

Cohabitation vs. Marriage: Self-Monitoring and Self-Selection to Intimate Relationships

Christopher Leone¹ & LouAnne B. Hawkins²

Abstract

Cohabitation involves fewer restrictions than does marriage. High self-monitors have an unrestricted orientation to close relationships; low self-monitors have a restricted orientation to close relationships. We therefore predicted that high self-monitors would cohabit rather than marry, whereas low self-monitors were expected to marry rather than cohabit. Across three studies, participants indicated their current relationship status (married versus cohabitating), completed the 18-item Self-Monitoring Scale, and provided demographic and relationship-related information. Our prediction was confirmed in Study 1. In Study 2, this finding was replicated, and relationship longevity did not mediate self-monitoring effects on relationship choices. Self-monitoring differences were again duplicated in Study 3, but these divergent preferences were mediated by the presence-absence of children in relationships (but not by differential commitment to partners). Limitations in our work, future theoretical and empirical directions, and clinical/policy implications are discussed.

Keywords: self-monitoring, self-selection, marriage, cohabiting

1. General Introduction

In the past few decades, there has been an exponential increase in theoretical and empirical work on close relationships. Despite this plethora of knowledge, relatively little is known about the role that some personality factors play in the sort of relationships individuals choose to enter or avoid. This dearth of information is not without consequence given that the developmental trajectory of relationship process such as maintenance and stability is influenced by factors involved in relationship initiation. In this paper, the role of self-monitoring will be explored in two kinds of close relationships: marriage and cohabiting.

1.1 Self-Monitoring

Conceptualized as an enduring disposition, self-monitoring involves differences in the way people see themselves and organize their social worlds (for a thorough discussion of this construct, see Fuglestad & Snyder, 2009). Motivated by social/situational appropriateness, high self-monitors are attentive to social cues (e.g., norms, roles) and use their interpersonal skill and knowledge to adopt a situated identity that matches the context in which they currently find themselves. High self-monitoring individuals display considerable situation-to-situation variability in their behavior as they adjust their actions to changes in roles, norms, and other situational influences. Low self-monitors are instead particularly mindful of intra-psychic cues (e.g., values, attitudes) and use their intrapersonal skill and knowledge to adopt an identity that is stable across the many contexts in which they may find themselves. Low self-monitors do so because they are motivated by a desire for congruence between their behavior and their self. Indeed, their behavior tends to be cross-situationally consistent because those forces (e.g., values, attitudes) that affect their words and actions are relatively stable from place to place.

¹ Department of Psychology, University of North Florida, Jacksonville, FL. 32224, USA Email: cleone@unf.edu

² University of North Florida

1.1.1 Self-Monitoring and Romantic Relationships. These differences between high self-monitors and low self-monitors are evident in the way these two kinds of persons structure their interpersonal lives (see Leone & Hawkins, 2006, for a review). The social worlds of high self-monitors and low self-monitors are, respectively, fluid and stable. For example, compared to low self-monitors, high self-monitors think of close relationships as involving short-term exchanges with a limited future (Oner, 2002; Norris & Zweigenhaft, 1999). High self-monitors are very willing to end a romantic relationship in order to initiate a similar relationship with a new partner, whereas low self-monitors are reticent to leave their current romantic partner for another (Simpson, 1987; Snyder & Simpson, 1984). This differential willingness to dissolve current relationships may reflect greater attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance on the part of high self-monitors versus their low self-monitoring counterparts (Fuglestad, Leone, & Drury, 2019). This divergent readiness to terminate romantic relationships is also congruent with the tendency of high self-monitoring individuals (compared to their low self-monitoring counterparts) to avoid using constructive solutions while utilizing destructive reactions to conflict with their intimate partners (Gaines, Work, Johnson, Youn, & Lai, 2000).

1.1.2 Self-Monitoring and Marriage. These self-monitoring differences in dating carryover to marriage. High self-monitors are more likely than low self-monitors to have been divorced and remarried at least once (Leone & Hall, 2003). These divergent rates of divorce are not surprising given that (a) marital adjustment and satisfaction are lower while (b) marital distress is higher in high self-monitoring spouses than low self-monitoring spouses (Haferkamp, 1994; Leone & Hall, 2003; Richmond, Craig, & Ruzicka, 1991). It is perhaps not a coincidence that compared to their low self-monitoring counterparts, high self-monitors are more inclined to have sexual partners outside the confines of the current relationship (Snyder & Simpson, 1987).

Taken together, these findings paint two different portraits. High self-monitors have an unrestricted orientation to intimate relationship; that is, they feel comfortable in readily initiating but then dissolving intimate connections with others. Conversely, developing but then maintaining intimate connections is congruent with the needs of low self-monitors who seem to have a restricted orientation to such relationships. These portraits imply that cohabitation versus marriage may be differentially attractive to high self-monitors and low self-monitors.

1.2 Cohabitation versus Marriage

Cohabiting was at one time a relatively rare event but is now commonplace. For example, over 50% of American adults report cohabitating at some point (see Campbell & Wright, 2010, for a review of the literature). In the two decades from 1977 to 1997, there was a four-fold increase in the number of people cohabiting (Casper & Cohen, 2000).

There are many reasons for this change, and many of them have implications for self-monitoring. For example, there are differences in the financial, social, and sometimes familial as well as legal dynamics of dissolving marriages versus terminating cohabitations (cf. Amato & Previti 2003; Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008). That is, cohabitating relationships can be dissolved more readily and easily than marriages (Noller, 2006). Moreover, cohabiting entails more autonomy and less restrictiveness for partners compared to spouses (Axinn & Thornton, 2000; Schoen & Weinick, 1993). Consistent with this assertion, the divorce rate is higher among individuals who previously cohabited than for those who did not (Amato, 2010; Jose, O'Leary, & Moyer, 2010) - perhaps because marital satisfaction is lower among spouses who formerly cohabitated than those who did not (Coleman, Ganong, & Leon, 2006; Jose et al., 2010) or because individuals who cohabit are especially prone to having sexual partners other than their cohabiter (Forste & Tanfer, 1996). Last and contrary to commonplace intuitions, most cohabitating relationships do not lead to marriage but instead end within one to five years (Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006; Smock & Gupta, 2002).

In brief, the dynamics of cohabiting and marriage seem to parallel, respectively, the dynamics between the close relationships of high self-monitors and low self-monitors. That is, cohabitation is a comparatively fluid and short-term arrangement - attributes that should appeal to high self-monitoring individuals. Conversely, low self-monitors should be relatively more attracted to marriage - an arrangement that is stable and future oriented.

1.3 Self-Selection

Thus, self-monitoring theory and cohabitation research suggest a connection between self-monitoring propensities and choices concerning cohabitation versus marriage. Indeed, scholars have suggested that personality is most likely to manifest itself in the situations (e.g., social relationships) to which people select themselves (Ickes, Snyder, & Garcia, 1997). In this meta-theoretical view of personality, individuals are presumed to (a) recognize their own needs, goals, and other dispositionally-based motives, (b) know which social environments are conducive to and which social settings are detrimental to acting in certain ways, and (c) desire acting in a manner that suits their dispositionally-based motives. There is in fact considerable support for these assumptions (for a review of the literature, see Higgins & Scholer, 2008).

In several contexts, there is evidence that high self-monitors and low self-monitors do engage in self-selection. High self-monitors chose to interact with a prospective date in a romantic (as opposed to a nonromantic) setting but only if that person was physically attractive; low self-monitors chose to interact with a prospective date in a romantic (as opposed to a nonromantic) setting but only if that person was personally compatible (Glick, 1985). Given that marital and cohabitating relationships in western culture are a matter of personal preferences (Kephart, 1967; Simpson, Campbell, & Berscheid, 1986), choosing to one of the aforementioned relationships should reflect the disparate needs of low self-monitors and high self-monitors.

2. Study 1

The reasoning and findings outlined above concerning the nature of self-monitoring differences, the divergent dynamics in marriage versus cohabiting, and the motivational bases of self-selection lead to the following hypotheses. Given their needs, high self-monitors ought to choose a relationship in which it is easier to change partners if they so desire. Because cohabiting involves relatively fewer barriers to dissolution, high self-monitors should prefer cohabiting to marriage. By comparison, low self-monitors ought to choose a relationship that is compatible with their view of relationships as long-term exchanges. Hence, low self-monitors should prefer marriage to cohabiting because the former entails the stability that is congruent with relationship longevity (Amato, 2010; Coleman, Ganong, & Leon, 2006).

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Participants. Participants (26 males, 20 females) were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses. To be eligible for this study, these volunteers had to currently be either married ($n = 20$) or cohabitating ($n = 26$). Individuals who were single, dating casually or dating exclusively were prohibited from participation. In contrast to most college students, a majority of our participants (63%) were older (i.e., 24 years of age or more).

2.1.2 Procedure. Using a *true-false* answer format, participants completed the 18-item Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). Eight items were worded such that *true* was indicative of high self-monitoring (e.g., “In different situations and with different people, I often act like very different persons.”). Ten items were worded such that *false* was indicative of high self-monitoring (e.g., “At parties and social gatherings, I do not attempt to do or say things that others will like”). Scores for answers were summed such that higher scores correspond to high self-monitoring. Snyder and his colleagues have summarized elsewhere the psychometric properties of this measure as well as their responses to critiques of this scale (Fuglestad & Snyder, 2009). In this sample, a Cronbach’s alpha of .74 was obtained for scores on this scale. Last, participants answered several demographic questions concerning their sex (*male, female*), age (*18-23, 24-29, 30-35, 36-41, 42 or older*), and relationship status (*married, cohabitating*).

Self-monitoring has typically been framed in terms of two distinct types (Fuglestad & Snyder, 2009). Low self-monitors strive for self-congruence (one kind of motive), whereas high self-monitors endeavor to be socially appropriate (another kind of motive). Consistent with this view of qualitatively divergent motives, participants were classified as either high or low in self-monitoring based on a median split ($mdn = 11$) of the full range of scores for this sample.

Absent multicollinearity among predictors, using a single median split is unlikely to threaten statistical validity (Iacobucci, Popovich, Bakamitsos, Posavac, & Kardes, 2015). It should be noted that we had only one predictor in all of our analyses: self-monitoring. Additionally, self-monitoring has a heritable component (Gangestad & Snyder, 1985; Wolf, Spinath, Riemann, & Angleitner, 2009). When latent variables have heritable components, modeling a construct as a class variable can be justified (e.g., MacCallum, Zhang, Preacher, & Rucker, 2002; Meehl, 1992, 1999). Our use of median splits therefore seems to be appropriate.

2.2 Results

2.2.1 Preliminary Analyses. Individuals' sex (male vs. female) and self-monitoring status (high vs. low) are sometimes confounded (for a meta-analysis, see Day, Schleicher, Unckless, & Hiller, 2002). To determine if this confound was present in our sample, we conducted a chi-square analysis with participants' sex and self-monitoring as variables. There was a reliable association for our participants between these variables, $\chi^2(1, N = 46) = 9.94, p = .002$. Low self-monitors were disproportionately female ($n = 13$) than male ($n = 5$); high self-monitors were disproportionately male ($n = 21$) than female ($n = 7$). To adjust for this confound, we used participants' sex as a covariate in subsequent analyses.

2.2.2 Main Analyses. Because self-selection to marriage versus cohabitation was a binary choice, we employed logistic regression for our data analyses. Following recommendations for categorical data analysis (Agresti, 2002), we report maximum likelihood parameter estimates. Also following recommendations in the literature, we report 95% likelihood-ratio confidence intervals for these parameters (Funder et al., 2014). In our hierarchical logistic regression analysis, participants' sex was a control variable which was entered first into this analysis, relationship choice was an outcome variable, self-monitoring was a predictor variable.

As expected, there was a reliable association between relationship status and self-monitoring (maximum likelihood parameter estimate = 0.95, 95% [0.12, 1.79]), even after controlling statistically for sex differences (maximum likelihood parameter estimate = -1.27, 95% [-2.94, 0.40]). Of cohabiters in this sample ($n = 26$), high self-monitors (61.54%) outnumbered low self-monitors (38.40%). For spouses in this sample ($n = 20$), low self-monitors (80.00%) outnumbered high self-monitors (20.00%). That is, high self-monitors were more often than low self-monitors in relationships with fewer barriers to dissolution, whereas low self-monitors were more often than high self-monitors in relationships that entail stability.

2.4 Brief Discussion.

The results of our first investigation were consistent with our hypotheses which were predicated on the empirically-founded supposition that marriage and cohabiting involve different levels of relationship restrictiveness (Smock, 2000; Wiik, Bernhardt, & Noack, 2009) and on the theoretical conjecture that high self-monitors and low self-monitors are differentially attracted to these divergent intimate relationships (Fuglestad & Snyder, 2009; Leone & Hawkins, 2006). Our hypotheses were also based on the premise that individuals engage in self-selection vis-à-vis their overarching needs (Higgins & Scholer, 2008; Ickes et al., 1997). High self-monitors and low self-monitors are presumably aware of their fundamental interpersonal motives (i.e., desire for fluid versus stable relationships) and know they can freely establish partnerships (i.e., cohabitation versus marriage) that suit their motives. Because arranged marriages are not the norm in our society (Noller, 2006), this assumption concerning self-selection seems reasonable.

Despite confirmation of our expectations, several limitations of this initial investigation are concerning. Given the results of inferential statistics, our findings appear reliable. Nonetheless, confidence in the robustness of any finding is increased by reproducibility (Brewer, 2000; Funder et al., 2014), and we therefore sought to replicate our results in a second study.

Moreover, the sample size in our first study precluded other analyses (e.g., mediation) that might otherwise shed light on our results. Because relationship restrictiveness and relationship longevity are related (Rusbult, Coonsen, Kirchner, & Clarke, 2006), one likely mediator in this case is the differential length of cohabiting versus marriage (cf. Noller, 2006; Rose-Greenland & Smock, 2013). To determine if a self-monitoring and relationship selection (cohabiting vs. marriage) connection might be mediated by relationship longevity, a larger sample size was used in our second study to provide statistical power for such a determination.

3. Study 2

3.1 Method

3.1.1 Participants. One hundred fourteen participants (32 males, 82 females) were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses. As in our first investigation, volunteers had to be currently either married ($n = 44$) or cohabitating ($n = 70$) to be eligible for this study. A majority of this sample (57.9%) was representative of many college students' age (18 – 23 years old). All participants indicated they had been married/cohabiting for at least 12 months.

3.1.2 Procedure. Participants in our second study completed the 18-item Self-Monitoring Scale using a *true-false* answer format (Snyder, 1974). Their scores on this scale were internally consistent ($\alpha = .71$). For reasons mentioned previously, participants were classified as either high or low in self-monitoring using a median split ($mdn = 8$) of the scores for this sample.

Besides identifying their sex (*male* vs. *female*) and relationship status (*married* vs. *cohabiting*), participants indicated the length of their relationships. Of the five options, no one chose *less than 12 months*. They instead chose *12 months to 24 months* (26.3%), *25 months to 36 months* (28.1%), *37 months to 48 months* (21.1%), or *more than 48 months* (24.6%).

3.2 Results

3.2.1 Preliminary Analyses. As in Study 1, a chi-square analysis was performed to identify a potential confound between participants' sex and self-monitoring in this second sample. There was a relationship between these two classifications, $\chi^2(1, N = 114) = 7.21, p = .007$. We accordingly used participants' sex as a covariate in our subsequent analyses.

3.2.2 Main Analyses. To determine if self-monitoring effects on relationship choice were direct, indirect, or both, we performed a hierarchical logistic regression analysis using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). In this analysis, participants' sex was a covariate entered first into this analysis, self-monitoring was a predictor variable, relationship choice was an outcome measure, and relationship length was a mediator variable. Because our outcome measure was binary, parameter estimates involve odds ratios and were therefore calculated using a Newton-Raphson iteration algorithm (Hayes, 2013).

As anticipated, there was a direct effect of self-monitoring on relationship choice, parameter estimate = 1.18, [+0.28,+2.09]. Although relationship length was related to participants relationship status, parameter estimate = -0.79, [-1.20,-0.39], it did not mediate the connection between self-monitoring and relationship choice, parameter estimate = +0.33, [-0.01,+0.86]. Among the cohabiters in this sample ($n = 70$), high self-monitors (57.14%) were disproportionately represented compared to low self-monitors (42.86%). Low self-monitors (77.27%) were more likely than high self-monitors (22.73%) to be among the married participants ($n = 44$). As in our first study, a relationship (i.e., cohabiting) that involves less restrictiveness was more often chosen by high self-monitors than low self-monitors, whereas a relationship (i.e., marriage) that typically entails higher levels of stability was more often chosen by low self-monitors than high self-monitors - even after statistically controlling for effects of sex differences on relationship choice, parameter estimate = +0.50, [-0.49,+1.49].

3.3 Brief Discussion

Our second study provided additional support for our overarching hypotheses concerning self-monitoring and relationship choice. This self-selection is consistent with our reasoning that high self-monitors seek out relationships like cohabiting because such relationships allow a detachment that is compatible with their unrestricted orientation to close relationships (Fuglestad & Snyder, 2009; Leone & Hawkins, 2006). This self-selection is also consistent with our reasoning that low self-monitors seek out relationships like marriage because such relationships necessitate an involvement that is congruent with their long-term orientation to close relationships (Fuglestad & Snyder, 2009; Leone & Hawkins, 2006).

More generally, these findings dovetail nicely with the proposition that personality is often manifested in the sort of situations that people selectively seek or avoid (Higgins & Scholer, 2008; Ickes et al., 1997) and that cohabiting arrangements do not last as long as marriages (cf. Noller, 2006; Rose-Greenland & Smock, 2013).

Interestingly, the discrepant length of cohabitating and marital relationships in our sample was not a mediator of the differential preference of high self-monitors and low self-monitors for cohabitating and marriage respectively. That absence naturally begs the question as to what factors might mediate the connection between self-monitoring differences and self-selection to cohabitation and marriage.

One such mediating factor might be children. Although it is now more common to have children outside of marriage (US National Center for Health Statistics, 2003), marital couples are still more likely than their unmarried counterparts to have children (e.g., Cherlin, 2010; Taylor, 2010), and the presence or absence of children is a structural factor related to relationship stability/dissolution (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010). That is, spouses are less likely to get divorced when they have children than when they do not. Indeed, potential harm to their children and/or the loss of access to their children is the reason spouses most frequently give for their reticence to get divorced (cf. Knoester & Booth, 2000; Previti & Amato, 2003).

Given that children are more likely to be absent in cohabitating relationships and the absence of children in households facilitates relationship dissolution, these considerations may impact high self-monitors' preferences for cohabitation. Because marriage is more stable than cohabiting (Hsueh, Morrison, & Doss, 2009; Stanley, Rhoades, Amato, Markman, & Johnson, 2010) and the presence of children seemingly enhances the stability of close relationships (Amato, 2010), these factors might influence the preferences of low self-monitors for marriage.

Additionally, self-monitoring differences in self-selection to cohabitating versus marital relationships may be a product of commitment. Degree of commitment is a potent predictor of relationship stability and mediates the effects of other forces (e.g., relationship satisfaction, perceived alternatives) on long term relationship outcomes (see Rusbult et al., 2006, for a review of the literature). Compared to spouses, cohabiters are less committed to their partners (Lichter et al., 2006; Smock & Gupta, 2002; Wiik et al., 2009). In light of their divergent orientations to close relationships, it follows that high self-monitors should choose cohabitation which entails less commitment (congruent with their dispositions), whereas low self-monitors should choose marriage which entails more commitment (congruent with their dispositions).

Given the reasoning outlined above, we expected that children would more often be present in the relationships of low self-monitors than high self-monitors and this presence or absence would mediate the connection between self-monitoring and marriage/cohabiting. We further expected that low self-monitors would be more committed to their partners than would high self-monitors and differential commitment would mediate the connection between self-monitoring and marriage/cohabiting. These hypotheses were tested as follows.

4. Study 3

4.1 Method

4.1.1. Participants. From undergraduate courses, 53 males and 100 females were recruited for our third study. As before, participation was restricted to individuals who were either married ($n = 77$) or cohabitating ($n = 76$). Only a statistical minority (31.4%) of sample were typical college students (i.e., ages 18-22). The vast majority (85.60%) of these participants reported that they had been with their current spouse/partner for more than 12 months.

4.1.2 Procedure. In this third study, self-monitoring was assessed as it was in our other two studies. Scores on this scale for this sample were internally reliable ($\alpha = .76$). As before, participants were classified as either low or high self-monitors based on a median split ($mdn = 9$) of the full range of scores for this sample.

Participants in this study provided the same descriptive information about themselves (sex) and their relationship (relationship type, relationship longevity) that our other participants supplied. Participants in Study 3 also reported how many biologically based children (0, 1, 2, 3, 4 or more) they had with their spouse/partner. In this investigation, participants also completed a measure of psychological commitment to their spouses/partners: the 12-item commitment subscale of the Triangular Love Scale (Sternberg, 1986). Participants responded to items (e.g., "I view my commitment to as a matter of principle.", "I would stay with through the most difficult times.") using a 5-point scale (*not at all, somewhat, moderately, quite a bit, and extremely*). The psychometric properties of this measure have been summarized elsewhere (cf. Graham, 2011; Sternberg, 1997). Scores on this commitment subscale are (a) higher for people in married than unmarried relationships and (b) predictive of relationship satisfaction in those relationships (Acker & Davis, 1992). In our sample, $\alpha = .94$ for scores on this subscale.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Preliminary Analyses. As in our prior studies, a chi-square analysis was performed to identify any multicollinearity between participants' sex and self-monitoring in this sample, and this confound did exist, $\chi^2(1, N = 153) = 8.34, p = .004$. Females were more likely to be low self-monitors ($n = 64$) than high self-monitors ($n = 36$); males more often were high self-monitors ($n = 32$) than low self-monitors ($n = 21$). This confound was statistically controlled by using participants' sex as a covariate in our subsequent analyses.

4.2.2 Main Analyses. To determine if self-monitoring effects on relationship choice were direct and/or indirect, we again performed a hierarchical logistic regression analysis using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). In this analysis, self-monitoring was a predictor variable, relationship choice was an outcome variable, and participants' sex was a covariate (entered first into our analysis). Commitment and the number of children in a household were mediating variables. Parameter estimates were calculated using a Newton-Raphson iteration algorithm (Hayes, 2013).

Unlike our results from Studies 1 and 2, there was no direct effect of self-monitoring on relationship choice (parameter estimate = +0.37, [-0.38,+1.12]) - even after controlling for the effects of sex differences on these choices (parameter estimate = +0.01, [-0.78,+0.79]). It should be noted, however, that consistent with the results of our other studies, cohabiters ($n = 76$) were more often high self-monitors (57.89%) than low self-monitors (42.11%). Additionally, spouses ($n = 77$) were more often low self-monitors (58.44%) than high self-monitors (41.56%).

There was a link between commitment and relationship choice, parameter estimate = -0.05, [-0.84,-0.01]. Commitment was higher among spouses than cohabiters. However, commitment did not mediate the connection between self-monitoring and relationship choice (parameter estimate for this indirect effect of self-monitoring on relationship choice = -0.06, [-0.35,+0.07]). High self-monitors were no less likely than their low self-monitoring counterparts to be committed to their partners (parameter estimate = +1.38, [2.07,+4.82]).

There also was a connection between the number of children in a household and relationship status (parameter estimate = -1.42, [-2.11,-0.73]). There were more children in married households than in cohabitating households. Additionally, the number of children in a household mediated the connection between self-monitoring differences and relationship choices (parameter estimate for this indirect effect of self-monitoring on relationship choice = +0.91, [+0.38,+1.82]). Compared to low self-monitors, high self-monitors had fewer children in their households (parameter estimate = -0.64, [-0.93,-0.34]) and, as mentioned above, were more likely to be cohabitating than married.

4.3 Brief Discussion

Findings in our third study once again support the premise that cohabiting and marriage are differentially attractive to high self-monitors and low self-monitors respectively. Our results also corroborate a basic premise of the self-selection meta-theoretical approach to personality (i.e., personality processes are evident in the kind of situations - including relationships - people selectively seek or avoid). This third investigation, however, provides some insight into the dynamics involved in the decisions of high self-monitors to opt more often for cohabitation and for low self-monitors to more frequently prefer marriage.

Given that cohabiters are less committed to their partners than are spouses (for a synopsis of this research, see Noller, 2006), we anticipated that differential commitment might mediate self-monitoring differences in preferences for marriage versus cohabiting. Commitment was related to relationship choice (i.e., marriage versus cohabiting) in our sample. It did not, however, mediate these divergent self-monitoring preferences we observed.

What mediated the differential attractiveness of cohabiting versus marriage for high self-monitors and low self-monitors, respectively, was the presence of children in their households. Divorce is related to problems in children's academic, social, and intrapersonal functioning (see Amato, 2010, for a literature review). Movement between divorced parents' homes is often distressing for children (Brown, Werner, & Altman, 2006), and issues in parenting stepchildren is a major concern for individuals who remarry (Coleman et al., 2006). These problems may be generally known and, if so, could be factors in individuals' choices to cohabitate versus marry.

Although high self-monitors might choose to cohabit simply to avoid constraints on relationship dissolution, they may choose to avoid marriage in order to circumvent negative consequences (e.g., children's poor academic, social, and intrapersonal functioning) that might occur in a marriage including children. Likewise, low self-monitors presumably seek to marry because the stability of marriage is compatible with their needs, but they may also be inclined to marry because they anticipate such a relationship - being more stable than cohabiting - is better suited for raising children and they desire to have a family. Although our results concerning mediation are consistent with this reasoning, these alternative/additional motives for self-monitoring decisions about relationships are a matter for future investigations.

5. General Discussion

Across three investigations, high self-monitors gravitated toward cohabiting rather than marriage, whereas low self-monitors favored marriage over cohabiting. These self-monitoring differences were not moderated by structural features (e.g., longevity) or psychological processes (e.g., commitment) associated with these two kinds of relationships. These divergent choices of high and low self-monitors were, interestingly, related to one relational feature (absence vs. /presence of children) known to be a factor in maintaining or dissolving close relationships.

5.1 Implications for Self-Monitoring

Our results converge nicely with the self-monitoring literature (for a synopsis, see Fuglestad & Snyder 2009). High self-monitors engineer their worlds in ways that allow them to quickly and skillfully move from one relationship to another (Fuglestad & Snyder 2009). Low self-monitors also construct their social worlds but do so in ways that facilitate stability.

Our findings also dovetail nicely with other self-selection investigations (e.g., Brown, White, & Gerstein, 1989; Snyder & Gangestad, 1982). Glick (1985), for instance, discovered that choosing to enter or avoid romantic situations was driven by a partner's personal compatibility for low self-monitors and a partner's physical attractiveness for high self-monitors. Because self-selection in our three investigations concerned interactions that covered considerable periods of time and entailed substantial consequences for relationship partners, our findings extend previous theoretical and empirical work on self-monitoring differences in self-selection.

5.2 Limitations in Interpretation

In our studies, self-monitoring differences were portrayed as a causal factor in individuals' decisions to enter/avoid qualitatively dissimilar relationships. In doing so, temporal precedence was assumed for the emergence of self-monitoring propensities. Consistent with this assumption, self-monitoring differences (a) have a heritable component (Gangestad & Snyder, 1985), (b) emerge relatively early in life (Graziano, Leone, Musser, & Lautenschlager, 1987), and (c) remain stable for individuals in early, middle and late adulthood (cf. Allen, 1986; Day et al. 2002). Moreover, people in Western societies do not typically enter into cohabiting/marital arrangements until late adolescence or early adulthood (Surra & Gray, 2006). Nonetheless, it is possible that relationship experiences might alter self-perceptions. Individuals who chose to marry may come to view themselves as persons (i.e., low self-monitors) who value long-term, stable relationships, whereas persons who choose to cohabit may infer they are individuals (i.e., high self-monitors) who desire short-term relationships which they can easily dissolve.

Furthermore, our self-monitoring effects might be a product of a third variable: sociosexual orientation. Compared to those with restricted sociosexual orientations, individuals with unrestricted sociosexual orientations have favorable attitudes about casual sex and report engaging in sex outside of committed relationships (for a review of the literature, see Simpson, Wilson, & Winterheld, 2004). Not coincidentally, high self-monitors report being comfortable with casual sexual encounters, whereas low self-monitors prefer sexual activity in stable relationships (Snyder et al. 1986). Perhaps compared to their low self-monitoring counterparts, high self-monitors might prefer cohabitation over marriage because they (a) are inclined to engage in extra-relationship sex, (b) know that such behavior - if discovered - is often fatal for the future of relationships, and (c) understand that the negative consequences of relationship termination are greater in marital than cohabiting relationships.

5.3 Future Directions

Addressing questions of causality is a matter for subsequent research. Additionally, researchers need to examine whether other psychological processes might mediate and/or moderate self-monitoring differences in marriage and cohabiting.

Differences in attachment anxiety/avoidance are related to a variety of outcomes in different kinds of relationships (Castellano, Velotti, & Zavattini, 2010). For instance, individuals who are motivated to avoid intimacy in close relationships are also likely to get divorced (e.g., Ceglian, & Gardner, 1999). In a similar manner, religiosity is connected to outcomes in close relationships (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2008). A lower risk of divorce is, for example, correlated with more frequent attendance at religious services (Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, 2009).

One can envisage connections among these variables, self-monitoring, and preferences for marriage versus cohabiting. High self-monitors may purposely segment their interpersonal networks to avoid psychological intimacy with any one network member. If so, then high self-monitors' preference for cohabiting may reflect a fear of intimacy (Fuglestad, Leone, & Drury, 2019). Driven by internal states, low self-monitors who are religious may internalize the tenets of their faith, and expectations of long-term if not permanent commitments to partners is a component in many religious traditions (Mahoney et al. 2008).

In addition to these potential mediators/moderators, other processes merit attention. Although we found a reliable connection between self-monitoring and relationship choice (marriage versus cohabiting), this connection was far from perfect. In all three of our samples, some low self-monitors were cohabiting while some high self-monitors were married. These exceptions to the overall trend we observed naturally beg the question as to the motives of these low self-monitors and high self-monitors.

One correlate of cohabiting is a deficit in interpersonal coping skills (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002). Such skills are less developed in low self-monitors than in high self-monitors (Fuglestad & Snyder, 2009; Snyder, 1979). Perhaps low self-monitors who gravitate toward cohabiting do so because they recognized they lack the abilities necessary to maintain a more involved relationship like marriage.

Another factor related to cohabiting is the absence/presence of children in households. Individuals may recognize that as scholars have that children's outcomes are enhanced by stable relationships between parents (Amato, 2010). High self-monitors have more social knowledge than do their low self-monitoring counterparts (Snyder & Cantor, 1980). Consequently, high self-monitors who choose to marry may do so in order to provide a stable familial environment in which their offspring would thrive - an outcome not incompatible with maintaining a socially desirable image as a competent parent.

5.4 Conclusion

In summary, much is known about self-monitoring differences in friendships and dating, but little has been discovered about these differences in other intimate relationships like marriage and cohabiting. Before a full understanding can be obtained of the role that self-monitoring differences play in intimate relationships, much more attention must be given to those conditions that give rise to these divergent orientations, those psychological processes that mediate the linkage between such differences and proximal relationship outcomes, and the long-term consequences for high self-monitors and low self-monitors of varying relational experiences.

6. References

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