s young adults will live with someone in a romantic relationship before marriage (Stanley, Whitten, & Markman, 2004). This arrangement, referred to as cohabitation, has become increasingly popular over recent decades. There were 5.1 million cohabiting couples in 2004, representing a 170 percent increase from 1980 (Dolgin 2011). This trend has continued, with over 7.5 million cohabitating couples in 2011 (Jayson, January 27, 2011). Knowledge of cohabitation was sparse until the 1980s. However with a dramatic increase in its occurrence, research has greatly expanded.

The meaning of marriage is dynamic and undergoing radial change in recent American history, likewise the meaning of cohabitation is difficult to address. The same rationale used to explain changes in overall family patterns is used to account for the trend in cohabitation. Smock (2000) indicates reasons which include declining fertility levels, increasing age of marriage, rising marital disruption rates, growing proportion of children being born outside of marriage, shifting values and attitudes about gender roles, and feedback loops, implying a pattern in which changes in one aspect of the family lead to changes in another aspect. Those who choose to cohabit tend to be of slightly lower socioeconomic status, more liberal, less religious and are more supportive of egalitarian gender roles and nontraditional family roles (Smock 2000).

Of couples who currently cohabit, 20 percent are under 25 years old (Dolgin 2011). College students who cohabit generally hold a positive attitude about the situation, reporting personal growth, deeper understand of one’s partner, deeper love, disclosing more, and better sex lives (Dolgin 2011). Kamp Dush & Amato (2005) also found that college students who cohabit have higher levels of general well-being and happiness.

One typical belief is that cohabiting prior to marriage leads to a marriage of higher quality and greater stability, although empirical research questions the validity of that belief. The idea is that cohabitation weeds out incompatible couples and prepares people for a better marriage; yet evidence disproves this theory (Dolgin 2011). Rhoades, Stanley & Markman (2009) studied the number one reason given for moving in together and found three distinct motives including more time together or greater intimacy, convenience, and a desire to test one’s relationship. Those who wanted to test their relationship through cohabitation were at the greatest risk due to an association with lower relationship confidence and adjustment, among other reasons. Findings also suggest that mental health and patterns of insecure attachment are associated with testing the relationship as motivation for cohabitation. These individuals had greater difficulty depending on others, more anxiety about abandonment, and higher levels of depressive and generalized anxiety symptoms.

In the current study, I will be examining potential interactions between college students’ decision to cohabit and representations of attachment. Attachment theory has been used in research as a framework for understanding human competence and adaptation during life transitions. The theory was originally developed by John Bowlby (1982; 1988), who defined attachment as the human propensity to seek proximity to caregivers during moments of discomfort or stress. Bowlby proposed that an internal working model of self and other (IWM) was formed by the child within the first year of life through cognitive representations of parental responsiveness. The IWM would then function as a framework for patterns of behavior by shaping experiences, appraisals, and outcomes later on in life (Mattanah, Lopez, & Govern 2011). Subsequent research has examined adult representations of attachment to parents, peers, and romantic partners (see Kenny, 1990; Arnsden & Greenburg, 1987; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). For example, Hazan and Shaver (1987) were two of the first researchers to explore Bowlby’s ideas in the context of romantic relationships and relied on a continuous measure between the anxious style of attachment and the avoidant style of attachment. Specifically, Fraley, Waller,
and Brennan (2000) suggest anxiety would reflect fear of rejection and abandonment while avoidance would reflect discomfort being close to and depending upon others.

The greater part of existing research involving cohabitation has been focused on the positive and negative effects of the arrangement, how children are involved and where the institution stands in the family system (Dolgin 2011, Smock 2000). However, this study sought to combine theories of attachment and research on cohabitation to discover whether or not a relationship exists between the two and if so, to what extent. I predicted differences in representations of attachment between those who choose to cohabit and those who do not. Specifically, I believed that cohabitation would be least likely among those exhibiting higher levels of avoidance and most common among those exhibiting higher level levels of anxiety.

Methods

The current project involves a secondary data analysis drawn from four studies of college students throughout the United States between the years 2000 and 2010. Each study asked students to complete a large battery of questionnaires which included a question about current living arrangement and at least one questionnaire assessing their representations of attachment (see Table 1). Demographic characteristics of each sample varied considerably.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Sample Characteristics of All Four Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>Females*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Sample</td>
<td>1531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample 1</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample 2</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
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<td>Sample 3</td>
<td>416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample 4</td>
<td>623</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matched Sample</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*200 (12.5%) subjects in the total sample did not respond to the gender question.

Subjects

Total Sample: A total of 1531 non-married students participated across all four studies (See Table 1). While the largest percentage of students reported living with either their parents (47.6%) or non-romantic roommates (31.4%), 115 (7.5%) did report living in some form of cohabiting arrangement (see Graph 1).

Matched Sample: To further explore this issue, a subset of 230 participants was created by matching each cohabiting student with a non-cohabiting student. These individuals were matched based on the criteria of sample (1-4), gender, and age. Since half of this matched sample involved cohabiters, the percentage of students who reported living with either their parents (22.2%) or non-romantic roommates (20.9%) decreased (see Graph 2).
*Based on response to place lived the longest during current school year
Measures

Demographic: Participants from all samples completed a series of demographic questions assessing gender, age, marital status, and current living arrangement (See Graph 1).

Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised: The ECR-R (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) is a measure of attachment in close relationships. The ECR-R is a 36-item self-report questionnaire where participants are assessed on their level of emotional intimacy in relationships using a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 7 = “Strong Agree.” Two continuous scores ranging from 18 to 126 were calculated, one for attachment avoidance and one for attachment anxiety. Higher scores on each indicate greater avoidance or anxiety representations of attachment, and are therefore less psychologically desirable. In the total sample, 215 students provided ECR-R responses.

Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment: The IPPA (Armsden & Greenburg, 1987) has three 25-item sections, one for each parent and a third for peers. The mother and father questions are substantially identical. Parent items generally have a corresponding peer item where subjects are asked to think about their closest friendships when responding. The IPPA produces three overall scores representing attachment to Mother, Father, and Peers where higher scores indicate a more psychologically desirable representation of attachment. In the total sample, 1,316 students provided IPPA responses.

Parental Attachment Questionnaire: The PAQ (Kenny, 1987; 1990) is an attachment measure designed for use with adolescents and young adults. The PAQ contains three scales relating to the subject’s overall parental attachment relationship—Affective Quality of Attachment, Parental Fostering of Autonomy, and Parental Role in Providing Emotional Support—where higher scores indicate a more psychologically desirable representation of attachment. In the total sample, 623 students provided PAQ responses.

Results

A series of ANOVAs were conducted for each representation of attachment variable comparing students who cohabitated to the matched student who did not cohabit. While none of the differences between these two groups were significant, it appears that non-cohabiteers were typically more likely to report higher attachment scores (See Graph 3). A similar series of ANOVAs were conducted for each sample (1-4), but no differences were found at the .01 level of significance. Additional analyses were also conducted to examine gender differences, but yet again, none were found at the .01 level of significance.

Discussion

Contrary to study hypotheses, the results demonstrate that there are no significant statistical relationships involving representations of attachment and the choice to cohabit. When the total sample was broken down and statistics were run on each individual sample, a few significant differences did arise at the .05 level. However, these significant statistics were minor and inconsistent and therefore assumed to exist by chance.

The appearance of slightly higher attachment scores among non-cohabiteers may suggest a few possible conclusions. Higher scores on the ECR-R indicate greater anxiety and avoidance. Therefore those who choose to cohabit may demonstrate a more desirable style of attachment. Since I predicted that those who choose to cohabit would have greater attachment anxiety, the opposite of my hypothesis may in fact be true. My premise that those individuals who demonstrate avoidant attachment styles would be less likely to cohabit did appear true based on the results of the ECR-R (see Graph 3). But again, the results were not significant.
Since cohabitation involves a romantic relationship, my focus was on attachment to a romantic partner. I did not form a hypothesis regarding cohabiting in relation to current representations of attachment to parents or peers, which the IPPA and PAQ assess. But because a key element of attachment theory does involve how representations of attachment affect experiences and behaviors later in life, it was quite relevant in this study. Future research ought to explore the particular relationship between choice to cohabit and individuals’ patterns of attachment to parents and peers.

Further research may also want to use a sample of young adults who are not college students. The fact that these individuals attend college in the first place creates a strong underlying similarity. Young adults who are not enrolled in a college or university are likely to provide greater diversity and better represent the overall population of young adults in the United States. It would be interesting to compare the same age cohort of individuals who are enrolled in college and those who aren’t, seeing that research demonstrates cohabitation is an overall positive experience for college students (Dolgin 2011, Kamp Dush & Amato 2005), while many negative characteristics have been associated with the greater population of cohabiters.

The fact that no significant differences in styles of attachment appeared between those who choose to cohabit and those who do not suggests that although Bowlby’s IWM may be shaping experiences and outcomes in life, but does not seem to affect these college students enough to influence the momentous decision to live with a romantic partner.

Graph 3: Attachment Scores for Cohabiters & Matched Non-Cohabiters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>IPPA Mother Attachment</th>
<th>IPPA Father Attachment</th>
<th>IPPA Peer Attachment</th>
<th>PAQ Affective Quality</th>
<th>PAQ Independence</th>
<th>PAQ Support</th>
<th>ECR-R Anxiety</th>
<th>ECR-R Avoidance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiters</td>
<td>96.38</td>
<td>85.41</td>
<td>99.29</td>
<td>101.20</td>
<td>50.69</td>
<td>44.34</td>
<td>51.51</td>
<td>42.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Cohabiters</td>
<td>100.90</td>
<td>84.97</td>
<td>100.48</td>
<td>106.46</td>
<td>52.43</td>
<td>44.17</td>
<td>55.95</td>
<td>47.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Kenny, 1990 Parental Attachment Questionaire.


