

Quality of Cohabiting and Marital Relationships among Young Couples

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Abstract

We investigated the quality of intimate relationship and its dependence on emotional intelligence and the sense of coherence in 36 cohabiting and 35 married young couples. The findings demonstrate that relationship quality perceived by cohabitators was akin to that of marrieds. There were gender differences in that the women perceived the relationship as less satisfying. The findings further demonstrate that both emotional intelligence and coherence were positively associated with the fineness of relationship perceived by both cohabitators and marrieds. A greater emotional engagement of female partners in the union may, however, mitigate the feeling of satisfaction they experience. We conclude that dyadic characteristics evolving from emotional intelligence and coherence are essential for the feeling of satisfaction from the intimate relationship, regardless of its type.

Keywords: cohabitation, coherence, emotional intelligence, marriage, intimate relationship

1. Introduction

The quality of intimate relationship has been the focus of family research for several decades (see Spanier & Lewis, 1980 for a review). Despite the widespread interest in the issue, the correlates of perceived satisfaction and stability in the relationship remain not full well clear. The results of studies differ widely depending on demographic factors, types of relationship, the number of years into the relationship, personality and social traits, etc (Brown & Booth, 1996). The issue is confounded by the recent sociological trends consisting of a sharp increase in cohabiting relationships among all ages, particularly clearly expressed in young people, and an accompanying decrease, or marked delays, in marriages. The Polish young generation is no exception to these trends, although Poland is still among European countries with relatively low levels of cohabitation. Cohabitation is a phenomenon that increases at an accelerated pace lately. The Polish National Census registry estimates the cohabiting relationships at 2.2% of all couples sharing a common household in 2002, which amounts to *ca* 400000 individuals engaged in this pattern of lifestyle (CSO 2003), as compared with 1.7% in 1995, and 1.3% cohabiting relationships in 1988. These figures show a remarkably increasing trend, although Poland drags behind some other countries in Europe, like those in Scandinavia, where cohabitation exceeds 10% of all unions. The phenomenon is of sociological relevance, as cohabitation has become an accepted lifestyle by more than 70% of younger Polish population aged below 30 as well as 30-40, even when cohabiting individuals do not intend to get married later on (Mynarska & Bernardi, 2007). Psychological consequences for relationship quality of cohabitation are an area of limited understanding. The quality of relationship is explicitly related to its stability, the ultimately desired core of any type of intimacy (Lewis & Spanier, 1979).

Therefore, the understanding of predictive factors of relationship quality is an important issue. Intimate relationship quality is a multidimensional phenomenon. The psychological certitude of relationship stemming from the formal, institutionalized marital bonding is one factor that may bear on the subjective perception of relationship quality. In the current study we set out to compare the relationship quality between cohabiting and married couples. We also sought to determine the role of emotional intelligence and the sense of coherence, the dimensions related to the abilities of adjustment, satisfaction, integration, and communication with the other person, in relationship quality of both types of unions. We addressed these issues by investigating married and cohabiting couples. We chose for the study couples consisting of young persons in the third decade of life, among whom the rate of cohabitation is highest, and on the premise that the fineness of a relationship at a younger stage of life may be an element in its future sustainment. Overall, we found that the dyadic overtones of emotional intelligence and coherence, but not the marital certitude, determine the quality of intimate relationship.

2. Subjects and Methods

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board for Research of the Institute of Psychology of Opole University, Poland. The study used a survey method in a cross-sectional routine. The respondents gave informed consent to the survey procedures after being informed about the anonymity and voluntarism of responses.

The study encompassed two cohorts of heterosexual couples: 35 married couples and 36 non-married cohabiting couples; i.e., a total of 71 women and 71 men, all having the first intimate relationship experience. The participating cohorts were closely homogenous. The average age was 25 years; range 19-33 years. 54% of the persons had high school education and 46% had college or university education. In the majority of couples, the level of education was same within a couple. The couples displayed socioeconomic and religious similarity, being of middle middle-class status and catholic observance. The predominant domicile of the couples were small cities (31%), the minority lived in villages (21%), with the remaining percentage living in towns of variable size. The basic enrolment criteria for both marital and cohabiting couples were remaining in a relationship for at least one year and sharing by a couple a common household. The average duration of remaining in relationship was 4.5 years; range 1-13 years. The majority of the surveyed couples were childless, whereas some had one child and just occasionally there were two children to a couple; the average number of children, on the whole, was 0.4 per couple.

Each individual in a couple was asked to complete a demographic survey which preceded the completion of questionnaires. The measures of three variables were adopted for the present study. The quality of relationship was a dependent variable in the study. Relationship quality was assessed in the study as the subjective assessment of relationship by each respondent in the couple on the dimensions of emotional intelligence and coherence. The assessment was done by means of the Questionnaire of Well-Matched Relationship by Plopa (2005). This is an evaluative measure that assesses satisfaction from relationship, which is taken as tantamount to its quality. The scale consists of 32 items adapted for interview studies. The respondent assesses the intensity of a given item perception on a 5-degree Likert scale, with the values 1 and 5 representing the minimum and maximum intensities, respectively. The scale assesses relationship quality in four dimensions: (i) Intimacy - relation based on mutual trust, closeness, inclusive of sexual relationship, and emotional openness and candor; (ii) Fulfillment - relation leading to the perception of global satisfaction which leads to the realization of one's virtues, life tasks, and satisfying partner and family roles; (iii) Similarity - a degree of congruity between the partners concerning the life goals, family obligations, and outlook for the future; and (iv) Disenchantment - the sense of life set-back by remaining in the relationship due to limited life opportunities, loss of independence and autonomy, often accompanied by avoidance-oriented strategy in daily living problem solving and lack of responsibility for relation sustainment. The scale is the most frequently used measure of relationship quality in Poland, with Cronbach's α ranging from 0.81 to 0.89.

There were two independent variables whose influence of relationship quality was investigated in the study: emotional intelligence and the sense of coherence. Emotional intelligence, understood as the ability to comprehend, discriminate, and control one's emotions and to effectively exploit that knowledge to manage one's and someone else's actions, was assessed with the INTE questionnaire by Schutte et al. (1998) in a Polish adaptation by Ciechanowicz, Jaworowska, & Matczak (2000).

The measure has originally been constructed on the basis of Salovey & Mayer's (1990) concept of emotional intelligence. It consists of 33 items on a 5-degree Likert scale and has a high internal consistency of Cronbach's α in a range from 0.83 to 0.87. The Sense of Coherence Scale (SOC-29) was used to assess the level of coherence in the couples studied. This instrument is based on Antonovsky's (1987) theory of salutogenesis in which coherence is defined as one's abilities to meet, understand, and manage upcoming life challenges. The level of coherence positively relates to the perception of life satisfaction and health and determines the optimal performance in response to stressful conditions. The SOC-29 scale is a reliable instrument assessing how people cope with stressful conditions (Eriksson & Lindström 2005). The measure consists of 29 items that are assessed on a 7-degree Likert scale and it has been adapted and validated for the Polish environment, with Cronbach's α of 0.87 (Pasikowski 2001).

Completion of all questionnaires, on average, required 20 min. Data are presented as means \pm SD of raw scores. The normality of data distribution was determined with Kolmogorov-Smirnov's test. Statistical analysis consisted of an unpaired or paired *t*-test as required for group comparisons. Associations of individual variables were assessed with Pearson's *r* method. A $P < 0.05$ was considered as indicative of a statistically significant difference between datasets. A commercial statistical package SPSS ver. 14 was used for the statistical elaboration.

3. Results

3.1. Analysis of psychological descriptors of marital and cohabiting relationships

The cohorts of married and cohabiting couples were surveyed regarding the levels of relationship quality, emotional intelligence, and coherence. Table 1 shows the obtained results of the joint assessment, i.e., with no regard for gender in either cohort. There were no appreciable differences in the mean scores of the aforementioned psychological features between the two groups of couples representing different relationship bonding.

Table 1. Psychological background of married and cohabiting couples

	Cohabitation ($n=72$)	Marriage ($n=70$)	
Quality of relationship	128.9 \pm 2.7	129.7 \pm 2.8	NS
Emotional intelligence	125.9 \pm 1.9	127.6 \pm 2.0	NS
Coherence	144.3 \pm 3.0	142.2 \pm 2.9	NS

Values are means \pm SE of raw psychometric scores; NS - non-significant for differences between the two types of relationship.

We extended the analysis by looking for possible gender-related differences in the psychological features surveyed. To this end we first compared the mean psychometric results for either gender between the two types of relationship studied. The comparison is displayed in Table 2. Clearly, there were no differences between the female or male cohorts of the two types of relationship. Gender differences appeared, however, within the couples representing each relationship; the differences had similar trends. The females perceived their intimate bond as being less satisfactory for them, and they attained a higher level of emotional intelligence compared with the males. There were no appreciable gender differences concerning the level of coherence.

Table 2. Gender stratification of the psychological background of married and cohabiting cohorts.

	Cohabitation		Marriage	
	Females ($n=36$)	Males ($n=36$)	Females ($n=35$)	Male ($n=35$)
Relationship quality	124.2 \pm 4.0	133.6 \pm 3.5*	125.6 \pm 4.0	133.9 \pm 3.9*
Emotional intelligence	128.0 \pm 2.7	124.1 \pm 2.7	131.2 \pm 2.9	124.0 \pm 2.6*
Coherence	143.5 \pm 4.6	145.1 \pm 3.9	142.8 \pm 4.6	141.6 \pm 3.8

Values are means \pm SE of raw psychometric scores. There were no significant within-gender differences between the two types of relationship; * $P < 0.02$ for inter-gender differences within each relationship.

3.2. Dependence of relationship quality on emotional intelligence and coherence

An analysis assessing how the perception of the quality of relationship vary together with emotional intelligence or coherence was performed on all individual data pooled from both married and cohabiting relationships, as the basic levels of these indices were alike, irrespective of the relationship type as shown in Table 1. The perception of relationship quality rose linearly with increases of both emotional intelligence and coherence ($P < 0.01$) (Fig. 1A & B). The slope of the relationship quality on emotional intelligence was, however, nearly double that on coherence, 1.14 vs. 0.69 ($P < 0.001$), pointing to the preponderance of the former in affecting the fineness of intimate relationship.

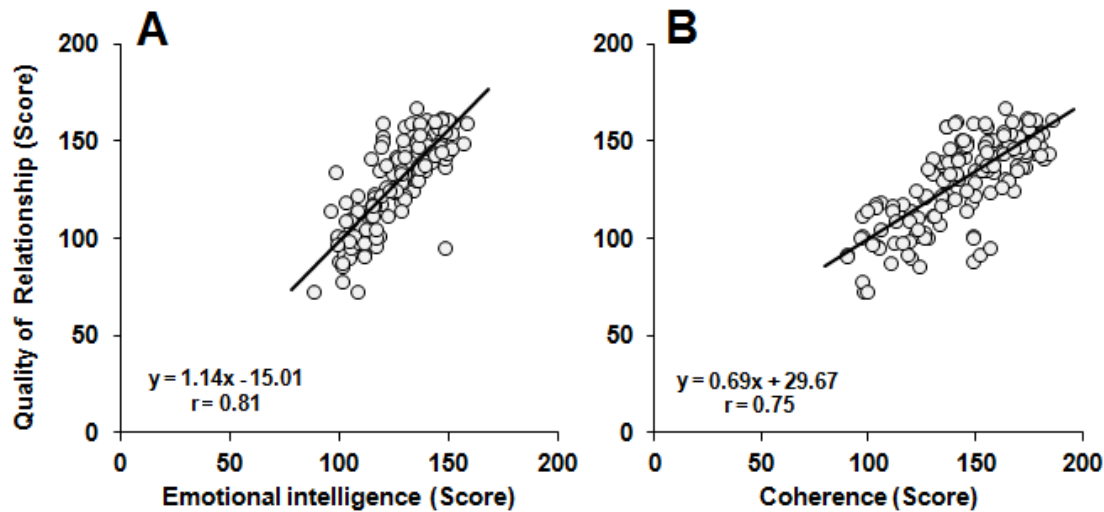


Fig. 1. Associations between the quality of intimate relationship and emotional intelligence (Panel A) and coherence (Panel B). Symbols represent individual data, with no regard to gender, pooled from both married and cohabiting relationships. Lines are linear regression lines in each panel.

The positive character of the associations between the fineness of relationship and both psychological indices remained highly significant when the subjects were stratified according to gender. Here, however, since the females perceived the relationships worse but displayed a higher level of emotional intelligence (see Table 2), the slope of the relationship quality on emotional intelligence was modestly, but significantly, lower in females than that in males; 0.51 ($r=66$) vs. 0.61 ($r=85$), respectively ($P < 0.01$). In contrast, the slope of the relationship quality on the level of coherence was greater in females than that in males; 0.95 ($r=82$) vs. 0.72 ($r=75$), respectively, although the difference did not assume statistical significance due to data scatter ($P > 0.05$).

4. Discussion

The present study demonstrates that the level of emotional intelligence and the sense of coherence displayed by spouses are the key psychological factors that underlie the fineness of an intimate relationship; be it married or unmarried. Moreover, both these factors positively interact with the subjective perception of relationship quality, regardless of its type. The study also demonstrates that the perceived quality of cohabiting relationship is akin to that of married relationship. The lack of appreciable differences in the relationship quality perceived by cohabiting and married couples was apparent when joint spousal assessments were taken into consideration. There were, however, gender differences, which were similar in both types of relationship. Women perceived the relationship as less satisfying compared with men. Simultaneously, women scored better than men at emotional intelligence. The corollary is that at the same level of emotional intelligence the perception of relationship quality was worse in women than in men.

Gender differences in emotional intelligence have been noted in other studies but the results are variable. The consensus prevails that women, in general, have an edge over men in the tests that appraise the emotional abilities for a happy and satisfying life.

This edge mostly concerns such dimensions as emotional empathy or interpersonal sensibility, i.e., the feeling what the other person feels or social skills and interaction, and to a lesser extent the control and management of one's emotions, particularly in upsetting situations (Goleman, 2001; Singh, 2002; Beisecker & Barchard, 2004). Other studies, however, point to an advantage in emotional intelligence in men (Chu, 2002; Ahmad, Bangash, & Khan, 2009). The issue of gender differences in emotional intelligence seems confounded by different methodologies used in different studies and by cultural background of populations investigated. In the present study we did not assess the peculiarities of emotional intelligence subscales. However, the results give a consistent impression that although a higher emotional intelligence is associated with a better perception of intimate relationships, it may actually have an inherent hampering effect on the perception of satisfaction from a relationship observable in women. That may be explicable by female partners being less resilient in upsetting situations of relationship or by their sentiment that the spouse does not live up to the empathic and socializing expectations, the factors in rapport with high emotional intelligence. The meaning of this distinction in the perception of relationship quality due to differences in emotional intelligence between women and men is unclear but it may reflect differential importance of relationship, being more complex and having more responsibility attributions in women than the facile solutions to complex partnership problems offered by male spouses.

Cohabitation has become an increasingly popular lifestyle worldwide. There are studies that address similarities and dissimilarities between cohabitation and marriage, mostly in terms of stability and delayed effects for later marriages (see Brown & Booth 1996 for a review). Less is known about the effects of cohabitation on the perceived quality of relationship. Understanding these effects seems important due to a sharply increasing rate of cohabitators treating this type of relationship as a substitution for marriage, and due to the effects of the perception of emotional well-being on individual's behavior and functioning.

The way cohabitators perceive relationship quality is by far a contentious issue. There are reports that cohabitators have worse relationship quality than married spouses. A number of factors are listed as plausibly responsible for that, such as greater instability of relationship or greater ease for parting away, more liberal attitude toward interpersonal relations and for having affairs, non-committal promises of marriage, etc. These factors put cohabitation at a disadvantage compared with marriages in terms of relationship quality (Nock 1995). Brown & Booth (1996) found that not only cohabitators have a worse relationship quality than marrieds, but the length of cohabitation negatively interacts with descriptors of good relationship quality such as fairness, conflict management, avoidance of interpersonal fights or disagreements. Others found a U-curved pattern of relationship satisfaction against time (Spanier, Lewis, & Cole, 1975); i.e., good feelings about it at the early and remote times of a union and a sharp drop at mid-term. In the present study we attempted to control for the demographic characteristics of respondents, who were in the third decade of life - the most frequent time of choosing cohabitation as a way of relationship - and at the first high arm of the U-curve of relationship quality, which is characterized by a still substantial degree of congruity of expectations and mutual interest in relationship. The results failed to substantiate appreciable differences in the subjective perception of relationship quality between cohabitators and marrieds. Therefore, institutional formalization of relationship in terms of a marriage certificate and a greater psychological certitude stemming from that do not contemporarily seem to be an issue influencing satisfaction from forming a fine relationship in the studied population of young Polish couples.

In the current study only two psychological constructs, emotional intelligence and coherence, both inherently having to do with the control of emotions, sensibility and manageability of situations, were related to the perception of satisfaction from intimate relationship. Understandably, emotional intelligence and coherence do not document the complex dynamics and changes in intimate relationships. Both, however, are considered to underline the interpersonal behaviors and communication (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey; Ciarrochi, Chan, & Caputi, 2000), which help achieve mutually desired aims and satisfaction from a union in a constructive and adaptive manner, and thus to be essential for the dyadic characteristics of relationships.

The respondents enrolled in the study were chosen on the basis of similarity of a number of demographic criteria such as age, education, income, religion, which may be considered a selection bias. The lack of differences found between the cohabiting and married couples might thus reflect the sameness of the selection criteria for both types of relationships rather than true inter-group differences. We, however, chose the above outlined study design on the premise that the simplicity of a pauci-variable approach may actually help contrast the relationship quality between married and cohabiting couples, all other factors being equal.

Despite the limitations and the narrow scope of the study we believe we have shown that there are no appreciable differences in the subjective perception of relationship quality between cohabiting and married couples, that dyadic faculties evolving from emotional intelligence and the sense of one's coherence are essential for the perception of relationship satisfaction, irrespective of its type, and that there are gender differences in that the more complex interpersonal emotional engagement of female partners in the relationship may mitigate the feeling of satisfaction they experience.

5. References

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