Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk
A professional journal for the social worker
w: https://socialwork.journals.ac.za/pub e: socialwork@sun.ac.za eISSN: 2312-7198 (online)
Vol. 60, No .2, 2024
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15270/60-2-1303

CONSTRUCTION AND EXPRESSION OF COMMITMENT IN COHABITATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Phuti Nathaniel Kgadima

University of South Africa, Department of Social Work, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6385-5378 *kgadinp@unisa.ac.za*

Article received: 16/03/2023; Article accepted: 10/09/2023; Article published: 14/06/2024

ABSTRACT

Cohabitation is often misconstrued as consisting of a relationship characterised by a low level of commitment. However, commitment in cohabitation is multidimensional, as it allows a couple to demonstrate their love in different ways, without necessarily conforming to a particular traditional formality. It is a private and personal commitment between the cohabiting partners concerned, founded on principles of trust. The current study suggests that commitment in heterosexual cohabitation is closely aligned with the couple's intentions. Through the lenses of commitment and symbolic interactionist theories**,** this article explored how cohabitees construct and express commitment in their relationship. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study involved 21 purposively selected heterosexual cohabitees who are involved in a monogamous relationship. Data were generated through conducting semi-structured face-to-face interviews, using open-ended questions contained in an interview guide which were subsequently analysed thematically. Principles of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability were adhered to throughout the research process.

Keywords: cohabitation; commitment; constraints; dedication; marriage

INTRODUCTION

Commitment is regarded as a key component in establishing a relationship that the pair involved wishes to preserve. As a belief, commitment binds an individual to a particular course of action (Tang & Curran, 2012). In romantic relationships, commitment serves as a reliable predictor of the stability of the covenant entailed (Carter, Duncan, Stoilova & Phillips, 2015; Sniezek, 2013). In cohabitation, commitment is traditionally understood in basic terms, such as whether a couple is planning to marry (Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2012). The current researcher argues that individuals in any relationship, irrespective of their status, can demonstrate commitment.

The primary goal of the present article is to provide an understanding of how cohabitees construct and express commitment in their relationship. This goal emanates from the dearth of empirical knowledge currently on how partners in general, and cohabitees in particular, express commitment to each other (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2014). Similarly, other authors contend that, despite its significance, commitment has not previously received close attention in the literature on cohabitation (Rhoades *et al*., 2012). Such a limitation in the research is evident, even though exploring how commitment is constructed and expressed in cohabitation could help the practitioners involved to understand how cohabitation functions as a relationship.

The first part of this article presents a brief review of the literature on the nature of commitment in cohabitation, with particular focus on how the phenomenon is defined and constructed in the cohabitees' everyday life. The theoretical framework that guided this study is provided in the second section. Third, the methodology is discussed, followed by the presentation of biographical profiles of the participants. The article then synthesises the key findings made, followed by an outline of the implications for social work practice.

MANIFESTATION OF COMMITMENT IN COHABITATION

Researchers often hold a misconception that cohabitees are generally less committed than are those who marry (Forrest, 2014). However, contradictory findings suggest that cohabiting relationships are characterised by a considerable amount of commitment (Berrington, Perelli-Harris & Trevena, 2015). Commitment in cohabitation is multidimensional, allowing the couple involved to demonstrate their love in myriad ways, without necessarily conforming to a particular traditional regime. Cohabitation is a private and personal commitment between cohabiting partners. Commitment is founded on the principles of trust, fidelity and support for each other, none of which is a definitive trait clearly indicating the status of the relationship concerned.

Commitment in cohabitation is closely aligned with a couple's intentions. Cohabitation, as an alternative to marriage, exclusively describes the state of those who intend to cohabit permanently, without ever marrying (Robertson *et al*., 2016). Such couples tend to live in committed, long-term cohabitation without marrying, either because they cannot legally marry, or because they reject the idea of marriage. The latter group might prefer to cohabit without marrying, because they see marriage as a patriarchal, heterosexist or religious institution which they wish to avoid (Baker & Elizabeth, 2014). For all couples who are in this type of cohabitation, marriage is seen as being unnecessary (or unavailable), leading them to prefer committing to a relationship of cohabitation instead. Yet rather than cohabiting in order to be a position to delay or reject the institution of marriage, some cohabitees opt for such a living arrangement as an expression of an intention to get married. For such cohabitees, marriage is the ultimate sign of commitment. The last group cohabits to test a relationship, so as to establish whether such an arrangement could serve as a precursor to a good marriage (Baker & Elizabeth, 2014). Cohabiting can therefore be seen as a step forward in a relationship, but one that is often assumed to be lacking in concrete commitment (Harris, 2021).

CONCEPTUALISATION OF COMMITMENT IN COHABITING RELATIONSHIPS

Major theories of commitment highlight those issues that problematise the terminating of relationships (Rhoades *et al*., 2012). In an attempt to understand the diverse dimensions of commitment, this article is guided by two theoretical frameworks, namely commitment theory symbolic interactionist theory. Weigel and Ballard-Reisch (2014) argue that it is important to understand the connections between the behaviours and perceptions of both partners. Symbolic interactionist theory was deemed to be the more relevant theory, in terms of assessing the day-to-day manifestations of commitment in cohabiting relationships.

COMMITMENT THEORY

Stanley and Markman's (1992) perspective on commitment was employed in the development of this article (Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2009). With regard to cohabitation, this perspective refers to the desire to persist in a relationship (*dedication commitment*) and to the forces that make it difficult to leave a relationship, regardless of that desire (*constraints commitment*). Constraints denote the moral obligation to stay together. This dimension, which is also termed *structural commitment*, also implies the '*have to*' aspect of commitment, which entails the feeling of being compelled to stay in the relationship (Tang & Curran, 2012).

In contrast to the above, those who are highly dedicated to their relationship tend to make sacrifices for their partners and relationships, and tend also to think in terms of "we" and "us" (Rhoades *et al*., 2012). This p*ersonal* commitment refers to the "*want to*" aspect of commitment, which is based on the individuals' attraction to their partner and on the intensity of the relationship itself (Tang & Curra, 2012).

The proponents of the above perspective, however, caution that it is important to note that dedication and constraint commitment are often related. They explain that individuals might choose to become constrained because they feel dedicated, with the behaviours undertaken based on such dedication potentially leading to increased constraints in the future (Rhoades *et al*., 2012). Similarly, Berrington *et al*. (2015) contend that both dimensions of commitment – namely dedication and constraints – can be expressed within the structure of the amount of commitment that is present in the relationship.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST THEORY

Symbolic interactionist theory describes the role played by cultural symbols in relationships (Silver & Lee, 2012). The theory is premised on the assumption that "human beings live in the world of meaningful symbols, and they continuously react, enact and respond to those symbols" (Hausmann, Jonason & Summers-Effler, 2011:320). Proponents of the theory suggest that individuals place symbolic importance on objects, people and relationships, based on the meaning-making processes derived from social interaction (Willoughby, Hall & Luczak, 2013). Such symbols are socially constructed, understood and experienced, as they reflect values, attitudes and beliefs (Kaasila & Lauriala, 2010:856; Kelley & Gruenewald, 2015; Roussel, Monaghan & Javerlhiac, 2010).

Symbolic interactionist theory is applied to the phenomenon of cohabitation so as to enable exploration of the meanings that couples attach to their interactions in everyday life, which

either increases or decreases the couple's commitment to their relationship (Roussel *et al*., 2010). The theory further explains how, and why, certain cultural symbols are significant for the quality of the relationship (Adamsons, 2010). Although symbolic interactionist theory is often criticised for its lack of empirical evidence (Hausmann *et al*., 2011), it is apparently effective in terms of coming to an understanding of how cultural symbols contribute towards the quality of cohabiting relationships. In cohabitation, such tangible acts as a couple buying a house together, the merging of finances, as well as childbearing and rearing, are likely to communicate the couple's extent of commitment and dedication to the relationship. Similarly, introducing a partner to one's family may be another sign of one's commitment to a relationship.

METHODOLOGY

This article explores how cohabitees construct and express commitment in their relationship. The qualitative, exploratory, descriptive and contextual approaches elicited first-hand personal accounts on the construction and expression of commitment in cohabitation. This qualitative inquiry was guided by a specific research question (Creswell, 2016): How do cohabitees construct and express commitment in their relationship?

Using face-to-face semi-structured interviews, data saturation was reached after the seventeenth interview, although four additional interviews were conducted to consolidate the themes involved. All the interviews undertaken were largely conducted in English for between 30 and 45 minutes. Both purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed, with the latter technique being the most effective in terms of identifying participants for the current study, considering that some cohabitees were discreet regarding the divulging of their living arrangements. The study, in short, mainly considered heterosexual cohabitees who were involved in a monogamous relationship at the time of the research, with some of the criteria involved being discussed under the description of the sample below. The data were analysed thematically, using Tesch's approach, as outlined in Creswell (2016). The credibility of the findings was ensured by means of triangulation and through consulting various knowledgeable sources on cohabitation. Confirmability was achieved through the documenting of participants' submissions in the form of a journal during data collection and the subsequent analysis. To ensure dependability, the findings were validated through an independent coder. In the current study, the element of transferability was enhanced by means of providing thick descriptions of the findings, along with the appropriate vignettes and quotations.

Ethical clearance was provided by the University of South Africa's College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee (35288353 _CREC_CHS_2023). The following ethical considerations were observed: obtaining written informed consent from the participants; assurance of confidentiality; protection of participants from harm; and confidential managing of the research data.

Description of the sample

This section presents key biographical profiles of those participants who met the criteria for inclusion. Biographical information included namely age, gender and duration of the participants' relationships.

Age distribution of the participants

As age is an important predictor of cohabitation (Moore & Govender, 2013), it was included in the biographical profiles of the participants. Individuals between the ages of 25 and 35 were eligible to participate in the study. The biographical profile of the participants shows that ten participants were between the ages of 25 and 30 years, while eleven were between the ages of 31 and 35 years at the time of the interviews. The age distribution of the participants is consistent with the assertion that cohabitation is a common arrangement among young cohorts aged between 25 and 35 years old (James & Daly, 2012; Vespa, 2014). In South Africa cohabitation is prevalent among those between 20 and 40 years of age (Moore & Govender, 2013). Although participants among the older cohorts constituted a relatively small number of the sample, the presence of cohabitation was still notable (Vespa, 2014), with, in this specific study, only two participants being 35 years old at the time of the interviews.

Duration of the participants' relationships

The second criterion for inclusion in the study was that the cohabitees should have been staying together for a period of twelve months or more. Surprisingly, the participants were generally unable to state the exact commencement date of their cohabitation. It was interesting to observe that the start of cohabitation is therefore not an event that is easily marked by a specific date. The participants concerned were able to recount different defining moments of their relationship, but not the exact date on which their cohabitation commenced. Some participants could only recall the month or year in which they had started living with their partners.

In the current study, 15 of the 21 participants had been cohabiting for a period from a year to five years, while for the remaining participants the duration was between five and ten years. The findings made do not generally confirm the widely held view that cohabitation is short-lived (Steuber & Paik, 2014). Previous studies on the lifespan of cohabitation posit that most cohabiting relationships are likely to end in marriage or dissolution within the space of a decade (Copen, Daniels & Mosher, 2013). Their relatively short lifespan is largely ascribed to the nature of the generally unstable family formation (Qu, Weston & de Vaus, 2009). In South Africa the inability of young men to raise money for *magadi*[1] seems to be a contributing factor to explain the existence of prolonged cohabiting relationships (Madhavan, Richter & Norris, 2014).

[1] In South Africa bride price is referred to as *magadi* or *mahadi* in the Sesotho languages, and as *ilobola* in the Nguni languages (Bogopa, 2010). In other African countries, such as Zimbabwe, the payment of *lobola* is referred to as *roora* among the Shona people (Mawere & Mawere, 2010).

Gender distribution of the participants

Gender is a social institution on its own, with recursive patterns (Miller & Sassler, 2012), and its inclusion in the study was essential. Cohabitation seemed to be more prevalent among young women within the 25 to 35 years age cohort, as only four of the 21 participants were men. Several reasons are advanced for women cohabiting. Firstly, for some African women, marriage remains an unattainable dream in the absence of the payment of *magadi* by their partners (Chaney & Fairfax, 2012). In cases where partners choose to cohabit, men tend to control the progression from cohabitation to marriage, as they are traditionally the ones to propose marriage to women. As it is uncommon for women to propose to their prospective partners, they tend to wait patiently for their male companion to propose marriage to them (Stavrova, Fetchenhauer & Schlösser, 2012). For such women cohabitation therefore becomes a prolonged state of cohabitation, until their partners decide to propose marriage to them (Moore & Govender, 2013).

Secondly, women are more likely to cohabit with their partners, as they perceive such an arrangement to be one way in which they can prioritise their career ambitions without being encumbered by having to try to satisfy the traditional demands of being a wife (Miller & Sassler, 2012). Thirdly, women tend to prefer cohabitation as an economic survival strategy, with them depending on their cohabiting with men for accommodation and money (Lailulo, Susuman & Blignaut, 2017).

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The findings in this study establish varying versions of commitment by partners. First, the findings revealed a private commitment that is personal and that requires no external affirmation, like getting married. Second, the participants shared the external obligations that problematise the ending of the relationship, often referred to as constraints commitment. Third, commitment can also be expressed through the public declaration of love that consists of introducing partners to their other family members; the spending of more time than before together and engaging in forms of behaviour that are deemed to enhance trust. Last, the ultimate commitment, or what is often termed "next level in their relationship journey" (Berrington *et al*., 2015:336), is often demonstrated through making of personal sacrifice for the sake of the relationship; and planning to eventually marry.

Personal commitment

A participant in the current study rejected the widely held notion that marriage is necessary to demonstrate commitment to each other within the bounds of an intimate relationship (Benjamin & Haze, 2011; Naess, Blekesaune & Jakobsson, 2015). Instead, the participant concerned referred to the personal commitment that they had made to each other:

> *We made a commitment to each other. It might not be a binding commitment; it may not be a commitment in the presence of everyone. But, I mean, does that really matter? I don't think so. I mean I can sign a piece of ... paper* [contract] *saying we are married, but it does not mean I am committed to you. Commitment for me is a personal thing. We* [couple] *need to sit together with each other and assure each*

> *other to make this* [relationship] *work. We need to tell each other that it is going to be tough at some point. It is also going to be fun at the other point, but we are committed to make each other as happy as possible.* (Male, 28 years old)

The use of the phrase *just a piece of paper* reflects the negative attitude displayed towards marriage by the man in the relationship, indicating the relative lack of importance that this cohabitee places on the institution of marriage as a sign of commitment. Hence, Smith (2014) argues that cohabitation is a fluid relationship that is continued only insofar as it is thought by both parties to deliver sufficient satisfaction to maintain the relationship (Funk & Kobayashi, 2014; Hughes, 2015; Martignani, 2011). Commitment to cohabitation has therefore to be continuously confirmed (Benjamin & Haze, 2011), as such an arrangement provides couples with heightened flexibility to be able to define and construct their sense of commitment on their own terms (Blatterer, 2016), either with or without even minimal structural commitment (Funk & Kobayashi, 2014). Accordingly, the cohabitees should agree in advance that they are determined to work towards, and to persevere with, the relationship, and to reject an effortless way out when their relationship experiences difficulties.

Cohabitation as a symbol of commitment

The existence of cohabitation indicates the presence of a serious relationship (Jackson, Kleiner, Geist & Cebulko, 2011). Couples tend to cohabit with no immediate intention to marry, but as a way of communicating their seriousness about their relationship (Willoughby & Carroll, 2012). Some participants were convinced that their decision to cohabit was a sign of commitment, as is illustrated in the vignettes below:

> *We would not have moved in together if we were not committed to the relationship. It sends a little flag to everyone around us that we are getting more and more serious.* (Male, 28 years old)

> *Moving in together with my partner shows that I am committed to him. It is not just a fling or an affair*. (Female, 28 years old)

> *We were just a boyfriend and girlfriend, so when we moved in together, we committed ourselves to the relationship.* (Female, 32 years old)

Such responses serve to corroborate those in Sniezek's (2013) study, in which the participants described cohabitation as a sign of seriousness. Similarly, Syltevik (2010) asserts that couples' decision to cohabit means that they take their relationship seriously. Such seriousness is often reflected in the duration and the willingness of the couple concerned to continue with their relationship.

However, in certain instances, where there is lack of communication, couples may cohabit with different motivations, which are not necessarily aligned. The decision to cohabit may have more than one meaning for couples (Dominguez-Folgueras & Castro-Martin, 2013). Whereas one partner may desire to be married, the other might be content to enjoy the benefits of having a live-in partner without any obligations in terms of the future. Two female participants viewed their partners 'suggestion to move in together' as an expression of commitment. Their views are captured in the following extracts:

> *For me, cohabitation means that he was making a commitment when he said that I want to be with this lady, and she is the person that I intend to stay with full-time* [silent for a while] … *for me, it meant that he wanted to settle down. My understanding is that there is a difference between people who are dating whilst staying separately, and those who are staying together. Hence, I say he wanted to settle down. I just told myself that we will take it from there and see what happens, moving forward. Personally, I will be happy if we eventually get married.* (Female, 30 years old)

> *For me, it* [moving in with her partner] *was a sign of commitment. I mean, for a man to even say 'I want to marry you', he must have seen that, okay, she does this, and she can do that. She actually can ... and then he is going to ask me to marry him. So, cohabitation gives him the opportunity to … make that decision.* (Female, 25 years old)

The above responses confirm the widely held belief that cohabitation carries different implications for women and men, and that cohabiting couples might not necessarily agree as to whether or not they are moving towards marriage (Willoughby *et al*., 2013). The first excerpt demonstrates that the participant equates cohabitation with commitment, whereas the second shows a happy woman who has been promised marriage. However, it should be noted that marital aspirations are influenced by a number of contextual factors, including culture (Gala & Kapadia, 2014). In many African cultures, women are socialised to be marriage-oriented, and they are encouraged to pursue the goal of marriage as representing the ultimate respectable and "fulfilled" life (Stavrova *et al*., 2012). Hence, researchers posit that women are likely to perceive cohabitation as a long-term commitment, and they expect to marry in future (Huang, Smock, Manning & Bergstrom-Lynch, 2011). However, every culture has its definition of womanhood and such beliefs tend to be culture-specific (Mothoagae, 2015).

Additionally, researchers acknowledge that, notwithstanding the woman's preference for marriage, it is still the man's prerogative to determine the relationship's progression and to propose marriage in the long run (Huang *et al*., 2011). Thus, when men do not share the same marital goals as their partners, a woman's wish for marriage remains an elusive dream (Sassler & Miller, 2011). The lack of open talk among cohabitees regarding marital aspirations is likely to cause relational distress when men do not eventually propose marriage, which women in contrast tend to desire.

The occurrence of pregnancy in cohabiting relationships might cause cohabitees to rethink their future together, leading either to marriage or to the dissolution of the relationship concerned (Lichter, Sassler & Turner, 2014). In the case of one participant, her pregnancy led to her contemplating getting married:

> *It* [the partner's decision to cohabit] *showed me commitment on his part, and that he was prepared to stay with me. I even fell pregnant at the time, and that convinced me we are family. I think we should get married, so that we can raise the child properly.* (Female, 27 years old)

The participant's wish following the pregnancy was well founded, with pregnancy during cohabitation tending to encourage cohabitees to marry. Moreover, within cohabitation, childbearing can be understood as indicating a willingness to invest in such a relationship over the longer term (Dush, 2011).

Constraint commitment

In some instances, commitment is based on the external obligations that help sustain the relationship. Some of the participants in the current study understood commitment as being an obligation that they had towards their partners and families, including in terms of their material possessions:

> *There is this person in your life … If I get to work first, I must let her know that I arrived safely. There is this person that you need to be accountable to daily. I also think if I decide to pull out now, I will be hurting more people. You should remember that now I know my partner's family; she knows my family. I will be hurting more people now.* (Male, 31 years old)

> *The biggest decision that we have made for a … while is that we should have a dog at the beginning of last year. This furthers* [the] *commitment that we already have towards each other – now you have this little animal that is dependent on you. Sometimes, I work late, and she comes home and plays with the dog. Sometimes she works late, or she leaves for work early and I spend time with the dog, or I take him for a walk, or whatever the case. So, the commitment to this relationship is not just about us anymore. There is a third little creature involved that needs to be looked after, and it needs time from both of us. We are no longer making a commitment to each other only, but also to the dog as well.* (Male, 28 years old)

The above excerpts suggest that certain cohabiting couples remain in a relationship because of certain constraints that they impose on it, such as buying assets together. In contrast, consideration for the cohabitees' families can also be regarded as a constraint that encourages the maintenance of the relationship, thus making it more difficult for such a couple to separate (Rhoades *et al*., 2012:371; Vennum, Lindstrom, Monk & Adams, 2014:412). However, cohabiting couples might feel obliged to remain in a relationship, no matter its quality.

Introducing a cohabiting partner to the family

According to symbolic interactionist theory, certain rituals may be taken as symbolising the level of seriousness in relationships (Knight, 2014). Public expression of feelings demonstrates an individual's commitment to the relationship (Ackerman, Griskevicius & Li, 2011; Santoro, 2012) as the participants explain in the extracts below:

> *Even though he jokes about it, he told the elders* [the older members of his family] *that he loves me, and that I am his future wife – the girl he is going to marry, his partner, his girlfriend and his future queen.* (Female, 30 years old)

> *He was able to face his mother and tell her how much he loves me. He also left the mother of his child for me. I don't think he would do that if he does not love me, but just wants to play with me.* (Female, 32 years)

Introducing a cohabiting partner to one's family tends to indicate the existence of a serious relationship (Jackson *et al*., 2011). In contrast, the failure of a cohabitor to introduce their partner to their family might be interpreted as a lack of commitment, on the former's part, to the relationship (Knight, 2014), as is evident in the case of the male participant described in the extract below:

> *Every day, I am asking myself all these questions that you are asking me today, about the future of this relationship. For instance, I was deeply hurt when he didn't introduce me to his family and relatives during his stepfather's funeral. I don't think he is committed to this relationship.* (Female, 35 years old)

The above extract emphasises the importance that cohabiting partners tend to attach to being introduced to other members of their partners' families, with them being more likely to suffer from a perceived lack of commitment from their partners, which can negatively affect their general happiness (Posel & Rudwick, 2014). When an African man introduces his partner to his parents, it means that he is committed to the relationship concerned.

Personal sacrifice

Personal sacrifice is another indicator of commitment (Li & Fung, 2012). One participant shared the sacrifices that she had made in her relationship in the following manner:

> *I don't know what to say. I can say, in our situation, I show commitment by cutting off some of my friends and partying, and* [rather] *spending more time with him. I think that he can see that as well. I made all these sacrifices for him. Some of these sacrifices are the things that he* [has] *asked me to do, and he also told me the type of woman that he would prefer to live with. I made these sacrifices voluntarily. For example, we are from the same religion, but I wasn't involved that much, and I have stopped most of the things that I was doing, and now* [I] *focus on our religion, just to show him that I was willing to become the woman that he would be happy to live with.* (Female, 31 years old)

Exhibiting a willingness to make sacrifices for the relationship is likely to be perceived as a demonstration of commitment, communicating the desire to continue to build a future together, which in turn fosters the development of trust. Therefore, individuals who are willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the relationship tend to be relatively satisfied with their relationships, with them being more likely to remain together over time (McIntyre, Brent, Mattingly & Lewandowski Jr, 2015). Individuals who are committed to each other are often willing to forego their personal interests for the benefit of the relationship. Such behaviour results in some degree of assurance, which contributes significantly towards the extent of adjustment to, and the stability of, the relationship involved (Segal & Fraley, 2016).

In other instances, commitment to cohabitation is demonstrated through positive behaviour (Hurt, 2012), as is illustrated below:

> *My partner has changed … he has changed a lot; he has grown. He was someone who liked going out partying. I didn't have to confront him about it. He just disciplined himself, and knows that he is now staying with* [other] *people.* (Female, 29 years old)

Cohabitation often results in a sense of maturation, when the individuals concerned become focused on their relationship (Hira & Overall, 2010:629). Such a change of attitude is attributed to the belief that cohabiting reduces an individual's socialising time and tending to discourage antisocial behaviour (Siennick, Staff, Osgood, Schulenberg, Bachman & van Eseltine, 2015:737). Whereas women tend to regard spending quality time with their partners as a demonstration of commitment and love, men usually perceive such activity as constricting their freedom. Spending quality time together entails time spent with partners without interruption (Nuru & Wang, 2014:150; Raffaetà, 2015:1197), although some couples may not agree on what makes for quality time. It is, therefore, important that partners communicate how they prefer spending their time.

Spending personal time with a partner

Due to competing demands and time constraints, individuals who are in intimate relationships might find it increasingly difficult to spend time together. Some of the participants in the current study, therefore, took it as a sign of commitment when their partners made time for them. Two participants associated experiencing a sense of commitment with the amount of time that they spent with their partners, as can be seen in the following vignettes:

> *I have no idea of how commitment is demonstrated in our relationship, I* [have] *never* [before] *thought about it. I guess* [in] *something as simple as just wanting to see the other person. To me, that is a sign of being committed to another person. At 4 p.m., I just want to leave work, so I can go home and see my partner.* (Male, 28 years old)

> *In a relationship, there are many things that you can identify, such as when he has many friends and doesn't make time for you.* [In contrast,] *he is making time for me.* (Female, 32 years old)

The above comments show that it is often a challenge for couples in cohabitation to describe how commitment is demonstrated, as the construct is often difficult to verbalise (Carter *et al*., 2015; Pope & Cashwell, 2013). Nonetheless, the views expressed in the above comments are consistent with the view that couples feel emotionally connected and significant when their partners devote time to, and give of themselves, in a relationship (Hira & Overall, 2010; Nicoleau, Kang, Choau & Knudson-Martin, 2016).

Trust

Technology has become an integral part of intimate relationships (Cheng, Ma & Missari, 2014), with the use of mobile phones having revolutionised the dynamics of intimate relationships (Clayton, 2014; Khunou, 2012), and with having access to a partner's mobile phone being perceived as a fundamental indication of transparency and trust in, and commitment to, the relationship, as can be seen below:

> *I think we show it* [a sense of commitment] *by fulfilling our responsibilities. If, for example, we have made a commitment to do something, and we experience some problem, we talk about it. He is also not a secretive person. You know, most of the guys will be secretive with their cell phone ... charging it in the other room, or hiding it inside their shoes when they go to bed. At the beginning, he used to put his phone on silent mode. I confronted him about it and, ever since, we never had a problem about it, and he is open with his cell phone* [use]. (Female, 29 years old)

The above comment suggests that being allowed access to the partner's mobile phone might indicate commitment to the relationship (Khunou, 2012; Miller-Ott, Kelly & Duran, 2014). Some couples have experienced uncertainty if they have not been allowed to access their partners' mobile phones (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). However, the management of issues relating to privacy and personal space regarding the degree of access allowed to the partner's mobile phone can be challenging (Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Zhao, Sosik & Cosley, 2012) Some individuals perceive having access to their mobile phones as an intrusion on their privacy (Clayton, 2014). Therefore, entering into ongoing communication regarding the expectations and meaning related to having access to partners' cell phones may alleviate any potential conflict between the partners involved (Roggensack & Sillars, 2014).

Intention to marry

African people tend to regard marriage as the ultimate public expression of commitment to an intimate relationship (Baker & Elizabeth, 2013). A few of the participants shared their partners' promises as follows:

> *He is planning to pay* magadi [bride-price], *and for me that shows he is committed to the relationship.* (Female, 29 years old)

> *He said that he wants to make our relationship official, and* [to] *make me his wife. I don't foresee any problem with that, because we know each other already.* (Female, 30 years old)

Payment of *magadi* is equivalent to entering into marriage in African culture. The step serves as an assurance that the man is committed to his partner, by means of publicly following tradition through the payment of *magadi* (Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2015). The payment of *magadi* further assures women that they are not just concubines. Following this tradition signifies sexual fidelity in, and emotional faithfulness to, a relationship (Ndinda, Uzodike, Chimbwete & Mgeyane, 2011).

DISCUSSION

Commitment to cohabitation is multidimensional, allowing the couple concerned to demonstrate their love in different ways, without necessarily conforming to a particular traditional formula. Therefore, social work practitioners need to acknowledge the meanings that the couples attach to relationships (Harris, 2021). In some instances, the motivation for the cohabitees to enter into, and to remain in, cohabitation may have nothing to do with a personal desire, but it rather relates to the compulsion to fulfil a moral obligation and accede to the pressure exerted by children, other family members, or financial considerations (Rhoades *et*

al., 2012). Such circumstances, although not necessarily being negative, may nevertheless motivate couples to stay together, even during turbulent times (Owen, Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2011:822). Moreover, such factors help to explain the reasons for individuals deciding to remain in cohabiting relationships (Knopp, Rhoades, Howard & Markman, 2015). Nonetheless, some researchers view cohabitation as not necessarily increasing the level of dedication to a relationship (Knopp *et al*., 2015:120). For instance, Forrest (2014) argues that cohabitees tend to be less committed to each other than married couples are. However, other scholars insist that cohabitees regard themselves as being as committed to their partners as married people are (Barlow, Duncan, James & Park, 2005:388). The present article contends that the issue of the level of private commitment is a personal matter between the cohabiting partners concerned. Such commitment is founded on the principles of trust, fidelity and support for each other, none of which depends on whether or not the couples involved are married.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

For social work practitioners who work with cohabiting individuals and couples, the findings in this study could have significant implications, suggesting that adopting a multidimensional approach towards commitment is necessary. Although marriage may be regarded as the epitome of commitment, cohabiting relationships can also entail high levels of commitment, especially because cohabitation has begun to assume many other functions of marriage, including the maintenance of a home, childbearing and childrearing (Berrington *et al*., 2015). Exploring how commitment is constructed and expressed in terms of cohabitation could help partners understand how cohabitation functions as a relationship. Most significantly, practitioners and therapists must appreciate the meanings attributed by the cohabiting couples to different aspects of their relationship.

Cohabitees often express and value commitment in different ways. When asked how they express themselves about, or identify, commitment, cohabiting couples often refer to either direct or indirect acts, like affection, caring and the making of sacrifice. Rather than explicitly referring to the phenomenon of cohabitation in direct conversations, the relationship is implied. Commitment, therefore, is what they see as sustaining themselves through both the good and the bad times. Therefore, for couples who may be struggling with communicating their sense of commitment to their relationship, the provision of education about the making of commitment as a conscious decision could be valuable and beneficial.

In conclusion, the article calls for additional studies to be undertaken into the nature of commitment to cohabitation. Researchers argue that, despite its significance, the issue of commitment has not yet received adequate scholarly attention (Rhoades *et al*., 2012; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2014). Further exploration of how commitment is constructed and expressed in terms of cohabitation would assist both practitioners and therapists to understand how cohabitation functions as a relationship.

REFERENCES

Ackerman, J. M., Griskevicius, V. & Li, N. P. 2011. Let's get serious: Communicating commitment in romantic relationship formation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 100(6): 1079-1094.

Adamsons, K. 2010. Using identity theory to develop a midrange model of parental gatekeeping and parenting behaviour. *Journal of Family Theory & Review,* 2: 137-148.

Baker, M. & Elizabeth, V. 2013. Tying the knot: The impact of formalization after long-term cohabitation. *Journal of Family Studies*,19(3): 254–266.

Baker, M. & Elizabeth, V. 2014. A 'brave thing to do' or a normative practice? Marriage after long-term cohabitation. *Journal of Sociology,* 50(4): 393-407.

Barlow, A., Duncan, S., James, G. & Park, A. 2005. *Cohabitation, marriage and the law: Social change and legal reform in the 21st century*. New York: Oxford.

Benjamin, O. & Haze, R. 2011. Performing cohabitation: Secular individualism and communication skills among Israeli committed cohabiters. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships,* 28(6): 790-808.

Berrington, A., Perelli-Harris, B. & Trevena, P. 2015. Commitment and the changing sequence of cohabitation, childbearing, and marriage: Insights from qualitative research in the UK. *Demographic Research*, 33: 327-362.

Blatterer, H. 2016. Intimacy as freedom: Friendship, gender and everyday life. *Thesis Eleven*, 132(1): 62-76.

Bogopa, D. 2010. Health and ancestors: The case of South Africa and beyond. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 10(1): 1-7.

Carter, J., Duncan, S., Stoilova, M. & Phillips, M. 2015. Sex, love, and security: Accounts of distance and commitment in living apart together relationships. *Sociology*, 50(3): 576-593.

Chaney, C. & Fairfax, C. N. 2012. A change has come: The Obamas and the culture of black marriage in America. *Ethnicities*, 13(1): 20-48.

Cheng, S., Ma, J. & Missari, S. 2014. The effects of internet use on adolescents' first romantic and sexual relationships in Taiwan. *International Sociology,* 9: 324-347.

Clayton, R. B. 2014. The third wheel: The impact of Twitter use on relationship infidelity and divorce. *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking,* 17(7): 425-430.

Copen, C. E., Daniels, K. & Mosher, W. D. 2013. First premarital cohabitation in the United States: 2006-2010 National Survey of Family Growth. *National Health Statistics Reports*, 64:1-3.

Creswell, J. W. 2016. *30 Essential skills for the qualitative researcher.* London: SAGE.

Dominguez-Folgueras, M. & Castro-Martin, T. 2013. Cohabitation in Spain: No longer a marginal path to family formation. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75: 422-437.

Dush, C. M. K. 2011. Relationship-specific investments, family chaos, and cohabitation dissolution following a nonmarital birth. *Family Relations,* 6: 586-601.

Elphinston, R. A. & Noller, P. 2011. Time to face it! Facebook intrusion and the implications for romantic jealousy and relationship satisfaction. *Cyber-psychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking,* 14(11): 631-635.

Forrest, W. 2014. Cohabitation, relationship quality, and desistance from crime. *Journal of Marriage and Family,* 76: 539-556.

Funk, L. M. & Kobayashi, K. M. 2014. From motivations to accounts: An interpretive analysis of "living apart together" relationships in mid- to later-life couples. *Journal of Family Issues,* 37(8): 1101-1122.

Gala, J. & Kapadia, S. 2014. Romantic love, commitment and marriage in emerging adulthood in an Indian context: Views of emerging adults and middle adults. *Psychology and Developing Societies,* 26(1): 115-141.

Harris, L. E. 2021. Committing before cohabiting: Pathways to marriage among middle-class couples. *Journal of Family Issues*, 42(8): 1762-1786.

Hausmann, C., Jonason, A. & Summers-Effler, E. 2011. Interaction ritual theory and structural symbolic interactionism. *Symbolic Interaction,* 34(3): 319-329.

Hertlein, K. M. & Ancheta, K. 2014. Clinical application of the advantages of technology in couple and family therapy. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 42(4): 313-324.

Hira, S. N. & Overall, N. C. 2010. Improving intimate relationships: Targeting the partner versus changing the self. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships,* 28(5): 610-633.

Huang, P. M., Smock, P., Manning, W. D. & Bergstrom-Lynch, C. A. 2011. He says, she says: Gender and cohabitation. *Journal of Family Issues*, 32(7): 876-905.

Hughes, J. 2015. The decentring of couple relationships? An examination of young adults living alone. *Journal of Sociology,* 51(3):707-721.

Hurt, T. R. 2012. Toward a deeper understanding of the meaning of marriage among black men. *Journal of Family Issues*, 34(7): 859-884.

Jackson, P. B., Kleiner, S., Geist, C. & Cebulko, K. 2011. Conventions of courtship: Gender and race differences in the significance of dating rituals. *Journal of Family Issues*, 32(5): 629-652.

James, B. & Daly, M. 2012. Cohabitation is no longer associated with elevated spousal homicide rates in the United States. *Homicide Studies*, 16(4): 393-403.

Kaasila, R. & Lauriala, A. 2010. Towards a collaborative, interactionist model of teacher change. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26: 854-862.

Kelley, K. & Gruenewald, J. 2015. Accomplishing masculinity through anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender homicide: A comparative case study approach. *Men and Masculinities*, 18(1): 3-29.

Khunou, G. 2012. Making love possible: Cell phones and intimate relationships. *African Identities*, 10(2): 169-179.

Knight, K. 2014. Communicative dilemmas in emerging adults' friends with benefits relationships: Challenges to relational talk. *Emerging Adulthood,* 2(4): 270-279.

Knopp, K. A., Rhoades, G. K., Howard, S. & Markman, J. 2015. Stuck on you: How dedication moderates the way constraints feel. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 32(1): 119–137.

Lailulo, Y., Susuman, A. S. & Blignaut, R. 2017. Improving maternal and reproductive health in Ethiopia. *Journal of Asian and African Studies,* 52(7): 947-964.

Li, T. & Fung, H. H. 2012. Relationship satisfaction: The paradoxical short-term and long-term effects of commitment. *Personality Science,* 4(3): 274-281.

Lichter, D. T., Sassler, S. & Turner, R. N. 2014. Cohabitation, post-conception unions, and the rise in nonmarital fertility. *Social Science Research*, 47: 134-147.

Madhavan, S., Richter, L. & Norris, S. 2014. Father contact following union dissolution for low-income children in urban South Africa. *Journal of Family Issue*s, 37(5): 622-644.

Martignani, L. 2011. 'All together now!': Couples and the ontological problem of cohabitation as a form of life. *International Review of Sociology,* (21)3: 565-581.

Mawere, M. & Mawere, A. M. 2010. The changing philosophy of African marriage: The relevance of the Shona customary marriage practice of *Kukumbira*. *Journal of African Studies and Development,* 2(9): 224-233.

McIntyre, K. P., Brent, A., Mattingly, B. A. & Lewandowski Jr, G. W. 2015. When ''we'' changes ''me'': The two-dimensional model of relational self-change and relationship outcomes. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 32(7): 857-878.

Miller, A. J. & Sassler, S. 2012. The construction of gender among working-class cohabiting couples. *Qualitative Sociology*, 35: 427-446.

Miller-Ott, A. E., Kelly, L. & Duran, R. L. 2014. Cell phone usage expectations, closeness, and relationship satisfaction between parents and their emerging adults in college. *Emerging Adulthood,* 2(4): 313-323.

Moore, E. & Govender, R. 2013. Marriage and cohabitation in South Africa: An enriching explanation? *Journal of Comparative Family Studies,* 44(5): 623-639.

Mothoagae, I. D. 2015. Setswana proverbs within the institution of *lenyalo* [marriage]: A critical engagement with the *bosadi* [womanhood] approach. *Verbum et Ecclesia,* 36(1): 1-7.

Naess, S. Blekesaune, M. & Jakobsson, N. 2015. Marital transitions and life satisfaction: Evidence from longitudinal data from Norway. *Acta Sociologica*, 58(1):63-78.

Ndinda, C., Uzodike, U. O., Chimbwete, C. & Mgeyane, M. T. M. 2011. Gendered perceptions of sexual behaviour in rural South Africa. *International Journal of Family Medicine,* 973706.

Nicoleau, A., Kang, Y. J., Choau, S. T. & Knudson-Martin, C. K. 2016. Doing what it takes to make it work: Flexibility, relational focus, and stability among long-term couples with children. *Journal of Family Issues,* 37(12): 1639-1657.

Nuru, A. N. & Wang, T. R. 2014. "She was stomping on everything that we used to think of as a family": Communication and turning points in cohabiting (step) families, *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 55: 145-163.

Owen, J., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M. & Markman, H. J. 2011. The revised commitment inventory: Psychometrics and use with unmarried couples. *Journal of Family Issues,* 32(6): 820-841.

Pope, A. L. & Cashwell, C. 2013. Moral commitment in intimate committed relationships: A conceptualization from cohabiting same-sex and opposite-sex partners. *Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 21(1): 5-14.

Posel, D. & Rudwick, S. 2014. *Ukukipita* (Cohabiting): Socio-cultural constraints in urban Zulu society. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 49(3): 282-297.

Qu, L., Weston, R. & de Vaus, D. 2009. Cohabitation and beyond: The contribution of each partner's relationship satisfaction and fertility aspirations to pathways of cohabiting couples. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 40(4): 587-601.

Raffaetà, R. 2015. My parents never spent time with me! Migrants' parents in Italy and hegemonic ideals of competent parenting. *Journal of Family Issues,* 36(9): 1192-1211.

Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M. & Markman, H. J. 2012. A longitudinal investigation of commitment dynamics in cohabiting relationships. *Journal of Family Issues*, 33(3): 369-390.

Robertson, P. N. E., Norona, J. C., Fish, J. N., Olmstead, S. B. & Fincham, F. 2016. Do differences matter? A typology of emerging adult romantic relationship. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 34(3): 1-23.

Roggensack, K. E. & Sillars, A. 2014. Agreement and understanding about honesty and deception rules in romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships,* 31(2): 178-199.

Roussel, P., Monaghan, L. F. & Javerlhiac, S. 2010. The metamorphosis of female bodybuilders: Judging a paroxysmal body? *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 45(1): 103-109.

Santoro, P. 2012. Relationally bare: Bodies of loss and love. *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies*, 12(2): 118-131.

Sassler, S. & Miller, A. J. 2011. Waiting to be asked: Gender, power, and relationship progression among cohabiting couples. *Journal of Family Issues*, 32(4): 482-506.

Segal, N. & Fraley, R. C. 2016. Broadening the investment model: An intensive longitudinal study on attachment and perceived partner responsiveness in commitment dynamics. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 33(5): 581-599.

Siennick, S. E., Staff, J., Osgood, D. W., Schulenberg, J. E., Bachman, J. G. & van Eseltine, M. 2015. Partnership transitions and antisocial behaviour in young adulthood: A within-person, multi-cohort analysis. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency,* 51(6): 735-758.

Silver, D. & Lee, M. 2012. Self-relations in social relations. *Sociological Theory,* 30(4): 207-237.

Smith, J. F. N. 2014. Same-sex marriage attitudes during the transition to early adulthood: A panel study of young Australians, 2008 to 2013. *Journal of Family Issues,* 37(15): 2163-2188.

Sniezek, T. 2013. Negotiating marriage: A process model of heterosexual engagement. *SAGE Open*, 3(3): 1-14.

Stavrova, O. & Fetchenhauer, D. 2015. Married and cohabiting parents' well-being: The effects of a cultural normative context across countries. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 2(5): 601-632.

Stavrova, O., Fetchenhauer, D. & Schlösser, T. 2012. Cohabitation, gender, and happiness: A cross-cultural study in thirty countries. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology,* 43(7): 1063-1081.

Steuber, K. R. & Paik, A. 2014. Of money and love: Joint banking, relationship quality, and cohabitation. *Journal of Family Issues*, 35(9): 1154-1176.

Syltevik, L. J. 2010. Sense and sensibility: Cohabitation in 'cohabitation land'. *Sociological Review*, 58(3): 444-462.

Tang, C. & Curran, M. A. 2012. Marital commitment and perceptions of fairness in household chores. *Journal of Family Issues*, 34(12): 1598-1622.

Vennum, A., Lindstrom, R., Monk, J. K. & Adams, R. 2014. "It's complicated": The continuity and correlates of cycling in cohabiting and marital relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships,* 31(3): 410-430.

Vespa, J. 2014. Historical trends in the marital intentions of one-time and serial cohabitors. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 76: 207-217.

Weigel, D. J. & Ballard-Reisch, D. S. 2014. Constructing commitment in intimate relationships: Mapping interdependence in the everyday expressions of commitment. *Communication Research*, 41(3): 311-332.

Willoughby, B. J. & Carroll, J. S. 2012. Correlates of attitudes toward cohabitation: Looking at the associations with demographics, relational attitudes, and dating behaviour. *Journal of Family Issues*, 33(11): 1450-1476.

Willoughby, B. J., Hall, S. S. & Luczak, H. P. 2013. Marital paradigms: A conceptual framework for marital attitudes, values, and beliefs. *Journal of Family Issues*, 20(10): 1-24.

Zhao, X., Sosik, V. S. & Cosley, D. 2012. It's complicated: How romantic partners use Facebook. CHI '12: Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems. https://doi.org/10.1145/2207676.2207788.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Nathaniel Phuti Kgadima was a PhD student at the University of South Africa and is currently an Associate Professor at the University of South Africa in the Department of Social Work. The article resulted from his PhD, conducted from January 2015 to December 2017. He solely wrote this manuscript.