

Cohabiting Couples' Gender Role Attitudes, Communication and Relationship Well-Being

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the effect of gender role attitudes (GRAs) on relationship well-being and the potential mediating effect of communication behaviors in a sample of engaged cohabiting couples ($n = 30$). Males and females reported having similar egalitarian attitudes. Regression results indicated that egalitarian GRAs were positively associated with relationship well-being. This relationship was mediated by communication behaviors, but the models differed for males and females. For females, positive interaction and female demand/male withdrawal and male demand/female withdrawal patterns were associated with relationship well-being; but for males, the only significant mediator was positive interaction patterns. The authors conclude that cohabiting couples who have egalitarian GRAs and intend to marry engage in more constructive communication behaviors, which in turn influence their perceptions of the quality of their relationship.

Introduction

Cohabitation is an increasingly common phenomenon in America, which has led to more research examining the dynamics of cohabiting couples (Casper & Cohen, 2000). With regard to gender roles, research generally suggests that cohabiting couples have more egalitarian and less traditional views toward the roles of men and women in a romantic relationship (Smock, 2000). In fact, this is such a common finding in cohabitation literature that authors have argued that cohabitation operates on the principle of gender equality, whereas marriage does not (Brines & Joyner, 1999). Across 26 nations, Davis, Greenstein, and Gerteisen Marks (2007) found cohabiting men and women reported sharing household labor tasks more than married individuals. However, some evidence suggests that cohabiting couples using a traditional breadwinner-homemaker framework are more likely to marry or continue long-term cohabiting relationships (Sanchez, Manning, & Spock, 1998). Those using a non-traditional and more egalitarian gender role framework were at increased risk of relationship separation. While existing studies on couple outcomes such as relationship well-being continue to emphasize the differences between men and women, researchers have cautioned that these studies should also include measures of gender role attitudes (Sanfilippo, 1994; Blatt and Shichman, 1983).

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Compared to only taking biological sex into consideration, gender role attitudes provide more information about the potential reason for sex differences and are better predictors of individual and couple outcomes (Harrison & Lynch, 2005).

The current study improves on the existing literature by examining the impact of both attitudinal and behavioral (i.e. gender role attitudes and communication) predictors on relationship well-being within cohabiting couples. Additionally, to eliminate potential differences between cohabiting couples with plans to marry and those whom do not, the current sample is limited to those intending to marry. With guidance from symbolic interaction theory and social role theory, this study explores 1) the relationship between gender role attitudes, communication patterns, and relationship well-being, and 2) how the communication patterns mediate the impact of gender role attitudes on relationship adjustment.

Review of Literature

Theory

Symbolic Interactionism focuses on the connections between symbols (i.e. shared meanings) and interactions (i.e. behavior and communications with others) (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; Stryker & Vryan, 2003). Based on this theory, the current study proposes a link between gender role attitudes and certain types of communication within cohabitating relationships. These attitudes are part of each individual's "symbolic world" which, in turn, affect behavioral interactions, including verbal communication, with significant others. Role theory suggests that role expectations, including gender role attitudes, are both learned from one's environment and self-created (Thornton & Nardi, 1975; Turner, 2003). While some roles are formal with prescribed behavior and cognitions (i.e. mother, school teacher, etc.), others are more informal and less prescribed. For instance, although cohabitation has become more prevalent, the role of cohabiting partners remains unclear compared to the roles associated with marriage. Additionally, in current society, gender role norms are more flexible than ever before, which leads to less prescribed behaviors and expectations and thus more negotiation within the relationship. Therefore, the gender role attitudes of cohabiters today may be subject to more negotiation than in the past and therefore require increased positive communication between partners as they navigate their roles and expectations for each other.

Gender Role Attitudes and Relationship Well-Being

In the current study, gender role attitudes (GRAs) are defined as each partner's expectations for themselves and each other in their romantic relationship (Helmreich, Spence, & Gibson, 1982). In marriage, those with more traditional attitudes tend to divide responsibilities based on stereotypical gender roles such that wives are expected to tend more to tasks at home while husbands are expected to focus on being the provider and primary decision maker. In egalitarian marriages, both spouses expect tasks and decision-making to be shared equally (Mickelson, Claffey, & Williams, 2006). Although GRAs are frequently discussed within the context of marriage, researchers have shown that these attitudes are also present and influential in cohabitating relationships, as well as dating and engaged relationships (Vanyperen & Buunk, 1991; Mickelson et al., 2006; Steiner-Pappalardo & Gurung, 2002). However, our understanding of the impact of GRAs on cohabitating couples is limited because past studies frequently have one of two purposes: a) longitudinally examining the impact of early cohabitation on the relationship after marriage or b) combining cohabitating couples with other types of couples as if there are no differences between these couple types. Therefore, while a good deal of knowledge

on GRAs exists in general, specific knowledge on cohabitating couples is limited to the finding that couples who choose to cohabit generally have more egalitarian GRAs (Lestheaghe and Surkyn, 1998).

Existing research has shown that conformity to traditional gender roles and GRAs is associated with decreased relationship intimacy for males regardless of relationship status, but not women (Ludlow & Mahalik, 2001; Vonk & VanNobelen, 1993). Similar research examining the impact of traditional and egalitarian attitudes on relationship satisfaction has found that men with traditional GRAs report lower levels of satisfaction in their dating relationships (Burn & Ward, 2005). Additionally, regardless of their own GRAs, females tend to report decreased relationship satisfaction when they perceive their partners as having more traditional attitudes. Burn and Ward (2005) concluded that GRAs impact females' relationship satisfaction more than males' perceived satisfaction. This is similar to studies on sex role differences (i.e. masculinity and femininity) that have consistently found that males favor more traditional sex-typed roles compared to females (King & King, 1985; Bryant, 2003; Fan & Marini, 2000). Thus, regardless of relationship status, females are more likely to have egalitarian GRAs than males. However, these egalitarian GRAs do not automatically translate into behaviors within the relationship, including communication patterns, which may be the source of the decreased satisfaction (Mickelson et al., 2006; Hackel & Ruble, 1992; Blaisure & Allen, 1995).

Communication Patterns in Cohabitation and Impact on Well-Being

Communication patterns have repeatedly been shown to predict relationship well-being across a variety of couple types (Sprecher, Metts, Burlison, Hatfield, & Thompson, 1995; Ting-Tommey, 1983; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). In contrast, couples reporting a pattern of one spouse demanding and the other withdrawing tend to perceive their satisfaction with the relationship as low or decreasing over time (Christensen, 1988). Although studies have frequently found that the female demand/male withdraw (FD/MW) pattern is more common than the male demand/female withdraw (MD/FW) pattern (Christensen, & Heavey, 1990; Vogel, Wester, & Heesacker, 1999), the occurrence of MD/FW is far from uncommon. Findings have been somewhat mixed about the effect of which partner plays the demanding and withdrawing roles. Early studies have found FD/MW to predict decreased satisfaction, but MD/FW has generally been found to have no effect, or even a positive effect in some studies, on satisfaction (Christensen, 1988; Christensen & Heavey, 1993; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993). In a study examining the association between communication patterns and satisfaction in cohabitating relationships, Smith, Heaven and Ciarrochi (2008) found the frequency of positive interaction and FD/MW, but not MD/FW, were statistically significant predictors of relationship satisfaction for both partners

More recently, studies have suggested that this difference is an artifact of the methodology used since researchers have generally examined disagreements about a wife's issue or complaint. Many have argued that the effect of demand/withdraw exists regardless of which partner demands and which withdraws (Heavey et al., 1995; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002; Klinetob & Smith, 1996; Eldridge, Sevier, Jones, Atkins, Christensen, 2007). Additionally, Stanley and others (2002), who found that demand/withdraw impacts relationship well-being regardless of the partner's sex, have also found that negative interactions explain much more of the variance in males' reported well-being whereas perceived positive communication patterns explain a larger proportion of variance in females' well-being. These findings suggest that females and males may be affected differently by how they communicate such that females'

relationship well-being benefits more from their perception of healthy, positive communication and males' relationship well-being benefits more from the avoidance of withdrawing behavior by either partner. While the impact of communication on relationship well-being is well noted, it appears that different aspects of communication influence males' and females' well-being.

How GRAs Influence Communication

Two published studies were identified that have examined the three primary variables of interest in this study (GRAs, communication, and relationship well-being). Although previous longitudinal research has suggested communication patterns impact relationship well-being (Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995), these two studies examined communication as the outcome measure. With a sample of newly married couples, Demaris and Leslie (1984) predicted that sex-role traditionalism would explain each partner's perception of how well he or she communicated with his/her spouse and his/her perceived marital quality. Their hypotheses were only partially supported in that husbands with traditional gender roles reported lower quality of communication, but traditionalism was not a predictor of the wives' perceived communication nor either spouse's perceived satisfaction.

The second study used a sample of married couples to examine the effect of marital adjustment and GRAs on each partner's perception of the other's communication (Pollock, Die, & Marriott, 1991). They concluded that GRAs were correlated with marital adjustment and communication. Overall, more egalitarian individuals reported higher marital adjustment and healthier communication patterns. Based on their multiple regression analysis, the authors concluded that GRAs and marital adjustment were both significant predictors of marital communication; however, marital adjustment exhibited a stronger influence than GRAs (standard beta weights of .71 and .16, respectively).

Together, these studies have shown the existence of a relationship between communication, GRAs, and relationship well-being. However, no studies examining the hypothesis that communication mediates the relationship between GRAs and relationship well-being could be located. Furthermore, these studies failed to examine differences between male and female partners and the associations between these variables.

Current Study

By combining findings from other existing research, this study examines the relationship between gender role attitudes, communication patterns, and relationship well-being. Three hypotheses are proposed. First, in our sample of cohabiting couples intending to marry, we hypothesized that females will report more egalitarian GRAs than males based on previous findings that, overall, females' attitudes and beliefs have shifted towards egalitarianism, but males' have not (Craig, 2007; Hochschild, 1989; John & Shelton, 1997). Second, to extend on the finding of previous studies (Demaris and Leslie, 1984; Pollock et al., 1991), we hypothesized that the relationship satisfaction of each partner will be positively associated with more egalitarian GRAs, more frequent positive communication interactions, and less frequent demand/withdrawal patterns of communication. Last, we predicted that how couples communicate would mediate the association between their GRAs and perceived relationship well-being. Because egalitarian GRAs reflect the belief that tasks and responsibilities within the relationship, including communication, should be shared equally, communication behaviors are conceptualized as a behavioral expression of each partner's GRAs.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Participants registered for a premarital psycho-educational workshop that was advertised throughout the community. Prior to beginning the program, participants were asked to complete a packet of questionnaires including the measures used in the current study. Partners were instructed to complete the questionnaires separately and not to discuss their answers with each other. Of the 55 couples who participated in the program and provided complete data, 30 cohabiting couples without children were identified for the current study. As summarized in Table 1, participants ranged in age from 19 to 44 and females were, on average, three years younger than males ($M = 25.27$ and 28.43 , respectively). The majority of participants was Caucasian (80%) and had completed at least four years of college (68%). Reported income ranged from no regular source of income to over \$100,000 with a median income of \$10,000 - \$19,999.

Table 1
Demographic profile of male and female participants (N = 30)

Variable	Males	Females
Age		
Range	19-44	20-32
M (SD)	28.43 (5.78)	25.27 (3.10)
Race (%)		
Caucasian	86.7	73.3
African American	13.3	13.3
Other	0.0	13.3
Education (%)		
Some high school	3.3	3.3
Finished high school	6.7	3.3
Some college/technical school	33.3	13.3
Four year college	43.3	60.0
Graduate/Professional degree	13.3	20.0
Income (%)		
Less than \$9,999	13.3	20.0
\$10,000 – \$19,999	23.3	23.3
\$20,000 - \$29,999	16.7	20.0
\$30,000 - \$39,999	23.3	13.3
\$40,000 - \$49,999	13.3	10.0
\$50,000 or more	6.6	6.7
Missing	3.3	6.7

The length of the couples' relationship ranged from less than 1 year to more than 5 years, and 43.3% reported being together 3 to 4 years. All couples were either engaged (83.3%) or seriously considering marriage with their cohabiting partner (16.7%). Of the engaged couples, the wedding dates ranged from 1 to 12 months away from the time of data collection, and 44% reported a

wedding date within the next two months. Two individuals had been previously married, but none of the individuals had children from the current or a previous relationship.

Measures

Gender role attitudes. Gender role attitudes were assessed using the role relationship subscale of the PREPARE-CC assessment inventory (Olson & Olson, 1999). This 10-item scale evaluates an individual's beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about marital and family roles and can be considered a measure of egalitarianism toward decision-making and shared roles in the relationship (e.g., 'we participate equally in setting new goals'). Respondents reported their level of agreement to each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Negatively worded items were reverse scored, and a total sum score was computed (possible range = 5 – 50) with higher scores representing more egalitarian attitudes (i.e. equality and shared power between partners). Although the PREPARE inventory is generally used for clinical purposes rather than research, reliability analyses performed on data from the current sample indicate that this measure has adequate reliability ($\alpha = .74$ for both males and females).

Communication patterns. Typical communication patterns used when issues arise were assessed using the Communication Patterns Questionnaire-Short Form (CPQ-SF; Christensen & Heavey, 1993). The CPQ-SF includes a three-item subscale measuring positive communication behaviors (PCB; e.g. "You both suggest possible solutions and compromises") and a six-item subscale measuring demand-withdraw interactions (e.g. "Man tries to start a discussion while Woman tries to avoid a discussion"). Additionally, the demand-withdraw subscale can be further separated by the three male demand/female withdrawal (MD/FW) items and the three female demand/male withdrawal (FD/MW) items. The CPQ-SF uses a 9-point Likert scale to indicate the likelihood of each communication pattern within the relationship (1 = *very unlikely*; 9 = *very likely*). Overall sum scores were created for the three dyadic communication patterns. There was a large amount of overlap between the females' and males' perceptions of the occurrence of these patterns within their relationship (intraclass $r = .84$ for FD/MW, $.74$ for MD/FW, and $.45$ for PCB). Therefore, the individual responses of females and males were summed to create a couple score for each subscale (possible range = 6 – 54) with higher scores reflective of more frequent engagement in each pattern of interaction. These scores reflect the couple's overall perception of the frequency of these communication patterns within their relationship. The CPQ-SF has been shown to have adequate criterion-related validity and reliability (Christensen, 1988; Christensen & Shenk, 1991), and each subscale was found to be reliable in the current sample ($\alpha = .69$ for FD/MW, $.68$ for MD/FW, and $.74$ for PCB).

Relationship well-being. The Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS; Busby, Christensen, Crane & Larson, 1995) is a 14-item assessment of relationship adjustment and explores the level of agreement between partners along three dimensions: dyadic consensus, cohesion, and well-being. An overall sum score was computed with possible scores ranging from 0 to 69 and higher scores reflective of greater relationship well-being. Strong convergent and criterion validity has been shown in previous studies (Busby et al., 1995), and adequate reliability was found in the current sample ($\alpha = .81$ for males and $.77$ and females).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

First, descriptive statistics and correlations for the variables of interest were computed. As shown in Table 2, in contrast to our first hypothesis, males and females, on average, reported similar and high levels of egalitarian gender role attitudes. Regarding communication patterns, couples reported, on average, fairly frequent engagement in positive interactions ($M = 41$ out of possible score of 54) yet moderate engagement in demand and withdrawal interaction patterns ($M = 21$ for MD/FW and 26 for FD/MW out of possible score of 54). A paired samples t test comparing FD/MW and MD/FW was statistically significant indicating that FD/MW occurred significantly more often than MD/FW, $t(29) = -2.38, p = .02$. Last, participants, on average, perceived their relationships positively; only 20% of males ($n = 6$) and 30% of females ($n = 9$) scored below 48, which is considered the cutoff score reflective of relationship distress (Crane, Middleton & Bean, 2000). A paired samples t test comparing males' and females' relationship well-being reflected a moderately significant difference such that males tended to report higher relationship well-being than females, $t(29) = 1.75, p = .09$.

Bivariate correlations, presented in Table 2, confirmed most of the expected associations specified in our second hypothesis. Although male and females on average reported similar egalitarian GRAs, female GRAs were significantly correlated with both partner's reported relationship well-being while male GRAs were significantly correlated with only his relationship well-being (see Table 2). In addition, more egalitarian GRAs were associated with more frequent positive communications and less frequent demand/withdraw behaviors for males and females. Interestingly, both types of demand/withdraw behaviors were associated with males' decreased relationship well-being, but females' relationship well-being was associated with FD/MW only. Positive communication behaviors were positively associated with both males' and females' perceived relationship well-being.

Based on these preliminary differences between male and female partners and our literature review suggesting different factors predict relationship well-being for males and females, male and female relationship well-being were conceptualized as separate dependent variables. Because our research questions then focused on relationship well-being at the individual level, and we anticipated potential sex differences between the partners, separate models were analyzed for males and females.

Regression Analysis

Regression analyses were conducted to test if the association between GRAs and relationship well-being was mediated by communication behaviors (hypothesis 3), and whether these associations were similar or different for male and female cohabiting partners. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), three criteria must be met for mediation to exist: 1) The independent variable must account for variation in the dependent variable; 2) The mediator must explain variation in the dependent variable when the independent variable is held constant; and 3) When controlling for the mediator, the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable is no longer significant. The first criterion was satisfied as noted in the correlations presented above. The second criterion was tested by regressing each partner's relationship well-being on his/her communication behaviors (MD/FW, FD/MW, and PCB) in step 2 while controlling for the GRAs of the individual in step 1. The final criterion was explored by examining the association of each partner's relationship well-being with GRAs while holding communication behaviors constant.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics and Pearson correlations for variables in the analysis

Variable	Range	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Female's Gender Role Attitudes	29-49	39.60	5.01	-					
2. Male's Gender Role Attitudes	31-50	39.63	4.65	.61***	-				
3. Male Demand/Female Withdrawal ^a	7-43	21.27	9.19	-.31 ⁺	-.40*	-			
4. Female Demand/Male Withdrawal ^a	7-48	26.33	10.56	-.44*	-.40*	.31 ⁺	-		
5. Positive Communication Behaviors ^a	20-54	40.97	8.02	.58***	.60**	-.27	-.38*	-	
6. Female's Relationship Well-Being	32-61	50.50	5.97	.55**	.28	-.04	-.60***	.59***	-
7. Male's Relationship Well-being	40-66	52.71	6.80	.58***	.59***	-.37*	-.47**	.61***	.43*

Note. *N* = 30 couples.^a Couple-derived score.
⁺ *p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

In the first step of our hierarchical multiple regression analyses (see Table 3), we entered GRAs as a predictor of relationship well-being in the male and female models. Consistent with the bivariate analyses, the regression analyses showed a significant and positive association between GRAs and relationship well-being. Female GRAs explained 28% of the variance in her relationship well-being, $F(1, 28) = 12.13, p < .01$, and male GRAs explained 32% of the variance in his relationship well-being $F(1, 28) = 14.55, p < .001$. For both male and female cohabiters, these results show individuals with more egalitarian GRAs also report greater relationship well-being, which supports hypothesis 2 and fulfills the first criterion for mediation.

Table 3
Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Female and Male Relationship Adjustment (N = 30 Couples)

<i>Female Model</i>	Step 1			Step 2		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>beta</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>beta</i>
Females Gender Role Attitudes	.66	.19	.55**	.26	.20	.22
Female Demand – Male Withdraw ^a				-.25	.08	-.45**
Male Demand – Female Withdraw ^a				.17	.09	.26 ⁺
Positive Communication Behaviors ^a				.27	.12	.37*
<i>Adjusted R²</i>		.28			.53	
<i>F for change in R²</i>		12.13**			6.09**	
<i>Male Model</i>						
Males Gender Role Attitudes	.86	.22	.59***	.36	.28	.25
Female Demand – Male Withdraw ^a				-.13	.10	-.20
Male Demand – Female Withdraw ^a				-.08	.12	-.11
Positive Communication Behaviors ^a				.30	.15	.36*
<i>Adjusted R²</i>		.32			.42	
<i>F for change in R²</i>		14.55***			2.57 ⁺	

^a Couple-derived score.

⁺ $p < .07$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The second criterion to establish mediation was satisfied when communication behaviors were added to these models (step 2). As shown in Table 3, the impact of GRAs was reduced to nonsignificance (hypothesis 3), and FD/MW, MD/FW, and PCB accounted for an additional 25% of the variance in female relationship well-being $F(4, 25) = 9.26, p < .001$ and 10% of the variance in male relationship well-being $F(4, 25) = 6.17, p < .001$. Notably, for females, all three

communication behaviors were either significantly or marginally significantly associated with their relationship well-being, whereas for males, PCB was the only variable associated with their relationship well-being.

To satisfy the third criterion for mediation, each partner's relationship well-being was regressed on communication behaviors in the first step and GRAs in the second step. Results were similar to the previous models. As found in the previous female model, the effects of FD/MW and PCB were significant in step one ($\beta = -.28, p < .01$ and $\beta = .35, p < .01$, respectively) when only communication patterns were included in the model, and step 2 when GRAs were added ($\beta = .26, ns$). The effect of MD/FW was marginally significant in step 1 ($\beta = .16, p < .10$) and step 2 ($\beta = .17, p < .07$). Again, when all of the communication behavior variables were entered in step 1, PCB was the only significant predictor in the male model ($\beta = .41, p < .01$). It remained significant in step two ($\beta = .30, p < .05$) when GRAs were included ($\beta = .36, ns$) in the model. As expected when mediation occurs, after accounting for communication behaviors, GRAs were no longer significantly associated with either partner's reported relationship well-being.

Finally, Sobel's Test (1982) measures the magnitude of the indirect effects of the independent variable (male and female GRAs) on the dependent variables (male and female relationship well-being) through the proposed mediator variables. Sobel's Test confirmed that PCB had a significant indirect effect on females' and males' reported relationship well-being ($z = 1.90, p = .05$, indirect $R^2 = .24$ and $z = .193, p = .05$, indirect $R^2 = .27$, respectively). Similarly, the indirect effect of FD/MW behaviors was marginally significant for females ($z = 1.86, p = .06, R^2 = .20$). Although MD/FW was a marginal predictor of females' reported relationship well-being, Sobel's Test was nonsignificant ($z = -.68, p = .50, R^2 = .00$), suggesting that this variable is not a convincing mediator.

Discussion

Findings from the current study suggest that the gender role attitudes of cohabiting partners with the intent to marry may influence their relationship well-being through their interaction patterns, especially the use of positive communication behaviors; and these associations may vary by gender. Although previous research has generally suggested that cohabiting couples have more egalitarian views toward the roles of men and women in a romantic relationship (Smock, 2000), subgroup differences within cohabiting couples have been shown to exist. For example, when cohabiting couples who intended to marry were compared to cohabiting couples without plans to marry, those intending to marry held less egalitarian beliefs (Sanchez, Manning, & Spock, 1998). In the current study, males and females reported similar and fairly egalitarian beliefs regarding marital and familial roles.

As hypothesized, we found that egalitarian GRAs were positively associated with relationship well-being for males and females. This finding is consistent with existing research that has shown conformity to less egalitarian beliefs, and role expectations is associated with decreased relationship intimacy and relationship satisfaction especially for males (Ludlow & Mahalik, 2001; Vonk & VanNobelen, 1993). However, it is noteworthy that men's GRAs were not associated with how women perceived the quality of their relationship. (Post hoc regression analyses including both men's and women's GRA scores, not shown, were consistent with the bivariate findings.) Though Burn and Ward (2005) found men's GRAs more greatly influence women's relationship satisfaction, the current findings suggest that such an influence may not exist for cohabiting couples.

Notably, preliminary analyses also showed that FD/MW and MD/FW were both associated with lower relationship well-being for males but only FD/MW, not MD/FW was associated with females' relationship well-being. Although more recent studies have found MD/FW and FD/MW impact relationship well-being similarly (Vogel et al., 1999), our finding is consistent with earlier studies (Christensen, 1988; Christensen & Heavey, 1993; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993). Researchers have suggested that MD/FW does not impact females' relationship well-being because male demand behaviors may serve as an indicator of the males' involvement and commitment in the relationship. Since males are frequently stereotyped as the withdrawing partner, the demanding behavior may be preferable to excessive withdrawn behavior if it is interpreted as showing an interest in the relationship (Heavey et al., 1993).

Although other studies have noted the effect of GRAs on relationship well-being, researchers have failed to establish how these attitudes impact the relationship, specifically through communication behaviors. From a symbolic interaction and role theory perspective, we hypothesized that communication behaviors would mediate the association between GRAs and reported relationship well-being. Though this hypothesis was supported for males and females, slight differences were found, in contrast to the bivariate analyses, in the types of communication behaviors that mediate this association. For females, all three communication behaviors (FD/MW, MD/FW, and PCB) were significantly associated with relationship well-being after accounting for GRAs. In contrast, PCB was the only significant predictor of reported relationship well-being for males after accounting for GRAs. Thus, when cohabiting couples hold more egalitarian beliefs, the relationship satisfaction of women is more greatly influenced when she has to initiate communication (demand) less frequently, the male partner is more engaging in discussing issues (low withdrawal and more demanding), *and* both partners exhibit positive interactions. For men, their perception of relationship quality is primarily influenced through positive interactions with their partner and not the occurrence of demand/withdraw behaviors. These findings are consistent with role theory, which suggests that cohabiting relationships likely represent rather flexible roles that warrant increased communication as partners' share their expectations and negotiate their roles with each other (Lindsey, 2005; Thornton & Nardi, 1975).

Limitations, Future Directions, and Implications

Limitations of this study include the unique characteristics of the sample, the small sample size, the measurement of gender role attitudes, and certain aspects of the research design. First, because the current sample included cohabiting couples who were intending to marry and who self-selected into a premarital education program, it is possible that they exhibited distinct and more positive GRAs and behaviors than other cohabiting couples. Therefore, caution should be taken when generalizing these findings to the larger population of couples in romantic relationships. Studies that include a broader sample of couple types (i.e. married and dating) are needed in order to further an understanding of the associations among GRAs, communication behaviors, and relationship well-being. Additionally, the small sample size, and the related lack of power, likely limited our ability to detect statistically significant findings. Specifically, although communication behaviors appear to have a mediating role, some of the associations were marginally or statistically significant in the regression model but not in Sobel's test of indirect effects. Next, gender role attitudes were measured using the role relationship scale of the PREPARE-CC inventory (Olson & Olson, 1999), which is typically used for clinical purposes rather than research. Although this measure evaluates individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about decision-making and shared roles within the relationship like other GRA measures, future

research should utilize more established, well-validated measures of GRAs. We also acknowledge that the study design is a limitation in some aspects. Although our sample involved linked data from both couple members, we chose to conduct separate analyses for males and females for several reasons. The small sample size hindered our ability to create a single large model predicting male and female relationship well-being. Additionally, others had hypothesized that these variables are related differently for males and females, which fits with our conceptualization of separate models for males and females (Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Ludlow & Mahalik, 2000; Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2008). Future studies utilizing structural equation modeling and larger and more diverse samples have significant potential for exploring the impact of these actor and partner effects simultaneously.

In spite of these limitations, the findings from the present study contribute to existing research in several ways. First, these results provide preliminary support for a link between GRAs, communication behaviors, and relationship well-being. In the current study, communication behaviors were significantly associated with GRAs. Those with more egalitarian GRAs reported more positive communication behaviors which, in turn, influenced perceived relationship well-being. Thus, the relationship between GRAs and relationship well-being may not be as straightforward as previous research has suggested. Second, these results focus on a specific subpopulation of cohabiting couples (i.e. those intending to marry). Although many studies distinguish between cohabiting, married, and dating couples, they often fail to distinguish between specific subgroups of cohabiting couples. Couples may intend to cohabit long-term, or they may choose to cohabit because of practical reasons such as economics or childcare needs. Although these are all examples of cohabiting couples, relationships may function differently in each of these situations. Thus, future research is warranted that compares these attitudinal and behavioral processes across these various types of committed relationships.

From an applied perspective, these findings can be used by therapists and other community educators who work with premarital cohabiting couples. Although the impact of communication behaviors on relationships is often emphasized in these settings, GRAs generally do not receive as much attention, especially as they relate to communication behaviors. Therefore, it may be helpful for therapists and community educators to consider the GRAs of couple members as they address and foster healthy communication behaviors (Russell, 2002).

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