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Thinking About Moving In Together? Reasons for Cohabitation Are Associated With Relationship Outcomes Over Time

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Romantic couples moving in together (i.e., cohabitation) is a normative stage of romantic relationships, and people report different reasons for moving in together. Few studies have examined whether reasons for cohabitation have implications for relationship functioning over time. This study investigated how three commonly endorsed reasons for cohabitation (i.e., to spend time together, to test the relationship, and out of convenience) were associated with relationship outcomes (relationship functioning and dissolution) over time. In a 5-year longitudinal study (from 2007 to 2012), adults ($N = 485$) who were in opposite-sex relationships and moved in with their partner were surveyed on their reasons for cohabitation (closest in time to moving in together) and their relationship status and functioning (in up to 11 waves of surveys). Results showed that greater endorsement of cohabiting to spend time together predicted better overall relationship functioning after cohabiting. Greater endorsement of testing the relationship predicted worse overall relationship functioning and a higher likelihood of relationship dissolution after cohabiting. Moving in together out of convenience did not predict postcohabitation relationship outcomes. The three reasons did not predict overtime trajectories (i.e., slopes) of relationship functioning. Instead, people showed similar trajectories of relationship functioning after moving in together regardless of their reasons for cohabitation, albeit at different levels that were differentiated at the time of moving in together. Reasons for cohabitation appear to reflect preexisting relationship quality, instead of impacting its postcohabitation trajectories. Findings highlight the importance of couples discussing their reasons for cohabitation when making decisions about moving in together.


Public Significance Statement

Cohabitation is normative in the United States, and people move in together for various reasons. This 5-year longitudinal study showed that people's reported reasons for moving in together reflect the preexisting quality of their relationship at the time of moving in together and predicted subsequent relationship outcomes. Romantic partners should reflect on and discuss with each other why they want to move in together before deciding to cohabit.

Keywords: cohabitation, reasons, relationship functioning, breakup, longitudinal

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continued

Romantic partners living together, or *cohabiting*, is an increasingly normative relationship stage in the United States. From 2015 to 2019, 76% of people reported cohabiting with their romantic partner before marriage (Manning & Carlson, 2021), which is a dramatic increase from the early 1950s when less than 1% cohabited with their romantic partner before marriage (Gurrentz, 2018). Further, more couples than ever before are cohabiting without necessarily planning to marry (Horowitz et al., 2019). Cohabitation as a precursor or alternative to marriage has become quite common, providing a strong rationale for advancing the knowledge base about how people enter it and what happens in such relationships over time.

Many people believe that living together before longer term commitment is a beneficial or even necessary way to test the strength of a relationship, in some cases serving as a “trial run” (Hall & Zhao, 1995). Contrary to this belief, living together before marriage has generally been associated with poorer outcomes in marriage (e.g., Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; DeMaris & Rao, 1992; Dush et al., 2003), and this is especially true among those who started living together prior to engagement (Rhoades et al., 2009b; Stanley & Rhoades, 2023).

Stafford et al. (2004) found that long-term cohabiters reported greater frequency of conflict, physical aggression, and risk for separation than the other two groups examined (those who entered directly into marriage and those who cohabited as a precursor to marriage; see also Brown et al., 2017, for similar findings). Additionally, longitudinal research has demonstrated the declines in relationship functioning following moving in together. Rhoades et al. (2012, Study 2) found that unmarried cohabiting couples had diminishing relationship quality after beginning to cohabit as indicated by several relationship functioning indicators, such as

declines in relationship satisfaction and dedication and increases in negative communication.

However, not all relationships experience declines in relationship quality after moving in together. Many couples cohabit and have satisfying relationships. Given the prevalence of couples who decide to cohabit either preceding marriage or as an alternative form of being together, it is important to understand when cohabitation is linked to negative relationship outcomes. One important factor that may have implications for a couple's relationship functioning following cohabitation is their reasons for moving in together. Previous cross-sectional research has suggested that the reasons couples give for moving in with their partner are associated with relationship quality (Rhoades et al., 2009a; Tang et al., 2014).

The three most common reasons that couples report for moving in together are to spend more time together, to test the relationship, and for convenience (Barna Group, 2016; Rhoades et al., 2009a). It is helpful to distinguish these reasons for moving in together through an intrinsic versus external lens. Intrinsic reasoning can be seen as positive characteristics that a partner considers about their relationship, such as desiring to increase intimacy or to *spend more time* with their partner through moving in together (Adams & Jones, 1997; Rhoades et al., 2009a). External reasons can be seen as events outside of the relationship that impact why people want to move in together, such as the *inconvenience* of living apart, a pregnancy, or sharing financial resources. Beyond intrinsic and external reasons for moving in together, other reasons may contribute to cohabitation, such as having doubts about the relationship and wanting to *test the relationship* through moving in prior to deciding on marriage or longer term commitments (Rhoades et al., 2009a). External and intrinsic reasons may forecast different

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relationship functioning trajectories and impact the likelihood of future relational distress or dissolution.

Endorsing internal versus external reasons has been linked to different relationship outcomes. In a study investigating the association between reasons for cohabitation and relationship functioning, greater endorsement of spending time together (intrinsic) as a reason for moving in was associated with higher relationship dedication among both men and women (Rhoades et al., 2009a). On the other hand, greater endorsement of moving in to test the relationship was associated with higher negative communication and lower relationship confidence for both men and women. Additionally, greater endorsement of convenience as a reason (external) was associated with lower relationship confidence and higher negative communication, at least among women (Rhoades et al., 2009a). In another study that investigated associations between reasons for cohabitation and relationship functioning, endorsement of spending time together was associated with better relationship functioning (higher commitment and satisfaction and lower conflict), whereas endorsement of testing the relationship and convenience was associated with lower relationship functioning (lower satisfaction and commitment and higher conflict; Tang et al., 2014).

Existing work linking reasons for cohabitation and relationship outcomes has largely been cross-sectional and did not examine relationship functioning over time across the transition to cohabitation and following cohabitation. As such, it is unclear whether differences in relationship functioning associated with reasons for cohabitation already exist as couples enter cohabitation *or* only start to emerge following cohabitation. In other words, existing cross-sectional evidence does not provide insight into whether couples' reasons they report for moving in together merely reflect their existing relationship quality (i.e., selection effect) or shape their relationship trajectories and outcomes (e.g., experience effect). Selection effects might provide insight into specific characteristics of people who tend to report certain reasons for why they move in together, whereas the experience effect highlights how the experience of moving in together for certain reasons (e.g., to test the relationship) leads to different outcomes (Bumpass et al., 1991; DeMaris & Rao, 1992; Rhoades et al., 2009a). Examining how reasons for cohabitation predict relationship outcomes over time would help

shed light on this question. Relatedly, existing cross-sectional research has examined how reasons for cohabitation are associated with relationship functioning at a single time point, but not whether reasons predict how relationship functioning changes over time after beginning to cohabit (Rhoades et al., 2009a; Tang et al., 2014). Longitudinal research allows us to examine whether reasons for cohabitation predict different *trajectories* of relationship functioning. Further, in previous cross-sectional studies, participants who were asked to recall their reasons for cohabitation retrospectively and rate their current relationship quality may be subject to recall bias because their response on one question may influence their response on another question (e.g., people who are currently less happy in their relationship may be more likely to endorse they moved in to test the relationship due to having doubts). This longitudinal study minimizes recall bias because participants reported on reasons for cohabitation as closely in time to moving in together as possible and on relationship quality in subsequent surveys.

The Present Study

Extending prior cross-sectional evidence on the link between reasons for cohabitation and relationship outcomes, the current research investigated how reasons for cohabitation were longitudinally associated with relationship outcomes (i.e., relationship dissolution and relationship functioning) following the transition to cohabitation among people in opposite-sex relationships. We investigated three common reasons for cohabitation (i.e., to spend time together, to test the relationship, and out of convenience), three indicators of relationship functioning (i.e., relationship satisfaction, negative communication, and dedication), and relationship dissolution (i.e., breakup). We hypothesized that greater endorsement of spending time together (Hypothesis 1a), less endorsement of testing relationship (Hypothesis 1b), and less endorsement of convenience (Hypothesis 1c) as reasons for moving in together would predict a lower likelihood of relationship dissolution following cohabitation. Regarding relationship functioning, we hypothesized that greater endorsement of spending time together (Hypothesis 2a), lower endorsement of testing relationship (Hypothesis 2b), and lower endorsement of convenience (Hypothesis 2c) would be associated with higher

overall relationship functioning after beginning to cohabit. Lastly, we examined how reasons were associated with trajectories of relationship functioning following the transition to cohabitation. We hypothesized that higher endorsement of spending time together would be associated with less decline in relationship functioning after beginning to cohabit (Hypothesis 3a). Conversely, we hypothesized that higher endorsement of testing the relationship (Hypothesis 3b) and convenience (Hypothesis 3c) would be associated with steeper declines in relationship functioning after beginning to cohabit. These hypotheses were formulated based on prior evidence on associations between reasons for cohabitation and relationship functioning (Rhoades et al., 2009a; Tang et al., 2014) and longitudinal trajectories of relationship functioning across the transition to cohabitation (Rhoades et al., 2012).

Method

Participants

Participants were 485 individuals (67.8% female, 32.2% male; $M_{\text{age}} = 27.1$ years at baseline, $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.6$ years, $\text{range}_{\text{age}} = 18.1\text{--}35.7$ years) who took part in a 5-year longitudinal study involving 11 waves of survey data. All participants included in the current analyses were unmarried and in a romantic relationship at baseline (71.5% dating and 28.5% engaged). To be included in these analyses, they needed to either be already living with their partner at baseline ($n = 345$, 71.1% of the full sample; duration of cohabiting at baseline: $M = 3.3$ years, $SD = 3.2$ years) or to have moved in with their baseline partner (i.e., the person they were in a relationship with at baseline) sometime during the study ($n = 140$, 28.9% of the full sample). Participants who never reported cohabiting with their baseline partner were excluded from the current analyses. The parent study (Rhoades et al., 2010) only recruited participants in opposite-sex relationships; thus, all were in opposite-sex relationships in this subsample. The average relationship duration at baseline was 47.1 months ($SD = 39.9$ months, $\text{range} = 1.0\text{--}276.0$ months). Participants reported the following racial identities: 1.0% American Indian or Alaska Native, 2.1% Asian, 11.6% Black or African American, 0.2% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 80.6% White, 3.7%

reported more than one race, and 0.8% race unknown or not reported; 9.7% of the sample were Hispanic/Latino/Latina. Slightly more than a third (35.4%) of the participants obtained at least a bachelor's degree, most were employed (78.1%), and the median individual annual income was in the \$20,000–\$29,999 range. In the total sample of 485 participants, 139 (28.7%) experienced relationship dissolution during the study, and the remaining 346 participants (71.3%) remained in relationship with their partner for the remainder of the study.

Procedure

For the larger Relationship Development Study, participants were recruited from a large-scale calling center within the United States; using a targeted telephone sampling strategy, respondents were told information about the study, and interested participants were screened for eligibility. Eligible participants had to be within the ages of 18–34 years and in a present unmarried relationship with an opposite-sex partner, which had lasted for at least 2 months (at the time of the screening call). Participants were asked to mail surveys back to the study team, and those who sent surveys back to the team were sent out 10 follow-up surveys, with the first five surveys sent out 4 months after the prior survey was mailed and the remaining five surveys sent out 6 months after the prior survey was mailed. Data collection was carried out from 2007 through 2012. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Denver.

Measures

Relationship and Cohabitation Status

Relationship Status. In their first (baseline) survey, participants' relationship status was assessed with the question, "As of today, what is the status of your relationship?" Participants were asked to select one option from the following: "Broken up," "Dating (living together or not)," "Engaged," or "Married." In the subsequent follow-up surveys, participants were asked whether they were still dating the same person they were with from the prior survey (i.e., "Are you together with the same person that you were with the last time you completed a survey for

the Relationship Development Survey?”). If they answered “Yes,” they were asked “What is the status of your relationship (please mark only one)?” selecting from the following options: “Dating (living together or not),” “Engaged,” and “Married.” If the participant answered “No,” they were asked additional questions about breakup experiences and new relationships (if any). Participants who broke up with their baseline partner were able to continue on in the survey and answer questions about their new relationship as well as complete all subsequent surveys in the study; however, only data relevant to the participant’s baseline partner (i.e., data up until the first time they indicated they were no longer with the same partner) were analyzed in the present study. Participants were considered to have broken up with their baseline partner if they ever answered “No” about being with the same person as the prior assessment point. We created a binary relationship dissolution variable to characterize each participant, which was coded as 1 if the participant broke up with their baseline partner after moving in and coded as 0 if the participant remained in relationship and living with their partner for the remainder of the study; this variable was used as the outcome variable for testing Hypotheses 1a–1c (see Analytic Plan section).

Cohabitation Status and Date. At each survey, if participants indicated that they were in a relationship (either with their initial partner or a new partner), they were asked, “Are you and your partner living together? That is, do you share a single address without either of you having a separate place?” selecting either “Yes” or “No.” For each participant, a binary cohabitation status variable was created for each wave of data (0 = *not living together*; 1 = *living together*), with not living together coded as the reference level.

Participants’ cohabitation date was assessed by participants’ answering, “What is the date that you and your partner began sharing a single home address?” with an entry of month, date, and year of cohabitation date. For each participant, a time-since-cohabiting variable (in years) was created for each survey by subtracting the cohabitation date from the date participant completed the survey, such that value of 0 indicates time of cohabitation.

Reasons for Cohabitation. At the first time point when participants reported living with their baseline partner, they were asked about

their reasons for moving in together. Assessing their reasons for cohabitation as closely to when the participant first moved in as possible helped reduce retrospective recall bias. Participants reported on their reasons for cohabitation using the 28-item Reasons for Cohabitation Scale (Rhoades et al., 2009a), which has three subscales: (a) spending time together (10 items); (b) testing relationship (12 items), and (c) convenience (six items). Each item stem began with “I moved in with my partner because,” and participants indicated how strongly they agree with each reason item using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The time together subscale measures reasons for moving in due to an internal desire to increase intimacy with their partner (e.g., “I want to spend more time with him/her”; “because I thought it would bring us closer”). The testing relationship subscale measures the degree to which one wished to test the relationship through living together (e.g., “because I wanted to test out our relationship”; “because I have doubts about us making it for the long haul”). The convenience subscale measures how convenient it would be for each partner to move together (e.g., “to share household expenses”; “because we were spending most nights together anyway”). Participants’ degree of endorsement for each reason was calculated by computing the average score of all corresponding items for the respective subscale, with higher values indicating stronger endorsement for that reason. The internal consistency (Cronbach’s α) for spending time together ($\alpha = .88$), testing relationship ($\alpha = .92$), and convenience ($\alpha = .72$) subscales ranged from acceptable to excellent. Of note, only reasons for moving in with the baseline partner were analyzed in the present study; for example, if a participant broke up with the baseline partner and later moved in with a new partner, reasons for cohabitation and relationship functioning in this new relationship were not analyzed.

Relationship Functioning

Relationship functioning was assessed at each time point. We used three indicators of relationship functioning, including relationship satisfaction, negative communication, and dedication. Only the relationship functioning of participants’ relationship with the baseline partner was analyzed.

Relationship Satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was assessed via one item from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) to measure relationship satisfaction among cohabiting couples. The item “Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship” was singularly chosen as a pure measure of overall relationship satisfaction as opposed to a generalized relationship adjustment measure. The item was scored on a 0 (*extremely unhappy*) to 6 (*perfectly happy*) scale.

Negative Communication. Negative communication was measured using the six-item Communication Danger Signs Scale (Stanley & Markman, 1992) to measure perceived negative communication. The measure assesses different forms of verbal and physical communication such as “Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name-calling, or bringing up past hurts” and “I hold back from telling my partner what I really think and feel.” This measure is scored on a 1 (*never or almost never*) to 3 (*frequently*) scale. This measure has demonstrated validity and reliability in past research (Kline et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2004). Internal consistency (McDonald’s ω) at the within-person and between-person level was acceptable ($\omega_{\text{within}} = .75$) and excellent ($\omega_{\text{between}} = .92$), respectively.

Dedication. Dedication was measured by the 14-item Dedication Scale from the Revised Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992). The measure includes items like “I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we encounter” and “I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of ‘us’ and ‘we’ than ‘me’ and ‘him/her.’” Each item was rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). This measure has demonstrated reliability and validity in previous research (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades et al., 2010, 2012; Stanley & Markman, 1992). We used the mean of the items, with higher reported scores indicating higher dedication. Internal consistency (McDonald’s ω) at the within-person and between-person level was good ($\omega_{\text{within}} = .82$) and excellent ($\omega_{\text{between}} = .95$), respectively.

Analytic Plan

We conducted all analyses using R statistical software 4.3.2 (R Core Team, 2021). To test Hypotheses 1a–1c, we conducted binomial

logistic regression, with relationship dissolution entered as an outcome variable and the three reasons for cohabitation entered as predictors (simultaneously entered in the model). To test Hypotheses 2a–3c, we conducted multilevel linear regression analyses with time (Level 1) nested within participants (Level 2), using the R package lme4 (Bates et al., 2015), modeling random intercept and slopes. As our research questions focus on how reasons for cohabitation predict relationship outcomes after cohabitation, we used data only from surveys that were completed after participants moved in with their partner. Participants’ scores of the three reasons for cohabitation were grand-mean-centered.

Specifically, for Hypotheses 2a–2c testing how the three reasons for cohabitation were associated with participants’ levels of relationship functioning, we used multilevel linear regression analyses, regressing each Level 1 relationship functioning indicator (relationship satisfaction, negative communication, or dedication) on time since cohabitation and the three Level 2 reasons for cohabitation (see Model 1 section).

Model 1

Level 1 Model:

$$\text{Relationship functioning}_{ij}(\text{relationship satisfaction, negative communication, or dedication}) = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}\text{Time since cohabitation} + r_{ij}. \quad (1)$$

Level 2 Model:

$$\begin{aligned} \beta_{0j} = & \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}\text{Spending time together} \\ & + \gamma_{02}\text{Testing relationship} \\ & + \gamma_{03}\text{Convenience} + u_{0j}, \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + u_{1j}. \quad (3)$$

At Level 1, β_{0j} represents participant j ’s mean level of the relationship functioning indicator at the time cohabitation at the sample mean levels of the three reasons for cohabitation; β_{1j} represents the change in the level of relationship functioning indicator when time since cohabitation increases by 1 year for participant j , controlling for three reasons for cohabitation; r_{ij} represents Level 1 (within persons) random

effect. At Level 2, γ_{00} represents the mean level of the relationship functioning indicator at the sample mean level of the three reasons; γ_{01} , γ_{02} , γ_{03} represent the change in the level of relationship functioning when time together, testing relationship, and convenience increases by one unit, respectively, controlling for the other two reasons, which were of interest to Hypotheses 2a–2c; u_{0j} represents Level 2 (between persons) random effect.

To examine Hypotheses 3a–3c testing how each reason was associated with trajectories (i.e., overtime changes, or slope) of relationship functioning after cohabitation, we added three cross-level interactions to Model 1, resulting in Model 2 as shown below.

Model 2

Level 1 Model:

$$\text{Relationship functioning}_{ij}(\text{relationship satisfaction, negative communication, or dedication}) = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}\text{Time since cohabitation} + r_{ij}. \quad (4)$$

Level 2 Model:

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}\text{Spending time together} + \gamma_{02}\text{Testing relationship} + \gamma_{03}\text{Convenience} + u_{0j}, \quad (5)$$

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}\text{Spending time together} + \gamma_{12}\text{Testing relationship} + \gamma_{13}\text{Convenience} + u_{1j}. \quad (6)$$

Of interest to Hypotheses 3a–3c are γ_{11} , γ_{12} , γ_{13} , respectively; they represent the degree to which the overtime change of relationship functioning varies as a function of endorsement of spending time together, testing relationship, and convenience, respectively, controlling for the other two reasons.

For all analyses, we conducted sensitivity analyses to examine whether significant findings held when controlling for theoretically important covariates. The nine covariates we used included several demographics (i.e., gender, age, race, ethnicity, education, employment status, individual annual income) and relationship characteristics variables

(i.e., relationship status and relationship duration at baseline), which were simultaneously entered in each model. Selection of covariates was based on theorizing about what could be associated with reasons for cohabitation and relationship functioning, as well as prior research conventions (Dush et al., 2003; Rhoades et al., 2009a, 2012; Stanley et al., 2006).

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Descriptive statistics of participant demographic characteristics for the full sample and the subsamples of those who stayed together or broke up are summarized in Supplemental Table S1. Regarding correlations among the three reasons for cohabitation, testing relationship was positively correlated with convenience, $r = .25$, $p < .001$; spending time together was not correlated with either testing relationship, $r = -.01$, $p = .75$, or convenience, $r = -.07$, $p = .14$.

Main Analyses

Reasons for Cohabitation and Relationship Dissolution

Supporting Hypothesis 1b, greater endorsement of testing relationship as a reason for cohabitation predicted a higher likelihood of relationship dissolution, $b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .04$. However, endorsement of the reasons of spending time together, $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .57$, or convenience, $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .57$, did not predict relationship dissolution, which did not support Hypotheses 1a and 1c, respectively. Findings remained the same when controlling for demographic (i.e., gender, age, race, ethnicity, education, employment status, individual annual income) and relationship characteristics (i.e., relationship status and relationship duration) as covariates.

Reasons for Cohabitation and Overall Relationship Functioning

Model 1 results showed significant main effects of time together (Hypothesis 2a) and testing relationship (Hypothesis 2b) on relationship functioning following cohabitation, supporting these hypotheses (Table 1, Model 1). Specifically, greater

Table 1

Results of How Reasons for Cohabitation Predict Relationship Functioning Over Time After Moving In Together

Predictor	Relationship satisfaction			Negative communication			Dedication		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Model 1: main effects of time since beginning to cohabit and reasons for cohabitation									
Intercept	4.27	0.06	<.001	1.67	0.03	<.001	5.62	0.04	<.001
Time since beginning to cohabit	−0.08	0.01	<.001	0.03	0.01	<.001	−0.01	0.01	.38
Reason-time together	0.16	0.05	<.001	−0.06	0.02	.001	0.19	0.03	<.001
Reason-testing relationship	−0.18	0.04	<.001	0.08	0.02	<.001	−0.19	0.03	<.001
Reason-convenience	0.02	0.04	.58	−0.01	0.02	.65	−0.03	0.03	.31
Model 2: interactions between time since beginning to cohabit and reasons for cohabitation									
Intercept	4.24	0.06	<.001	1.67	0.03	<.001	5.62	0.04	<.001
Time since beginning to cohabit	−0.05	0.01	<.001	0.03	0.01	<.001	−0.01	0.01	.37
Reason-time together	0.15	0.06	.02	−0.07	0.02	.003	0.20	0.04	<.001
Reason-testing relationship	−0.19	0.05	<.001	0.10	0.02	<.001	−0.18	0.03	<.001
Reason-convenience	0.001	0.05	.98	0.02	0.02	.41	−0.03	0.04	.47
Time Since Beginning to Cohabit × Reason-Time Together	0.01	0.01	.11	0.003	0.01	.53	−0.002	0.01	.81
Time Since Beginning to Cohabit × Reason-Testing Relationship	−0.001	0.01	.87	−0.01	0.004	.21	−0.001	0.01	.91
Time Since Beginning to Cohabit × Reason-Convenience	0.01	0.01	.27	0.003	0.004	.44	−0.002	0.01	.81

Note. *SE* = standard error.

endorsement of spending time together was significantly associated with higher relationship satisfaction ($b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$), lower negative communication ($b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .001$), and higher dedication ($b = 0.19$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$) following cohabitation. Greater endorsement of testing relationship was significantly associated with lower relationship satisfaction ($b = -0.18$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$), higher negative communication ($b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$), and lower dedication ($b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$) following cohabitation. However, convenience was not associated with overall level of relationship satisfaction ($b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .58$), negative communication ($b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .65$), or dedication ($b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .31$), following cohabitation, which did not support Hypothesis 2c.

Model 1 results also showed a significant main effect of time since beginning to cohabit on relationship satisfaction, and negative communication, but not dedication (Table 1, Model 1). Specifically, relationship satisfaction declined ($b = -0.08$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$), whereas negative communication increased ($b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$) over time following

cohabitation, controlling for the three reasons for cohabitation. Dedication remained at a steady level over time following cohabitation ($b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = .38$), controlling for the three reasons for cohabitation. All Model 1 significant findings held the same when controlling for the nine demographic and relationship covariates.

Reasons for Cohabitation and Trajectories of Relationship Functioning

Contrary to Hypotheses 3a–3c, Model 2 results showed that reasons for cohabitation did not interact with time since beginning to cohabit to predict any of the three indicators of relationship functioning (Table 1, Model 2), suggesting that reasons for cohabitation did not predict overtime trajectories (i.e., slopes) of relationship functioning following cohabitation. In other words, people who endorsed varying levels of each reason followed similar trajectories of relationship functioning after cohabitation (albeit, at different levels). To help readers visualize overall mean levels and trajectories of relationship functioning at different levels of endorsement of

reasons, we plotted model-predicted levels of relationship functioning over time among participants who endorsed low (-1 *SD*) and high ($+1$ *SD*) levels of spending time together (Figure 1, Panel A), testing relationship (Figure 1, Panel B), or convenience (Figure 1, Panel C) based on Model 2 results, while holding the other two reasons at sample mean levels.

Additionally, the coefficients of the three reasons for cohabitation based on Model 2 indicated how reasons for cohabitation were associated with relationship functioning at the time of cohabitation (i.e., when time since beginning to cohabit equals zero). We found that greater endorsement of spending time together was associated with better relationship functioning (higher relationship satisfaction: $b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .02$; lower negative communication: $b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .003$; higher dedication: $b = 0.20$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$) at the time when cohabitation began. Conversely, greater endorsement of testing the relationship was associated with worse relationship functioning (lower relationship satisfaction: $b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$; lower negative communication: $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$; higher dedication: $b = -0.18$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$) at the time of cohabitation. These findings held when controlling for all nine covariates in the model. Convenience was not associated with any of the three indicators of relationship functioning at the time of cohabitation, $ps > .41$.

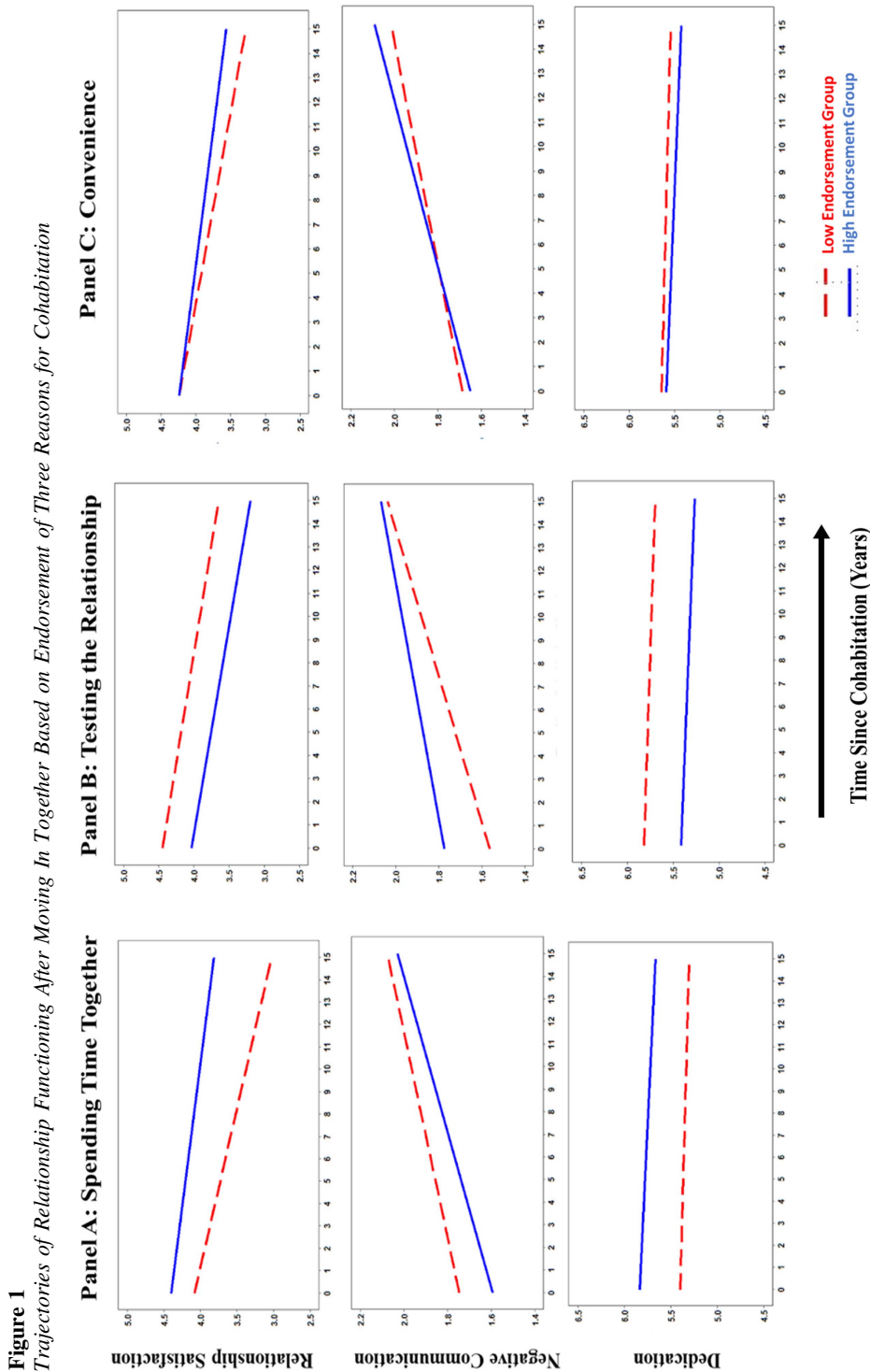
Discussion

Partners move in together for a variety of reasons, and knowing their reasons for cohabitation may offer insight into who may be at greatest risk for negative relationship outcomes. This study represents the first effort in examining how reasons for cohabitation are associated with relationship outcomes longitudinally. Overall, findings suggested that stronger endorsement of spending time together was associated with better relationship outcomes after moving in together, whereas stronger endorsement of testing the relationship was associated with worse relationship outcomes. How much someone said they moved in together out of convenience was not significantly associated with relationship outcomes. Reasons for cohabitation appeared to reflect couples' relationship quality at the time

of moving in together rather than altering its trajectories.

Regarding relationship dissolution (i.e., breakup), testing the relationship, but not spending time together or convenience, predicted likelihood of breakup after moving in together. Moreover, couples who cohabited to test their relationship entered cohabitation with lower relationship quality, compared to the other two reasons examined (spending time together and convenience). It may be that those who strongly endorse testing the relationship as a reason for cohabitation already experience doubts in their relationship before moving in together, and they believe that demonstrating commitment through moving in together will improve their preexisting (low) relationship quality or that their partner or relationship will "pass" the commitment test. In contrast to this expectation, these couples may discover that they are not compatible for longer term plans as they experience the added challenges and stress associated with living together (i.e., sharing finances, dividing household responsibilities, and reduced alone time). Despite the stressful nature of breaking up, choosing to end a low-quality relationship can be interpreted as a positive outcome itself. Couples may choose to consider alternative, lower stake ways to test the relationship (e.g., traveling together) than moving in together, as the latter may increase the risk of one being stuck in a low-quality relationship due to increased constraints (hence, greater difficulties associated with breaking up) after moving in with a partner.

Two out of the three reasons we examined—spending time together and testing relationship—showed significant associations with participants' levels of relationship functioning after moving in together. Specifically, greater endorsement of spending time together predicted higher overall levels of relationship functioning after moving in together, as indicated by higher relationship satisfaction, lower negative communication, and higher dedication. Conversely, greater endorsement of testing of the relationship predicted lower overall levels of relationship functioning after moving in together, as indicated by lower relationship satisfaction, higher negative communication, and lower dedication. It is notable that all significant findings held when accounting for a host of demographic (e.g., age, gender) and relationship characteristics (e.g., engagement status, relationship length). Convenience, however,



Note. This figure shows trajectories of three relationship functioning indicators among people with low ($-1\ SD$) and high ($+1\ SD$) endorsement of moving in to spend time together (Panel A), to test the relationship (Panel B), and out of convenience (Panel C). See the online article for the color version of this figure.

did not predict relationship dissolution or relationship functioning following cohabitation.

These results largely extend previous cross-sectional evidence linking intrinsic reasons for cohabitation (e.g., spending time together) with better relationship well-being (Rhoades et al., 2009a; Tang et al., 2014) and demonstrate that reasons for cohabitation can have implications for relationship outcomes that persist years after cohabitation. Our findings on spending time together and testing the relationship are largely consistent with prior evidence and theories on these two reasons. Previous literature has suggested that greater endorsement of intrinsic reasons (e.g., spending time together) is associated with less commitment ambiguity and higher relationship confidence (Rhoades et al., 2009a; Tang et al., 2014). Partners who invest in spending time together to build trust and dedication in their relationship are less likely to have relationship doubts due to already having a strong foundation of commitment prior to moving in together (Adams & Jones, 1997; Rhoades et al., 2010; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Surra & Hughes, 1997). On the other hand, those who move in largely to test their relationship are associated to have lower relationship functioning following cohabitation, which may reflect preexisting doubts and feelings of dissatisfaction with the relationship prior to cohabitation (Rhoades et al., 2009a). Thus, moving in together under these circumstances contributes to increased difficulty to end the relationship if one wishes to do so (e.g., due to sharing a lease or mortgage together), possibly leading individuals to feel “stuck” or trapped in the relationship (Stanley et al., 2004, 2006). Thus, our findings are consistent with past research associating higher relationship functioning with intrinsic reasons (e.g., spending time together) due to being commitment-driven (Rhoades et al., 2009a; Stanley & Markman, 1992), whereas testing the relationship may be associated with lower levels of commitment and relationship confidence, reflecting poorer relationship quality (Murrow & Shi, 2010; Rhoades et al., 2009a).

Those who move in together for commitment-based reasons (e.g., intrinsic reasons) may also have better long-term outcomes. Surra and Hughes (1997) described two commitment processes in their sample of premarital couples who reported their reasons for commitment and relationship quality: relationship-driven and event-driven.

Premarital partners who attributed changes in commitment over time due to positive attributes about the relationship or partner (e.g., relationship comfort and happiness), which they refer to as relationship-driven, were associated with higher relationship satisfaction and quality over time. They reported less changes in commitment compared to event-driven participants (e.g., premarital partners who attributed negative relationship beliefs to events outside of the relationship). Due to the deliberate nature of relationship-driven reasons (e.g., spending time together to enhance compatibility), they may be subject to less fluctuations in commitment (Surra & Hughes, 1997). Murrow and Shi (2010) similarly examined reasons (termed as “purposes” by original authors) for cohabitation and their associations with relationship quality, with “precursor to marriage” (e.g., definitive plans to marry) being associated with higher relationship confidence and future planning, which could reflect intrinsic reasons. In contrast, those who are less certain about their dedication to their partner may wish to trial their relationship through cohabitation before longer term plans (i.e., “trial marriage”), which is similar to testing the relationship examined in the present study, and reported lower relationship quality (Murrow & Shi, 2010).

Additionally, Stanley et al. (2006) proposed a theory called inertia to explain why partners stay living together despite dissatisfaction: Couples who move in with a lack of dedication to their partner may end up feeling “trapped” in the relationship, due to sharing a high amount of structural constraints that make it harder to break up (regardless of their dedication levels) and too costly to leave (Rhoades et al., 2011; Stanley et al., 2006). Consistent with our findings, these prior findings and theories support the idea that those moving in together to test the relationship may be both more likely to break up because their relationships are lower in quality while also being more likely to persist in low-quality relationship because cohabiting makes it harder to exit a relationship compared to dating and not cohabiting.

Convenience as a reason for cohabitation was not associated with any relationship outcomes examined, which did not support our hypotheses. Convenience as a reason itself may be neither a good nor bad indicator of relationship functioning, and its implications for relationship outcomes likely depend on the individual, relationship, and

situational contexts. Convenience as a reason for cohabitation may work in one's favor if in tandem with intrinsic reasons, or reflect a lack of commitment, if in the absence of intrinsic reasons. Further, given that convenience is by definition more relevant to the circumstances than to the relationship itself compared to the other two reasons, it is perhaps not so surprising that convenience yielded null findings when predicting relationship outcomes.

Although we found that certain reasons for cohabitation predicted relationship dissolution and overall levels of relationship functioning following cohabitation, none of the reasons predicted trajectories (i.e., slopes or change over time) of relationship functioning after moving in together. That is, regardless of their levels of endorsement for each reason, people's relationship functioning after moving in with their partner followed similar trajectories (albeit at different levels). People's levels of relationship functioning are already different *at the time of moving in together* depending on their levels of endorsement on spending time together and testing the relationship as reasons for cohabitation. Thus, it appears that people's reasons for cohabitation *reflect* their existing relationship quality rather than affecting its trajectories following cohabitation. In particular, these findings show that reasons such as testing the relationship predict future doubts or trouble within the relationship that follow the couple into their cohabiting relationship and remain at a stable level over time. As such, reasons for cohabitation may serve as a potential index of relational health in therapeutic settings and preventative relationship education courses.

There are several limitations of the present study. Importantly, this study only included people in opposite-sex relationships. Future research should examine whether current findings are generalizable to same-sex relationships. Future research could also examine how different reasons for cohabitation play out during cohabitation. For instance, moving in together to spend more time together may purposefully dedicate more time to one another, whereas those testing the relationship may set up ways to remain distinct and hurdles for another to pass as a test. Moreover, the data were collected 13–18 years ago. Although the participant demographics at the time of data collection were representative of the U.S.

population in terms of income, race, and ethnicity, the composition of the United States today includes more Hispanic and Asian people, along with greater income and education disparities (Sawyer & Marshall, 2024). Since then, societal attitudes toward cohabitation may have changed, and the current findings may not be generalizable to how and why certain groups decide to move in together due to increased housing inequities, income disparities, natural disasters, and gentrification in certain areas (Sawyer & Marshall, 2024). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic created mass disruptions to normal living conditions, work or job opportunities, and access to mental and physical health resources (Gruber et al., 2021), and it is possible that cohabitation with a romantic partner increased during this period due to mandated quarantines. As such, couples today may think about moving in together differently and endorse event-driven reasons more (e.g., financial necessity or convenience), instead of relationship-driven reasons, though these speculations require empirical examination by future research. Despite these limitations, the current findings point to the strengths of examining relationship-driven reasons as indices of pre-existing relationship quality within cohabiting couples. Spending time together, which couples endorse similarly today (Stanley & Rhoades, 2023), may hold weight in defining higher quality relationships and provide insight into stable characteristics of a relationship that persist years after cohabitation begins.

Implications and Applications

Clinicians, counselors, and relationship education programs can help guide conversations between romantic partners who are thinking about moving in together. They can advise couples to have deliberate conversations about why they want to cohabit, instead of “sliding” into moving in together with ambivalence or uncertainty (Lindsay, 2000; Stanley et al., 2006). Clinicians may choose to emphasize the positive relationship outcomes that are associated with intrinsic reasons for cohabitation, as well as to advise that moving in to test the relationship often does not lead to improved relationships outcomes they may hope for (e.g., it may create feelings of being trapped). For couples who wish to move in together to test the

relationship, clinicians may choose to work with the couple around the existing doubts they have about the relationship and explore alternative ways of testing and improving the relationship before moving in together. Partners who reflect on their reasons for cohabitation prior to moving in together might recognize how the positive and negative attitudes they felt toward their relationship or partner remained stable and static both during and after the transition to cohabitation. Couples who discuss their long-term compatibility with each other before moving in may create better relationship functioning outcomes in future plans together, or apart.

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