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Waiting to Be Asked: Gender, Power, and Relationship Progression Among Cohabiting Couples

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Abstract

The majority of young married Americans lived with their spouses before the wedding, and many cohabited with partners they did not wed. Yet little is known about how cohabitating relationships progress or the role gender norms play in this process. This article explores how cohabiting partners negotiate relationship progression, focusing on several stages where couples enact gender. Data are from in-depth interviews with 30 working-class couples (n = 60). The women in this sample often challenged conventional gender norms by suggesting that couples move in together or raising the issue of marriage. Men played dominant roles in initiating whether couples became romantically involved and progressed to a more formal status. Although women and men contest how gender is performed, cohabiting men remain privileged in the arena of relationship progression. The findings suggest that adherence to conventional gender practices even among those residing in informal unions perpetuates women's secondary position in intimate relationships.

Keywords

cohabitation; relationship progression; gender; power; couples

Cohabitation has become a normative part of the courtship process among American adults. Recent estimates indicate that more than two thirds of American women lived with a partner by their mid-20s, and the majority of individuals who married lived with their spouses before the wedding day (Chandra, Martinez, Mosher, Abma, & Jones, 2005; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). Social scientists have long suggested that men and women are looking for alternatives to the traditional family (Bernard, 1981; Goldscheider & Waite, 1991; Stacey, 1990). Cohabitation is often portrayed as such an arrangement, because it provides the benefits of intimacy and shared economies of scale with fewer expectations for specialization in traditional gender roles (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995). Although numerous studies have explored the factors facilitating or impeding marriage among cohabitors (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Sassler & McNally, 2003; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005), these studies have not

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addressed how gender norms shape power relations within couples and the impact that power relations have on relationship progression.

Building on prior research on romantic relationships and on feminist critiques of how marital power has been studied, we examine how couples discuss their decisions to become a couple, move in together, and raise and negotiate plans for the future. Because the literature on marital power has suggested that gender display is an essential factor undergirding how men and women interact (Potuchek, 1997; Tichenor, 2005; Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiege, & Hall, 1996), this study is based on the interactionist approach known as "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Our qualitative analysis explores how romantic partners negotiate the process of relationship progression, focusing on several relationship stages where cohabiting couples do (and undo) gender (Deutsch, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Our findings reveal how interpersonal interactions reflect the social processes that underlie adherence to, as well as resistance against, conventional gender relations and how challenges to the power dynamics and inequities between men and women are managed.

The Manifestation of Power in Romantic Relationships

Family scholars have long been interested in the relationship between power and decision making. A recurrent theme in this research is the extent of asymmetry between partners. Early studies conceptualized power as the ability to get one's way, even in the face of a partner's opposition, and tended to focus on outcomes, such as which partner made the final decisions over major purchases (houses, cars, vacations). They generally found that men had more power in intimate relationships, which was often attributed to their greater economic contributions (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Szinovacz, 1987).

Gender scholars are increasingly challenging the notion that the basis of power is predominantly material. The majority of women are now employed in the paid labor force, and about one third earn as much or more than their partners (Winkler, McBride, & Andrews, 2005). Yet while women's greater labor force participation has increased their power in certain domains—employed women do less housework, get more child care assistance from partners, and have greater control over money than do their nonworking counterparts—women's employment has not equalized their balance of power relative to men (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Pyke, 1994; Sayer, 2005). The increase in cohabitation has also been suggested as a challenge to conventional gender relations, in part because of presumed differences in exchanges between married and cohabiting men and women (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Cohabitors have weaker expectations for specialization in traditional gender roles (Clarkberg et al., 1995; Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004) and partners generally maintain control over their own resources (Heimdal & Houseknecht, 2003; Vogler, 2005; Winkler, 1997). Furthermore, a subset of cohabitors eschews marriage and its inherent gender inequities (Elizabeth, 2000). Yet research continues to find that cohabiting women remain disadvantaged relative to men, performing a disproportionate share of domestic labor (Ciabattari, 2004; Hohmann-Marriot, 2006). In addition, their economic resources are not significant predictors of equality in spending or in marital transitions (de Ruijter, Treas, & Cohen, 2005; Sassler & McNally, 2003; Vogler, 2005).

Feminist scholars have long noted the need to better account for persistent gender inequality in studies of power and decision making. The gender perspective highlights how gender differences in decision-making power result from social norms regarding appropriate behaviors, interactions that reinforce gendered performances, and social institutions that limit possibilities for challenging such behavior (Ferree, 1990; Martin, 2004; Risman, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Existing social structures perpetuate beliefs that men's

authority is more "legitimate" than women's (Carli, 1999). The consequences—gendered power differences—are seen in both public and domestic realms. To date, however, scholars have not extended studies of gender differences in power to the ways that intimate unions evolve and progress, although the family is a primary location of gender inequality (Tichenor, 1999, 2005; Zvonkovic et al., 1996).

Reviewing the research on marital power, Gray-Little and Burks (1983, p. 522) asserted that "much that goes on between spouses is not reflected in the final outcome of the decision-making process." To better understand how power is exerted by each partner requires the investigation of interactions and a focus on influence strategies, negotiation, and conflict management (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998; Pyke, 1994; Zvonkovic et al., 1996). A growing body of research explores how partners negotiate decision making, when power is exerted, and situations where conventional gender patterns are challenged or affirmed (e.g., Tichenor, 1999, 2005; Zvonkovic et al., 1996). Komter (1989) argued that existing studies based on conventional resource theory masked how *manifest power* operated to advantage men. In her study of marital decision making, it was usually women who desired change, but men who controlled the outcome. But power is not always evident (McDonald, 1980). Disagreement may not emerge as a result of adherence to dominant values—what Komter termed *hidden power*. In such situations, conflict does not occur because subordinate groups adhere to hegemonic notions of what is natural and appropriate. Women's reliance on men to initiate all stages of romantic relationships because that is "tradition," even if that means deferring or foregoing desired goals, is one example of how hidden power may operate (see also Humble, Zvonkovic, & Walker, 2008; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998).[1] *Covert power* can also operate to suppress negotiation and maintain the status quo—for example, when one partner determines that the timing is not right to address relationship advancement, or a partner no longer raises issues because of fear of destabilizing the relationship or resignation resulting from previous failed attempts (Komter, 1989; Pyke, 1994; Tichenor, 1999, 2005).[2]

Little attention has been paid to how covert power and hidden power operate to establish and perpetuate gender inequality in premarital romantic relationships. What research exists on this topic suggests that romantic involvement remains an arena where established gender norms are highly entrenched. Notwithstanding young adults' expressions of egalitarianism, male and female students generally expected first dates to proceed in gender-typical ways, with men responsible for initiating and paying (Laner & Ventrone, 1998; Rose & Frieze, 1989; Ross & Davis, 1996). Male partners in dating relationships also reported more decision-making power than female partners (Felmlee, 1994; Peplau, 1979). Women's attempts to influence outcomes are more often indirect, consistent with gender norms (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998; Komter, 1989; Zvonkovic et al., 1996). For example, one study that asked women to simulate date initiation found that nearly a third of the women (31%) instead showed responsiveness to encourage the man to ask them out (Gilbert, Walker, McKinney, & Snell, 1999). Even when relationships do not begin with the traditional "date," men retain greater control over whether a romance ensues or remains a brief physical encounter (England & Thomas, 2006).

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[1] Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiege, and Hall (1996) also identified ways that men's *hidden power* operated to reduce active contention. They provide several examples of how wives naturalize accepting men's right to ultimately make family decisions when the couple was not in consensus.

"We usually talk and come to full agreement, or I give in and do what he wants on … [a] majority of things," one woman stated, explaining "I love him, and minor disagreements are a part of life." (Zvinovic et al., 1996, p. 98)

[2] Several examples of *covert power* emerge in Tichenor's (2005) study of how couples negotiate men's dominant role among couples where the man earns substantially less than his wife; the author discusses the power asymmetry that advantages men but not women, and women's perceptions that such imbalances were dangerous or threatening to couple stability and harmony.

Research on cohabitors' relationship progression is sparse. Sassler (2004) examined how young adults entered cohabiting unions, although her study focused on relationship tempo and reasons given for moving in together. Most quantitative research on cohabitors explores the structural factors shaping the decision to move in, marry, or break up rather than how such transitions are negotiated (Manning & Smock, 2002; Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004; Sassler & McNally, 2003; Smock & Manning, 1997). Although several qualitative studies have considered what cohabitation and marriage mean to individual cohabitors and the role economic resources play in conditioning their views of the appropriate time to wed (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Reed, 2006; Sassler & Cunningham, 2008; Smock et al., 2005), they do not reveal how couples negotiate discrepant desires.

Cohabiting couples may attempt to challenge conventional gender norms for relationship progression. Nonetheless, cohabitors are still socialized into a culture that assigns greater power and authority to men, so it is not surprising that gender ideology continues to condition the relationship progression of cohabitors; for example, couples engaging in complementary roles are more likely to marry than are their less traditional counterparts (Sanchez, Manning, & Smock, 1998). Since cohabitation prior to marriage is now normative, it is important to better understand how and when power relationships that disadvantage women are challenged or affirmed. This study examines how cohabiting couples discuss the progression of their relationships, using inductive, qualitative methods to consider how couples make decisions at several stages. We focus on outcomes, who initiates and controls them, and how such decisions are negotiated, forwarded, or negated. Our study asks whether underlying ideas about gender-appropriate behaviors shape how relationships progress and continue to perpetuate women's subordinate status even in less formal unions.

Method

This study is based on semistructured face-to-face interviews with 30 cohabiting couples (60 individuals). We focused on the working class, where intense change regarding women's and men's opportunities is taking place (Cherlin, 2009; Ellwood & Jencks, 2004). Working-class men's employment prospects and wages have declined with the loss of manufacturing jobs, resulting in a diminishing gap between the earnings of working-class men and women (Levy, 1998; Rubin, 1994). Furthermore, within the past decade the increase in cohabitation has been greatest among those with a high school diploma or those who have some postsecondary education but no college degree (Chandra et al., 2005). Finally, the working class has traditionally expressed conservative views regarding gender roles (Komarovsky, 1987; Rubin, 1976, 1994). Our theoretical focus on the working class therefore underscores how gender is negotiated in a population where men's dominant role as provider is threatened.

Recruitment took place in a large metropolitan area (Columbus, Ohio) at a junior college. Community college students come from families with limited economic resources and have relatively low rates of attaining a 4-year degree (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Signs inviting participation were posted on public message boards on the campus. We were also contacted by nonstudents who saw the postings or were told of our study by acquaintances.[3] The data were collected from July 2004 to April 2005. Respondents were selected if they reported being heterosexual, were aged 18 to 35 years, were currently cohabiting, and shared a residence with their partner for at least 3 months.

[3]Two couples who contacted us were referred by others that had been interviewed; we limited our acceptance of these referrals to one per couple, in order to ensure that the sample is not composed of couples who are all interrelated (Berg, 1988). A third couple was referred by an acquaintance of one of the researchers.

Our study sample was not in the bottom quarter of the income distribution (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) but nevertheless differed in important ways from those whose characteristics would place them among the solidly middle class (Rubin, 1976). Couples were screened primarily on education and income. When both partners had less than a bachelor's degree, couples were eligible for the study provided they earned more than $18,000 a year. We used occupation as a determinant of class status when a couple's earned income was above the second quartile for Ohio (the highest earners in the sample, e.g., are skilled laborers and a postal worker) and when one partner in a couple had a bachelor's degree but the other did not (two men and two women in the sample). None of the respondents with bachelor's degrees were working at jobs requiring a college education, and their responsibilities did not differ from other sample members without college degrees.[4]

Respondents were interviewed simultaneously in separate rooms to ensure confidentiality and to allow each partner to discuss sensitive issues (Hertz, 1995). Interviews were conducted by both authors and a graduate student who had been involved in the project from its inception. Interviews lasted 1 to 2½ hours. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were coded line by line by both authors. Emergent codes identified through repeated reading of transcripts were discussed until agreement was reached. Individual partners' stories were read in conjunction with those of their counterparts to reconstruct a couple-level experience of each aspect of relationship progression. Couples' narratives often differed. In these instances, we followed Hertz's recommendations and did not attempt to find one objective "truth," but instead created "a space for both partners to tell different accounts" (Hertz, 1995, p. 434). Names of all respondents have been altered to protect confidentiality.

Couples were asked how their relationship progressed from first meeting until the present and about plans with their current partner. Interviewers probed to ascertain timing of events, which partner initiated a step, when plans were discussed, and thoughts regarding the relationship tempo. We focused on three stages of the relationship, although some couples engaged in two steps at the same time: becoming romantically involved, moving in together, and discussing the future (particularly engagement and/or marriage). Following the grounded theory approach, *open coding* was used initially to generate topical themes (e.g., male initiation, female initiation, negotiation) for each stage (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The second stage of analysis involved *axial coding*, or looking at the variability and linkages within topics (i.e., female initiation of cohabitation and discussions of the future). The third level of analysis, *selective coding*, integrates and refines categories to identify a "story line" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) regarding how gender is done (and challenged) in cohabiting couples.

Descriptive information for the 30 couples is presented in Table 1. The mean level of education for participants was some college; in 20 couples both partners had completed some postsecondary education. The average yearly income for men was $22,044, somewhat higher than the women's average of $17,427. The median combined household income of $35,350 was lower than the Ohio median earnings of $45,805 for 2004–2005 (Fronczek, 2005). A disproportionate number of couples were interracial, and nearly 40% lived with children, consistent with other studies of cohabiting couples (e.g., Blackwell & Lichter, 2000; Sassler & McNally, 2003).

[4]For example, one of the women with a college degree reported working at a job that was identical to that mentioned by several of her less educated counterparts, telemarketing; another man with a college degree in theater reported working at a job with computers that was similar to one held by another man who had a few classes from a technical school.

Findings

We focused on three stages of couples' relationship: (a) how they became romantically involved, (b) decisions to move in together, and (c) discussions of the future (particularly proposals and marriage). For each stage, we assess which partner was given (or took) credit for the outcome of interest, as well as whether and how the process was negotiated. Our findings on romantic relationship initiation are consistent with prior studies (e.g., Laner & Ventrone, 1998; Rose & Frieze, 1989; Ross & Davis, 1996); discussion of that stage is therefore condensed.

Becoming a Couple

Determining how couples became romantically involved is challenging given today's looser relationship patterns. The cohabiting couples in our sample often relied on normative gender scripts. Men were more likely to initiate relationships, and to do so using direct approaches, whereas women demonstrated their receptiveness. Although only 11 couples in our sample describe a formal "date" as the beginning point of their relationship, 10 of these couples attributed the initiation of the relationship to the man. Another 6 couples met on the Internet. No clear patterns regarding gender and initiation emerge from this group. The remaining 13 couples met through friends, common interests, or work, and many describe "hanging out" with their partners in groups before their relationships became romantic.

Although more indefinite relationship progression patterns could challenge normative gender prescriptions, our findings suggest more consistency than contestation with traditional gendered scripts. Seven couples described knowing they were in a romantic relationship because of a sign—a first kiss (or more), leaving flowers in a locker, or the presentation of chocolates. In six of these seven couples, men were the instigators of these direct but nonverbal signifiers. Other men expressed their interest in a romantic relationship. Stacy recalled that Andre, while giving her a ride home from a social gathering, told her, "I have a crush on you," after which their relationship rapidly developed. Women, in contrast, were far more likely to rely on indirect strategies to transition friendship into romance or to clarify whether the couple was involved. Explaining why a particular date was their "official" anniversary, Aliyah said, "I asked him one day, like 'Well, what do you consider me as?' and he was, like, 'Well, you're my girlfriend.'" The men in these couples have more power to determine whether hanging out evolves into a romantic relationship, consistent with research on hook-ups (England & Thomas, 2006). That may be because non-normative gender behaviors are apt to be met with resistance. Several respondents revealed that women who pursued the first date or first sexual encounters with partners were, in the words of one rueful woman, "shot down." At least in the initial stages, men have greater power to formalize the establishment of relationships, a sign of manifest power (Komter, 1989). That women in our sample are much less likely to initiate these relationships also provides some evidence of men's hidden power.

Moving in Together

The process whereby couples determined to move in together provides a unique opportunity to examine how decisions are made regarding shared living, as well as how differences are negotiated. Women were far more likely to suggest the couple move in together than they were to ask men out on a date; in fact, they are as likely as the men to suggest cohabiting. Yet deeper probing reveals the ways that structural gender inequities continue to shape relationship strategies and, subsequently, reflect power.

The majority of couples share similar stories about how they came to live together. Nine couples concurred that the male partner was the one to initially raise the idea that they

should share a home, with an additional two men suggesting it in response to their partner's indirect pleas for a place to live. Three of the four long-distance Internet couples reported that the man instigated discussion of living together, with housing needs mentioned as a primary reason for doing so. Bill and Maria resided in different states and met on the Internet. Asked how they decided to move in together, Maria said, "I think it was him bringing it up and saying, 'You know, why don't you just move in?'" The greater convenience of shared living was most often mentioned as a reason that men proposed living together. Vic, who met Carly in his neighborhood bar, recalled how he raised the subject. "I think it was in mid-April, I said, 'You know, you're here all the time.... Why aren't your clothes here? Why aren't you here, you know, sort of, officially?" Eugene suggested cohabiting when his partner experienced housing problems, recalling,

> [Susan] explained to me her situation when she was about to get kicked out of her house and she had like a week to get out or pay the rent. So she said "I really need a place to stay." And I wasn't gonna say, you know, well, you can go live elsewhere.

Another third of the couples in our sample agreed that the female partner initially raised the idea of living together; in one additional couple, the woman suggested that her partner move in with her in response to his housing needs. Examining how the subject of living together was broached reveals how normative gender roles are challenged, as well as maintained. Only four women in this group used a direct approach to suggesting cohabitation. Brian mentioned how they gradually began spending every night together, then divulged that Shelly had initiated the talk of their living together. Shelly's discussion revealed what preceded that request:

> I'd say he "officially" moved in like maybe in March, because like when he was staying there that whole time, like he finally started staying there like 7 days a week. And I wasn't making him pay the bills and he wasn't offering, and I was [thinking] like, "This is so messed up, like how are you not even offering?" Like it started really to get me, like I was [thinking] "Ask him to pay, to see if he wants to. Is he gonna move out?" But one day I was just like "We got to talk. You've got to start paying 50% because I can't do this." So that was when the living together became, like, official.

Her response reveals the considerable anxiety she felt in being frank. In fact, women's direct attempts were sometimes checked, as Keisha reveals. "I was the one that came up with the suggestion," she said laughingly. "He was kind of leery about it, too, when I first came with the suggestion." Asked what happened next, she replied:

> So, yeah, so after I pushed that conversation with him about that, he thought about it for a while. First kept on telling me he didn't know. He had to think about it. So, suddenly, out of the blue, like maybe a couple months later … he said, "You know, I put some thought into what you was talking about." And he said "Yeah, that does sound like a plan."

Although several male-initiated couples also deferred moving in, they all indicated that the reason for delay was to save enough money for a deposit or to search for an apartment. Even when women are willing to initiate relationship progression, doing so is perceived as risky and outcomes uncertain. Furthermore, men's ability to defer the decision highlights their control over decision making, or the use of manifest power to determine *when* changes are agreed on.

Another four women used indirect approaches to raise the topic of living together. These respondents faced little resistance from their partners. Two women suggested that they become roommates. Tyrone recalled, "She was like, 'We move in together, we could split the rent, we could be roommates,' and she stressed the point of roommates," after which he

laughed. Another man whose partner broached the topic of living together said that he found her qualms about assertiveness endearing. Jake said, “She did one of those, like, ‘I’m going to ask you a question and I don’t want you to freak out about it, ‘cause it’s like one of those things where I am being too forward.’” Although these women demonstrated hesitation about initiating the discussion to live together for fear of overturning normative gender expectations (being “too forward”), their partners enjoyed being asked and were receptive. This suggests an area where social interactions can minimize gender divergence. The final two women raised the need to live together in response to pregnancies; both their partners agreed that moving in together was “a given,” consistent with other qualitative studies on relationship progression (Reed, 2006).

Of the remaining eight couples, three reported that decisions to live together were jointly made. Another five disagreed about who had initially raised the subject or how living together actually transpired. In two couples, for example, the female partner interpreted words in ways the man had not intended. Crystal credited Ron with suggesting she move in, adding, “He just asked me to bring some things over and to start keeping things there so I didn’t have to go home.” Ron asserted that his offer to make life more convenient for her was not an invitation to move in. Neither of these men, however, contested shared living so much that partners felt uncomfortable enough to move out. There was no consistent pattern in the remaining three couples who did not concur on how their living decision transpired.

Reasons respondents gave for why they moved in suggest that for many women, structural factors, such as gender disparities in wages, the shortage of affordable housing, and an absence of reliable transportation, often conditioned their initiating discussing of living together (whether directly or indirectly). Housing issues were mentioned most frequently by couples where the woman had instigated the discussion of shared living, whereas male-initiated cohabitors cited convenience as their primary reason. Gender disparities in earnings might account for women’s greater challenges affording housing; alternatively, while many of the respondents said they could move back in with their family, women in particular were unwilling to do that. The way decisions to move in together were discussed, and whose residence couples moved into, revealed other manifestation of power. Several men did not act on the initial suggestion to live together. Eric, who said he initially laughed when Dawn raised the idea, later suggested she move in with him. Negotiation about where to move was most evident for three involved noncustodial fathers, two of whom insisted their partner move for them. Laura mentioned that “she made a compromise” and moved to Columbus, because Simon wanted to be able to see his young son as much as possible. Gender disparities also emerged in where couples first lived. Half of the 30 couples moved into the man’s home. Only 7 couples made their home in the woman’s apartment; this was more likely to happen when the woman raised the idea, or had more earnings or education. The remaining 8 couples relocated to a new apartment.

Discussions of the Future

Cohabitors are a diverse group, and a considerable number have no interest in marrying (Elizabeth, 2000). Nonetheless, there are strong normative expectations that cohabiting young adults are contemplating marriage. Not all couples have discussed future plans with partners, in response to past experiences, adherences to gendered scripts, or because relationships are too new; others have curtailed such conversations. But most of the respondents in our sample report periodic or ongoing discussions of marriage, sometimes in response to seeing something on television or following an invitation to a wedding. How these talks progress, the roles men and women play in forwarding or impeding such talks, and the decisions couples ultimately make suggest that while normative gender roles continue to have considerable weight, women in cohabiting couples are challenging conventional female roles.

Earlier research suggests that many cohabitors do not raise serious discussions of future plans until well after they have moved in together (Sassler, 2004), often because the transition to shared living has occurred rapidly. Three couples in our sample agree that they have never discussed marriage. Asked whether she and her partner Eugene had talked about marriage, Susan replied, “Not really. We still don’t really, I mean, ‘cause it’s the future. You don’t know really much about it, it can change.” Though she did think that they would probably get married, the way Susan describes her understanding—as “kind of like this unspoken thing that we’re gonna stay together”—typifies many cohabiting relationships. Two of these couples have been dating and cohabiting for under a year.

Yet other respondents who have been involved for similar lengths of time have raised the issue of marriage, especially when they are opposed to marriage. Four couples in our sample have verbally agreed that they never want to formalize their unions through marriage. “I think we discussed marriage like probably the first date we had or something,” Mitch explained, “just because I wanted to get it out in the open that I didn’t want to get married ever. Not unless, like, for insurance or tax purposes.” The four women in these couples are equally dismissive of marriage. Several reported vigilance in ensuring their partners understood that they were not interested in bearing children. Stacy recollected a discussion she had with her partner Andre when they first got involved:

> But I told him the first day, the first day, before we even had sex I told him, ‘Look. If you want to date me, that’s cool. I want to date you, too.... But I’m not having your puppies and I’m not getting married, so if you’re looking for marriage or puppies you better look to somebody else. It’s not me. I’m not that girl.

In another three couples, only one partner was marriage averse; two previously married women had no interest in marrying again, and the man in the third couple claimed he would never be responsible enough for marriage (and his partner agreed). By rejecting the possibility of marriage, they control the matrimonial future of their partners as long as they remain coupled.

Marriage either is or has been a topic of discussion for the remaining 20 couples, in varying forms. Several women revealed they had been reluctant to discuss desires for marriage and children on first moving in together. Brandi explained, “It was just kind of like an off-subject, you just don’t ask, you know?” Asked why, she responded, “I didn’t want to put pressure on him to think that just because we live together that this is like forever.” Dawn’s restraint was driven by previous experience, saying, “I tried not to talk about marriage because I talked about it with my last boyfriend, and it just really didn’t make things very good.” Both were reluctant to destabilize their relationships by suggesting to their partners that they were too desirous of marriage. An additional five respondents indicated that they had curtailed marriage talk in response to their current partners’ reactions. The three women provided similar stories, of how marriage talk discomfited their partners—a reaction that a male partner verified. Shane revealed that Sandra no longer talked much about their future:

> And eventually she realized that I was so undecided and, like, not ready that she just kind of backed off without saying anything like that. She just kind of stopped pressing the issue. So I’m pretty sure it’s something she still thinks about and it’s probably still on her mind. But she hasn’t been bugging me about it.

Women’s fear that talk of marriage will be unwelcome demonstrates how covert power advantages men. But power to curb marriage talk was also wielded by two women. Maria explained, “About a year ago he stopped demanding that we had to be married, because I told him that if we had to be married, then I was going to break up with him, because I couldn’t promise that.” Both women had been previously married, had children, and were

tenuous about their desires to remarry. Both were also the primary providers in their relationships, suggesting that their resources may have been one source of their power.

More than one third of the couples in our sample (n = 12) are actively negotiating the relationship, its progression and desired outcomes. Many of the women in these couples attempted to challenge normative gender constructions involving male initiation of relationship advancement. At least one partner in 10 couples indicated that the woman has stated a desire to get engaged or married. Women often revealed that they hinted or joked about getting engaged but few admitted to raising the issue directly. Stories of the woman's desires to expedite a proposal were also mentioned by the men. Anthony conveyed how his partner, Diana, tipped her hand, saying, "We were at the mall the other day, and she was like, 'Oohh, look at these rings,' and she keeps saying stuff like, you know, 'My birthday's coming up pretty soon. I'd like some jewelry.'" Although women may attempt to promote their desires, those in this sample faced considerable opposition to realizing their goals. Aliyah mentioned that she brings up marriage once or twice a month, but admitted, "I usually have to force him into talking about it. He doesn't like talking about it, but once I get him into it, he will talk about it."

In discussing reasons for deferring marriage, both men and women note that they wanted to be earning more, to have decreased their debt, completed school, or saved money for a house or a wedding before getting engaged, consistent with prior research (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Smock et al., 2005). The cost of engagement rings also featured in these talks; men sometimes said they had to save up for a ring, whereas women mentioned the pressure their partners felt to buy a "nice enough" ring. But another reason also emerged—ambivalence about marriage. This sentiment was expressed mainly by men, several of whom stated that marriage was not on their minds. Notwithstanding Diana's hints, Anthony was content with the status quo. "Everything's working out right now the way it is and we just want it to be that way for now, you know?" he said. Asked about a possible time-table, he replied, "Maybe eventually down the road." Terrell responded to Aliyah's feints by stating, "I ain't ready, I don't want to talk about it." Six women expressed some dissatisfaction with this situation. Dawn, for example, said, "I just feel like he wants to, he wants control of the situation. He wants to do it when *he's* ready for it." And although admitting that finishing school before getting married was the right thing to do, she also felt that prospect was quite far away. "I don't know, the way he's going, he might be another 2 years," she said, mentioning that he was already in his sixth year of school. Only one man reported pushing for marriage more than did his partner.

The men in our sample appeared far more confident in their partners' desires to marry them than the women did with respect to their mates. In fact, men often asserted that their partners were anxious to get engaged. Stan reported, "Oh, she's waiting for, itching for that," whereas Bill declared, "She seems to be okay with waiting until I graduate. I mean, she would like to get married now. If I walked up to her and said, 'Let's get married tomorrow,' she'd get married." The consistency of such statements reflects men's conviction that they control the pace of the relationship progression. Women often verified men's assertions. Keisha noted that Stan tells her to be patient, whereas Dawn replied, "I'm just waiting for my boyfriend to ask me."

Furthermore, exploration revealed that men's dominant position rests largely in the enactment of becoming engaged. Among nearly all the couples where marriage was a possibility (and even among some of those rejecting marriage), the man is expected to be the one to "pop the question." Most of these couples adhere to conventional views, referencing "tradition" as a justification. Ron said, "I mean, that's just a guy thing," and added, "It's how it should be," a sentiment his partner Crystal seconded. Because neither of these

partners believes that women should propose, the power to advance the relationship rests in the hands of the men.

Both partners do not always agree that proposing is the male prerogative. Two men who had been discussing engagement with their partner said they would welcome being proposed to, as proposing was often viewed as a burden; one other man, who had not discussed marriage with his partner, also expressed the belief that having his partner ask him to marry her would be, in his words, "cool." Simon thought being proposed to would be "awesome," further clarifying, "I do think more women should propose. I think that is a turn on. It would be a turn on for me." However, these men's partners were not eager to take on that role. Simon's partner, Laura, affirmed that she would never think of proposing to Simon. Asked why, she stated, "'cause that's the man's job. The man is supposed to do it." Asked what the woman's job was, she replied, "To say yes. To wear the ring." Several of the women indicated that for them to propose smacked of desperation. Brandi said, "I think it would just be kind of strange, and I don't know how he'd react to that." Dawn jokingly asked, "What girl really wants to be the one that has to propose?" then said in a pathetic voice, "Will you take me as your wife?" before laughing. But Dawn's partner, Eric, mentioned that in the past she had joked about proposing; asked his response, he said, "I'm like, 'Well, if you do, I'm going to say no!'" In view of Eric's reply, Dawn's best option appears to be to wait until he is ready.

The two women who felt that either partner could propose, or who had tried to do so, were met with resistance. Asked how they would feel if their partner proposed, men frequently said they would be shocked or surprised, or worse, that they would laugh. "It would be hilarious," Spencer commented. Terrell's response revealed how firmly entrenched men's prerogatives are. Faced with a hypothetical proposal from Aliyah, Terrel said, "I would laugh and then I would be like, 'Come on, girl, get off your knees. Stop playing around.' Then I would eventually go do it for real—the real way, how it's supposed to be done." Even if women desire to take control of their relationship's progression, they need the consent of their partners. Men's demonstration of manifest power suggests that for most of these couples a woman's proposal would be disappointing or (as in the case of Dawn) refused. Yet two couples did mention that the woman had proposed; in neither instance are both partners satisfied with the outcome, and both couples indicate that the man would be "redoing" the proposal in the near future. In one case the female partner had tried to set up a scenario where he would ask her, but slipped and "accidentally" asked him instead. The other man was discomfited by his partner's proposing. Though he called Maria his fiancée, Bill did not wear the engagement ring she gave him, saying, "I don't know of guys having engagement rings or anything."

Yet individuals' attempts to convince partners to take a step are not all futile. Several respondents mentioned that over time their partners have influenced them to do something they had not previously considered—demonstrating convincing power. This occurred with two men, who persuaded partners to get engaged (although one woman says she subsequently broke it off). Harry was eventually able to sway Marta into talking about marriage and at his interview revealed that he was currently planning his proposal. Men also reported doing (or planning) something they believed their female partner wanted more than they did. For some men, it was proposing, or giving their partner a ring; for other men, the ultimate sacrifice was in deciding to get married.[5] Ray said that he had proposed to Julie, stating,

[5]We distinguish between proposing and marriage based on respondents' actions. For example, Ray and Julie had been engaged for about 5 years at the time of their interview and had not yet picked a wedding date. Among other couples, discussions of wedding plans seemed to precipitate an acceptance that marriage was in the cards, perhaps because talks about when and where to marry were more concrete.

> I think at the time it was mostly for her, because it was something that she really wanted and I didn't want to lose her. So I was willing to do it just so that, you know, I wouldn't lose her.

Jerry, who reported being "kind of against" marriage, said "I still, even though I am going to propose to her, it's more for her gratification. I mean, I don't think it's necessary to get married." And finally, Simon, who preferred that Laura propose, said that he would end up doing it, as it was what she wanted. These supposed sacrifices were generally for hypothetical actions that had yet to take place.[6] That these respondents took account of their partner's desires rather than their own suggests that control can be negotiated, at least when partners seek to keep each other happy.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined whether cohabiting couples attempted to "undo gender" by challenging normative expectations that male partners assume primary responsibility for relationship progression. We analyzed how relationships progressed for a sample of 30 working-class cohabiting couples (60 respondents). Our findings suggest that cohabitation serves as an arena where normative gender roles are sometimes undone, at least when it comes to establishing cohabiting unions. Nonetheless, couples reinforce normative gender enactments at numerous relationship points, including initiating relationships and transforming them into more formal arrangements, such as engagement. Individuals' strategies to attain their desired ends highlight the persistence of men's dominant position, through the operation of manifest, covert, and hidden power.

Women did not leave all relationship decisions in the hands of their male partners. They frequently raised the topic of moving in together, and many also advocated strongly for formalizing their relationships via engagement. Cohabitation is an "incomplete institution" (Cherlin, 2004), with few clear guidelines regarding whether and how it should progress. Our findings suggest that cohabitation is a welcome alternative for couples who do not desire children or marriage. However, we do not find such relationships are any more likely to be female driven. That women remained more likely to use indirect approaches, and expressed concerns about their assertiveness when they did suggest living together, reveals the challenges experienced by those tentatively trying on new roles. In addition, although the women were as likely as the men to suggest living together, the primary reason given by women who initiated shared living was related to housing needs. Low wages available for women, particularly those with less than a college degree, rather than resource power therefore seem to condition women's relationship strategies. Women also demonstrate agency in discussing marriage, although we found that when marital goals are not shared women are generally less able than men to obtain their desired outcome. Even though a few women were able to get a less sanguine partner to at least contemplate engagement, far more couples revealed that when they held discrepant views regarding the desirability of marriage, women's desires had less weight. Women's power may be limited to their ability to end an already formed union (cf., England & Kilbourne, 1990).

Men's responses to women's attempts to "undo gender" highlight the importance of couple-level analysis for studies of relationship power. Although some men tacitly welcomed female partner's assertiveness, describing it as endearing or sexy, male partners were not always accepting of women's attempts to play a more assertive role in the progression of intimate relationships. Several of the men whose female partner raised the possibility of

[6]Only one of the men who had been ambivalent about engagement had actually proposed, though Jerry revealed that he had already purchased the ring and planned and paid for the vacation where he intended to ask his partner Natalie to marry him.

living together put off decisions, and relatively few welcomed the idea of women proposing. The male prerogative of proposing, though sometimes seen as a burden because of expectations that it be unique and memorable, endows men with considerable outcome power. In fact, quite a few of the men in our sample reveled in their ability to control the timing and pace of relationship progression; 7 of the 12 men who have discussed their relationship's future believe that their partners are eager to get engaged. Men's ability to play the dominant role in romantic relationships by controlling the proposal leaves women who desire to marry, in the words of both the male and female respondents, "waiting to be asked." Nonetheless, in most instances the female partners are complicit in this enactment of male control. As with other traditional norms that disadvantage women, the right of the male proposal is also interpreted as an expression of love and caring (Ferree, 1990). Thus, women are not just failing to ask their partners to marry them because they fear disapproval or are unwilling to flout normative gender roles but because they want to be asked.

Consistent with other studies on the division of domestic labor and spending (Miller & Sassler, 2010; Tichenor, 1999, 2005; Zvonkovic et al., 1996), our findings provide greater support for the gender perspective than for relative resource theory. Women who have more education than their partners or who earn equivalent amounts or more do not have greater say in advancing their relationships in the direction and at the pace they desire. Most women, regardless of their earnings, were not the ones who instigated the formation of the couple as a romantic unit. There is also no consistent relationship between women's relative earnings and initiating the discussion of living together, no doubt because housing needs featured so prominently among the women who did raise the topic. Most conclusively, regardless of the resources they commanded, women did not have—and did not claim—the right to propose. And although couples do mention the need to be more financially established as a reason to defer marriage (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Reed, 2006; Smock et al., 2005), our findings suggest the importance of assessing whether marital delay also reflects power imbalances between men and women, especially when men are less desirous of marriage than their partners.

Our sample consists of intact, cohabiting couples who had not (yet) married or broken up. This study is therefore limited in that it likely underrepresents those couples least satisfied with their relationship progression, as both partners would not have agreed to participate. Relying on retrospective interviews might also result in fewer mentions of failed negotiations. Nonetheless, we did get reports from both partners regarding their thoughts about their relationship, how it progressed, and their desired outcomes. There is also the possibility that cohabiting couples characterized by unconventional (female initiated) relationship progression were more likely to have broken up (Felmlee, 1994), or wed. As with most qualitative studies, our sample is not representative of the population of all cohabitors. Cohabitors may engage in different relationship strategies in other regions where housing costs are higher. Finally, the working class may pursue different relationship strategies than do their more advantaged counterparts, given greater challenges to men's abilities to assume the provider role. Results emerging from other studies of working and lower-middle-class cohabitors regarding men's role in relationship progression (e.g., Sassler & Cunningham, 2008; Smock et al., 2005), however, provide some confirmatory support for our findings.

In conclusion, cohabitation appears to be an arena where normative gender roles can be contested. Women often instigate relationship progression, by suggesting couples move into shared living arrangements or raising talk of marriage. Nonetheless, men continue to play dominant roles in both initiating whether couples become romantically involved and in formalizing these unions via proposing, largely because of hegemonic norms regarding male prerogatives. Although both women and men contest how gender is performed, the way

these cohabiting couples enact what it means to be male and female are more likely to privilege cohabiting men in the arena of relationship progression. Couples' initial behaviors lay the groundwork for future expectations and behaviors (e.g., Humble et al., 2008; Laner & Ventrone, 1998). In fact, such power differentials also emerge in other areas (Ciabattari, 2004), suggesting that should these couples wed, similar patterns would emerge in their marriages. In our sample, cohabitation mainly served to reinforce rather than challenge extant gender norms. In other words, adherence to conventional practices even among those residing in informal unions perpetuated women's secondary position in intimate relationships.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Cohabiting Couples

Variables	Measures	Means
Age	Mean age: Men	26.4 years
	Mean age: Women	24.4 years
Couple-level income[a]	Mean combined income	$38,971
	Median combined income	$33,350
Couple-Level Measures		*N*
Relative age	Man >4 years older	4
	Woman >4 years older	2
	Both within 4 years	24
Educational attainment	Both high school or less	1
	1 ≤ high school, 1 some college	5
	Both some college or associate degree	20
	1 high school, 1 BA	1
	1 some college, 1 BA	3
Relative schooling	Man has more education	7
	Woman has more education	7
	Equal levels of schooling	16
Race	Both White	13
	Both Hispanic	1
	Both Black	4
	Mixed race	12
Relative earnings[a]	Man earns 60% or more	13
	Woman earns 60% or more	6
	Each partner earns within 40% to 60%	11
Marital status	Both never married	24
	One never married, one previously married	6
Parental status	Both no children	16
	Both share children[b]	5
	Man has children (not woman)	6
	Woman has children (not man)	2
	Each has child from prior relationship	1
Duration of cohabitation[c]	3–6 months	8
	7–11 months	2
	12–23 months	5
	24–35 months	7
	3 years or more	8
N		30 couples (60 individuals)

[a]Determined by summing each partner's reported individual income. In one instance, where the male partner did not report his income, we relied on his partner's report of both their incomes.

[b] In two instances, the couples share a child and the male partner also has a child from a prior relationship.

[c] Five couples have broken up and gotten back together; their living together duration is from the initial cohabitation to the interview date.