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# Co-constructing stories of "we" and "us" with cohabitating couples

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Co-constructing stories of “we” and “us” with cohabitating couples

by

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A THESIS

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## **Abstract**

In this research, I examine how cohabitating couples co-constructed stories of mutuality and “we-ness” in conversations with me. Using Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) approach to analyzing narrative reality, based within a social constructionist perspective, I study how participants and I co-narrated and co-edited stories of relational identity. I pay particular attention to my role as researcher, and how I was active in inviting and shaping these stories of “we-ness.” In my analysis, I also attend to how participants and I co-managed the stakes of storytelling, as we were developing plotlines about who they were as a couple and where they were going as partners. In their interviews, participants indicated that talking with me about “we-ness” had strengthened their sense of relational identity. I discuss the implications of my results for both research and counselling, and particularly for how counsellors can actively invite clients into telling stories of “we-ness.”

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

In recent years, cohabitation (or living with a romantic partner outside of marriage) has become more common and socially acceptable in mainstream North American society (Jose, O’Leary, & Moyer, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2009a). While cohabitation stories were once limited to tales of immorality and sin, new narratives have been emerging as more and more dating couples are choosing to move in together. Cohabitation may now be understood, for example, as an opportunity to test out a potential marriage and safeguard against divorce, as a way to cut living expenses, or as the relational equivalent of marriage (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009b).

At present, there is no commonly shared understanding within North American culture about what it means to cohabit. Instead, individuals have access to a variety of understandings that they may draw upon as they make sense of cohabitation in their own lives. Since people are likely to construct different understandings of cohabitation based on their unique contexts and experiences, I wondered, what happens when people form couples and begin living together? How are they called upon to create a sense of shared meaning for their relationship? How do couples co-construct a sense of “we” in cohabitation? While these are questions that have interested me as a researcher, they also became personally relevant when I entered into a cohabitating relationship myself.

“We-ness,” as I understand it, has to do with a couples’ lived sense of being joined together as partners. It involves a sort of mutual understanding, a shared knowing, a “being on the same page” about their relationship and where it is heading. “We-ness” also has to do with a couple’s sense of relational identity, which belongs to neither partner as an individual, but is constructed and shared between them through

collaborative action (Gergen, 2009). Further, creating “we-ness” is a project that is never complete. A couple’s sense of “we” is dynamic and fluid, such that it is continuously being constructed and re-constructed through their ongoing interactions with one another (Shotter, 1987).

Sharing a sense of “we” is important in a romantic relationship, as it contributes to a couple’s feelings of togetherness, adds richness to their union, and feeds their understanding of how they are going forward together as partners (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Shotter, 2011). Shared stories of love and “we-ness” can also serve as resources for couples through hard times, reminding partners that, even when they are struggling, they share something that links them to one another, and to their joint history and planned future as a couple. Creating feelings of “we-ness” may be especially important in less traditional (or more contested) forms of relationships, such as cohabitating unions. In the context of multiple, and often conflicting, understandings of cohabitation, couples need to be able to come to mutual understandings that allow them to account for their relationship to themselves, to their partners, and to others.

In this research, I invited cohabitating couples to co-construct stories about their relationship with me, particularly stories about how they have developed a sense of mutuality and “we-ness” between them. In my analysis, I focus on our joint storytelling as a social practice, seeing storytelling as a means of negotiating meaning and identity while navigating the emotional stakes of relationships (Potter, 1996). I attend to the ways in which partners and I co-narrated and co-edited their developing love story to come up with something they indicated was shared between them (Strong & Knight, in press). I also explore how I, as the research interviewer, was active in shaping the process of

storytelling through my questions and responses. Further, as the co-construction of “we” is considered to be an ongoing matter, I examine how our conversations contributed to participating couples’ sense of “we-ness,” and find that inviting couples to notice and talk about “we-ness” in their relationship served to strengthen the very experiences of connection and togetherness that we were discussing.

In the following chapters, I outline my research on the ways through which cohabitating couples and I co-constructed joint relational narratives. In Chapter Two, I review the literature on cohabitation, stories and storytelling, and the co-construction of meanings and identities that serves as the background and context of my current research. The third chapter includes an outline of the theoretical framework from which I approached this work, as well as detailed descriptions of the method and design that I used to generate and analyze data. In Chapter Four, I present results from my analysis of the stories and storytelling interactions that took place between cohabitating couples and I.

More specifically, I demonstrate how I invited couples into telling particular kinds of stories, and examine how the couples and I interacted to co-narrate and co-edit stories of “we-ness” that we could all agree to. I also demonstrate how our conversations served to strengthen and enrich the couples’ experiences of relational “we-ness.” Finally, in the fifth chapter, I discuss the implications of these results for future research, and conclude by suggesting ways for therapists to invite and facilitate couples in co-creating stories of mutuality and “we-ness” in therapy.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

In the past, cohabitation stories were quite limited, such that few different stories about cohabitation existed within the dominant North American culture (which is composed of those ways of talking or understanding generally considered to be conventional or normative among members of this culture), and those that did seemed to be widely shared. Popular expressions for cohabitation, such as “shacking up” and “living in sin,” hint at how cohabitation narratives have traditionally been negative, with cohabitation depicted as an immoral lifestyle choice, or at the very least, a ramshackle sort of union. While throughout history, there have always been couples who lived together outside of marriage, these couples would typically have faced significant social stigma, and thus have lived on the boundaries of what was considered to be respectable society (Coleman, Ganong, & Warzinik, 2007).

In North America, marriage has long been regarded as the foundation of the family structure, and the only acceptable way for two people to live together as romantic partners (Thornton, 2009; Thornton, Axinn, & Xie, 2007). The importance of marriage is embedded within legal and religious (primarily Judeo-Christian) expectations, and has traditionally served as the primary indicator of a young person’s transition into adulthood (Abbott, 2010). Further, marriage has been cited as a source of significant social and economic benefits, including increased financial stability and improved emotional and physical health (Waite & Lehrer, 2003; Williams, 2003). Families made up of married parents have also been argued to be the prime environment for raising healthy, happy children (Brown, 2010; Klausli & Owen, 2009).

Over the last five decades, however, numerous changes have been occurring within North American families; in fact, the very definition of “family” has been changing (Peters & Kamp Dush, 2009; Thornton, 2009). While rare in the past, divorce became more and more common through the 1960s to 1980s, and is now considered to be a “modern-day norm” (Miles & Servaty-Seib, 2010, p. 209). The past several decades have also seen an increase in the number of children born to unmarried parents, and a rise in single-parent families (Institute of Marriage & Family Canada, 2009). Cohabitation outside of marriage has increased significantly as well; “common-law” couples have been identified as the fastest-growing type of family in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2009a).

In general, many people are delaying marriage and childbearing, or choosing not to get married or have children at all (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004; Williams, 2003); according to the 2006 census, for the first time ever, more Canadian adults are unmarried than are married (Statistics Canada, 2009c). Thus, popular understandings of “family” have grown to recognize that families often consist of more than just two parents and their biological children, and may include grandparents, extended relatives, same-sex or cohabitating partners, close friends, community members, or step-parents, step-children, or step-siblings, for example (Thornton et al., 2007).

These trends reflect an overall movement toward the “deinstitutionalization” of family relationships, with marriage now considered to be but one of several options to choose from when building a family (Cherlin, 2004; DiFonzi, 2011). Some of the social, cultural, and technological developments that have been associated with this movement include an increased acceptance of premarital sex, the development of the birth control pill, changes in divorce laws (e.g., the introduction of the no-fault divorce), the women’s

liberation movement and rising wages for women, increasing emphasis on individualistic values, and the secularization of Western society (Thornton, 2009; Thornton et al., 2007). Thus, in North America, families appear to be more diverse than ever before.

### **Cohabitation**

It is within this context that cohabitation has emerged as a common and normative experience for many North Americans. In 1976, common-law couples made up only 0.7% of all Canadian couples; by 2001, this percentage had expanded to 14% (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2002). And while couples of all ages are choosing to move in together, cohabitation appears to be most popular among individuals between the ages of 25 and 29. In 2006, 22.6% of people in this age range indicated that they were in a common-law relationship (Statistics Canada, 2009b). As cohabitating unions tend to be short, these statistics may underestimate the number of people who will cohabit at some point in their lives (Smock & Gupta, 2002). Cohabitation has now become the most common type of first conjugal union for young adults in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2002).

While cohabitation is becoming increasingly popular, research suggests that people approach, understand, and make sense of cohabitation in very different ways. Some couples make a formal decision to cohabit, while others seem to gradually begin living together without making a conscious decision (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006; Manning & Smock, 2005). Couples who decide to cohabit give different reasons for doing so, such as to test a potential marriage, to spend more time together, or to live conveniently in the same place (Rhoades et al., 2009b; Sassler, 2004). Researchers also suggest that people hold a variety of views on where cohabitation fits into the course of a

relationship. While many view cohabitation as a step toward marriage, others may see it as an alternative to being single (Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990), or as a long-term alternative to being married (Smock, 2000). The level of commitment believed to be associated with cohabitation varies as well; some people describe cohabitation as a serious commitment, while others indicate that they began living together without discussing the future of their union (Stanley et al., 2006).

The prevalence of cohabitation suggests that living with a partner outside of marriage has become a socially acceptable experience (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). In fact, cohabitation is often said to be advisable, as it is viewed as a way for couples to test a potential marriage before they actually get married (Huang, Smock, Manning, & Bergstrom-Lynch, 2011). But cohabitation is still controversial. Many people continue to argue that cohabitation negatively impacts couples (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Hall & Zhao, 1995; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003) and children (Brown, 2004; Manning, Smock, & Majumdar, 2004). As a social trend, some see cohabitation as contributing to the de-valuing of traditional family structures such as marriage (Axinn & Barber, 1997; Smock & Gupta, 2002). As such, cohabitation has become a hotly-debated topic in the research literature, mass media, and in many families across North America. I will now explore some of the popular discourses about cohabitation that have been taken up in these debates.

**Cohabitation discourses.** In social constructionist theory, it is argued that people co-construct their sense of reality through interactions that take place within, and that are influenced by, their context (Burr, 2003). Within this context are social and cultural discourses that people tend to draw upon as they construct and make sense of their world

(Burr, 2003). These discourses are made up of “a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events” (Burr, 2003, p. 32). In this section of my literature review, I will explore some of the popular discourses about cohabitation that are currently circulating in North American society. Since, from the social constructionist perspective, popular discourses about cohabitation shape how participants and I understand and make decisions about cohabitation, it is important to examine these messages in detail.

*Cohabitation as a test for marriage.* Cohabitation is often described as a sort of test run for marriage (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Rhoades et al., 2009b; Huang et al., 2011). Cohabitation is said to provide couples with the opportunity to find out if they are compatible enough to live together before they get married. For this reason, cohabitation is commonly talked about as a way to reduce the odds of divorce, because couples who are not compatible might not end up married at all (Rhoades et al., 2009b). When cohabitation is talked about as a testing ground for marriage, it is depicted as a temporary sort of relationship, and one that is less committed and easier to exit than marriage (Nock, 1995; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004).

The “cohabitation as a test” discourse has been linked to rising fears about divorce (Huang et al., 2011). Statistics claiming that one out of every two marriages will end in divorce, though misleading, have been widely circulated (Ambert, 2009). Further, many young people have been through the experience of parental divorce and have found it to be difficult for everyone involved (Manning, Cohen, & Smock, 2011). So while many people continue to place significant value on the institution of marriage and would like to get married at some point in their lives (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), they

want to do what they can to ensure they are marrying the “right” person (Smock, Huang, Manning, & Bergstrom, 2006). Premarital cohabitation has been talked about as one way of seeking that assurance.

*Cohabitation as an alternative to marriage.* Another common discourse about cohabitation is that living together outside of marriage is the same, in terms of relational commitment and day-to-day life as a couple, as being married (Brown & Booth, 1996). From this perspective, marriage is considered to be more of a legal formality than a transition that significantly changes the nature of a relationship (Arnett, 2004). When this discourse is taken up, cohabitation is often talked about as a long-term or even permanent state, and as a form of relationship that can be just as serious and committed as marriage (Brown & Booth, 1996; Guzzo, 2009).

Those who take up this discourse may point to rising divorce rates as a sign that marriage does not guarantee anything in a relationship, and argue that the commitment that partners negotiate between themselves is more important than legal, religious, or cultural acknowledgment of that commitment (Arnett, 2004; Landale & Fennelly, 1992). Some who align with this discourse might describe themselves as opposed to marriage as an institution, and place greater value on individualism and personal commitments than on public commitments (Cherlin, 2004), while others might talk about marriage as something that is not necessary.

It is interesting to note, however, that while marriage has become less institutionalized over time, cohabitation has taken on an increasingly legal nature. In Canada, cohabitating partners have access to many of the same legal advantages as married partners, including access to insurance benefits, and under certain circumstances,

a right to the division of assets if the couple separates (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004).

The “cohabitation as an alternative to marriage” discourse is not as dominant in the literature as talk about cohabitation as a trial marriage. Within the cohabitation literature, it is maintained that almost all cohabitating couples want to get married at some point (Manning & Smock, 2002; Sassler, 2004). If they do not, it is because they are not committed to the relationship. Woods and Emery (2002) described cohabitation as a “phase of courtship, a prelude to marriage, or a specific type of relationship that serves as an alternative to marriage and provides the advantages of marriage *with less commitment*” (p. 102, italics added for emphasis). From this perspective, cohabitating relationships are easier, and less painful to leave, than married relationships, which might not always be the case. The marginalization of the “cohabitation as an alternative to marriage” discourse is also reflected in the fact that much of the cohabitation literature has focused on *premarital* cohabitation (e.g., Jose et al., 2010; Kamp Dush et al., 2003; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006; Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2009), rather than cohabitation as a conscious alternative to marriage.

*“Sliding” into cohabitation.* Particularly in the research literature, the transition to cohabitation is often talked about as something that happens quite gradually, rather than as the result of conscious planning or decision-making (Manning & Smock, 2005; Stanley et al., 2006). Partners may begin to spend more and more time together, spending nights with one another and slowly bringing together their things, until they eventually find that they are basically living together already. Stanley et al. (2006) referred to this sort of transition as “sliding” rather than “deciding.” According to the sliding discourse,

many couples enter cohabitating situations without talking about the future of their relationship (Sassler, 2004; Stanley et al., 2006). This discourse supports the argument made by some researchers that cohabitation is more akin to being single or dating than to being married, as it does not necessarily involve a long-term commitment (Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990). It has also been suggested that this sliding transition, and its potential implications for relationships, may be responsible for the so-called “cohabitation effect” (Stanley et al., 2006), which will be explored in the following section.

*The “cohabitation effect.”* As described above, much of the research on cohabitation has focused on cohabitation as a precursor to marriage, and particularly on the effects that living together before marriage has on subsequent marital relationships. One of the most commonly circulated discourses from this literature is that of the “cohabitation effect.” This term is used to refer to a collection of research findings that suggest that couples who live together before marriage tend to demonstrate decreased levels of marital quality, marital stability, and relationship commitment; increased levels of conflict, disagreement, and negative communication behaviours; and an elevated risk of divorce compared to couples who do not live together before marriage (Booth & Johnson, 1988; Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; DeMaris & Rao, 1992; Hall & Zhao, 1995; Jose et al., 2010; Kamp Dush et al., 2003; Thomson & Colella, 1992).

Debates continue over whether this effect is due to the characteristics of those who self-select into cohabitation, is related to something about the cohabitation experience itself, or speaks to the constraints of cohabitation that make people more likely to stay together and get married than break-up (Kamp Dush et al., 2003; Stanley et

al., 2006; Woods & Emery, 2002). In several research studies, it has been found that those who begin to cohabit only after they have become engaged or have otherwise established clear intentions to marry tend not to experience the cohabitation effect (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009a)

The “cohabitation effect” has been widely discussed in the media, likely because this collection of findings goes against the popular discourse that cohabitation improves the odds of compatibility in marriage (Woods & Emery, 2002). Consider the following headlines: “The downsides of cohabiting before marriage” (Jay, *The New York Times, Sunday Page, Opinions*, 2012); “Cohabitation is bad for women’s health” (Risen, *The New York Times Magazine*, 2006); “Study: Cohabitation may lead to break-ups” (*CNN U.S.*, 2002); “Maybe it’s time to say ‘I don’t’ to living together before marriage?” (Leung, *The Globe and Mail, The Hot Button*, 2012). The “cohabitation effect” discourse seems to suggest that cohabitation might not be good for relationships after all. As such, it has frequently been taken up by those promoting the importance of marriage and warning against the dangers that cohabitation poses to marriage as an institution.

*Cohabitation and the decline of the family.* The rising prevalence of cohabitation has also been talked about as a sign that the family is in decline. In 1993, Popenoe wrote: “Like the majority of Americans, I see the family as an institution in decline and believe that this should be a cause for alarm - especially as regards the consequences for children” (p. 527). The “nuclear” family of the 1950s, composed of a married mother and father and their children, is depicted as the ideal family form in this discourse, and is said to offer the best environment for sustaining a satisfying relationship and raising well-functioning children (Coontz, 1993; Heath, 2012). As the nuclear structure was most

widespread in Canada and the United States in the 1950s, this period has been described as the “golden age” for families; a time when everyone was purportedly content and prosperous (Coontz, 1993; Kerr, Moyser, & Beaujot, 2006). Recent changes in families, including increases in cohabitation, are considered to be negative in that they mark the breakdown of this more “traditional” family structure and the benefits that are associated with it (Popenoe, 1993).

In the “decline of the family” discourse, the potential downsides of cohabitation are emphasized. For example, research supporting the cohabitation effect is called upon to demonstrate that cohabitation damages relationships, and tends to lack the commitment and stability of marriage: “Cohabitation is a halfway house for people who do not want the degree of personal and social commitment that marriage represents, at least not now” (Waite & Gallagher, 2000, p. 42). A family with cohabitating parents is also viewed to be a less stable, less healthy, and more conflicted environment for children to grow up in (Klausli & Owen, 2009; Manning et al., 2004; Schmeer, 2011). Further, cohabitation is said to reinforce the dwindling value that is placed on marriage and family in society (Popenoe, 2009; Smock, 2000). Those who take up this discourse of the family in decline call for North Americans to return to family forms that place marriage at their centre, namely the nuclear family (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

*The family is not declining, but it is changing.* In a contrasting discourse, it is recognized that while the family has been changing rapidly in recent decades, these changes are not necessarily negative or positive (Coontz, 1993). While many North Americans look to the 1950s as a halcyon time for families, author Stephanie Coontz (1993) has suggested that, in doing so, we are caught in a “nostalgia trap.” We often

remember and overemphasize those aspects of the past that seemed to be ideal, while the negative parts fade away. She argues that the 1950s, and the sort of nuclear family that was prevalent at that time, was not ideal for many people. Men and women were held to strict gender role expectations. Many families lived in poverty, and those who did not belong to the dominant white ethnic group faced severe discrimination (Coontz, 1993). While variability in families did exist at that time, those who did not fit the model of the dominant family, such as unmarried adults, gay or lesbian individuals, or single mothers, were stigmatized and oppressed (Kerr et al., 2006).

Increasing acceptance of diversity in families has opened up a wider range of options and more flexible roles for individuals to choose from (Kerr et al., 2006). It has also made it more possible for those in non-dominant lifestyles to live more openly and with less fear (though the effects of discrimination and hate are still very real). As such, the argument for marriage and for the nuclear family has been criticized to be an argument for the heteronormative, middle-class, white, married family (Heath, 2012). Coontz (1993) also contends that the family in decline discourse is not a recent one, and does not necessarily reflect the “actual” lives of families at any given time in history.

*“What would Grandma think?”* Cohabitation is commonly talked about as something that is more acceptable among younger generations than older generations, who might have grown up at a time when cohabitation was widely considered to be improper. But researchers have indicated the individuals and couples tend to take into account the opinions of their parents and family members when making their own decisions about cohabitation (Manning et al., 2011). Individuals whose parents have been in a cohabitating relationship, or who express more positive attitudes toward

cohabitation, are more likely to live with a partner outside of marriage (Axinn & Thornton, 1993; Sassler, Cunningham, & Lichter, 2009). Further, individuals whose families object to cohabitation, perhaps for religious reasons, may decide not to cohabit, either because they share the same beliefs as their family or because they do not want to lose their emotional or financial support (Manning et al., 2011). So as people develop their own understandings of cohabitation, they may wonder: “What would Grandma think?”

*Discourses of sexuality and gender.* Sexuality and gender are also important factors to consider when discussing cohabitation. Like marriage, cohabitation is most often talked about in the context of heterosexual relationships. As marriage for same-sex couples has only become legal in Canada in the last decade (and is still not permitted in the majority of American states), cohabitation has been one of the only options available to many couples. As such, it is expected that discourses surrounding cohabitation and marriage would be much different when considering same-sex relationships as opposed to heterosexual relationships, where marriage has always been an option, and often, an expectation.

When discussing heterosexual relationships and cohabitation, the issue of gender often arises as well, particularly when it comes to conversations about the potential advantages and disadvantages of living with a boyfriend or girlfriend. In both the research literature and in popular media, it is suggested that men tend to be more “commitment phobic” (Stanley et al., 2004, p. 513) than women. The expectation is that women will often push for more commitment in relationships, while men will, in general, resist that push (McGinnis, 2003; Reneflot, 2006). With this idea in mind, cohabitation is

often talked about as an appealing option for men who are not yet ready to commit to marriage, and who might want to further test their relationship before going forward with marriage (Huang et al., 2011). In contrast, women are said to be more likely to view cohabitation as another step in the path toward marriage with the partner that they intend to marry, rather than as a test for that relationship.

In terms of people's concerns about cohabitation, women are often depicted as being most concerned about the effects that cohabitation will have on their partner's willingness to commit to marriage in the future (Huang et al., 2011). This discourse is reflected in a quote from the website for *Glamour* magazine, which is targeted primarily at women: "Will living with your boyfriend hurt your chances of getting engaged?" (Bodgas, 2011). Men, in contrast, are said to worry more about how cohabitation might negatively affect both their relationship and their lifestyle, such as by reducing the passion that they share with their partners or limiting their freedom and independence (Huang et al., 2011). For example, in a relationship advice article featured on the *Men's Health* magazine website, readers are warned: "Now that you're 'domestic partners,' things are going to be different around here, mister. Effective immediately." (Connolly, 2005).

*Lack of common meaning.* An exploration of the above discourses suggests that there are many different ways to make sense of cohabitation and its role in relationships. While marriage is becoming a less institutionalized form of relationship in North America, there are even fewer shared norms and understandings around what it means to be in a cohabitating relationship (Kerr et al., 2006; Soons & Kalmijn, 2009). Cohabitation "lacks a universal meaning among adults" (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2007, p.

560), and as a form of relationship, is “suffused with ambiguity” (Nock, 1995, p. 56). As described in Chapter One, this ambiguity could present a challenge for couples as they work to construct an understanding of their relationship to which they can both agree.

### **The Power of Narrative: Co-constructing Stories, Meanings, and Identities**

Stories serve as the primary means through which we create and express meaning in our lives (Bruner, 1991). In order to make sense of our many experiences, we put together stories about what these experiences might mean, often including information about how they are connected to past experiences, the roles that we or other important characters have played in creating them, and what sort of future they seem to be leading us toward (Bamberg, 2004a; Polkinghorne, 1988). In this way, we use stories to give form, structure, and significance to our world (Frank, 2010). But stories can also work to shape experiences themselves, as we often seek out and recognize those events and circumstances that fit with storylines we have already been constructing (Sarbin, 1986).

Narrative researchers look at stories for the information they can provide on people’s lived experiences, or at least the sense of meaning that they have created around those experiences (Bamberg, 2012). In examining cohabitating couples’ stories about “we-ness,” I hope to gain a fuller understanding of how couples make sense of their cohabitating relationships, particularly in the context of the diverse cohabitation discourses described above. I also wish to generate new information on how couples go about developing a sense of meaning and shared identity within their relationship.

Traditionally, narrative approaches to psychology and research have focused on the “internal” characteristics of stories, such as their content, organization, and central themes (Bamberg, 2012; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). But some analysts have been

expanding the focus of narrative research, beyond just stories themselves, to examining the processes and contexts through which stories are produced (e.g., Bamberg, 2004b, 2011; Frank, 2010; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). In these forms of narrative analysis, storytelling is understood to be a social practice through which actions, such as constructing meanings and identities, can be performed (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

As a practice, storytelling is both interactional and situated (Bamberg, 2004b; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Stories, and occasions for storytelling, are constructed through ongoing interactions between potential narrators and audiences (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Stories tend to be meaningful in relation to the conversations that have been taking place prior to, and that have occasioned, their telling (Bamberg, 2006). Further, stories that are told in conversation tend to influence the talk that follows (Bamberg, 2006).

Storytelling is situated in that it is shaped by the particular social, cultural, historical, and institutional environments in which it takes place (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). People draw upon aspects of the narrative environment (such as the audience, the purposes of the story, the consequences that may be at stake in the storytelling, and the culturally-available resources for storytelling, including common plots) to construct a story that is meaningful in a particular context (Frank, 2010; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). At the same time, the building and sharing of narratives impacts the environment, such as by changing the relationship between the storyteller and their audience (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Wortham, 2001). Frank (2010) argued that “analysis is always about the relationship between at least two and most often three elements: a story, a storyteller, and a listener. None of these could be what it is without the other” (p. 16). This quote

highlights the reflexive nature of storytelling: The ways in which stories are produced both influence, and are influenced by, the circumstances in which they are constructed (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

From this *narrative-in-interaction* perspective, as it has been labelled by Bamberg (2004a, 2012), stories are not viewed as having a pre-given or essential form, but as being actively constructed to serve particular purposes in particular settings (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). And since stories are not created by storytellers in isolation, but are shaped by the people and environments with which they interact, stories can be said to be *co-constructed*. When storytelling is analyzed as a social practice, analysts tend to orient toward how people do storytelling, as well as to how they do things with stories (e.g., request sympathy, make an argument, justify their behaviours), rather than to what stories are about in terms of their content (Bamberg, 2004b, 2012; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

As past narrative research has focused primarily on stories, or on the “outcomes” of storytelling, the contexts and processes through which stories are created have generally been ignored (Bamberg, 2004b; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). As such, there is a lack of understanding within the narrative literature regarding how story environments, as well as interactions among storytellers and listeners, shape the stories that are produced by research participants. In this study, I examine how couples talk and tell stories about their relationship. Doing so involves analyzing couples’ stories, the ways in which these stories have been constructed (e.g., how conversational turn-taking is managed between partners), the roles that I played in the storytelling conversations, and the environments in which the storytelling took place (e.g., the context of the research interview), as well as how these factors interacted with one another. Adopting this research approach will

contribute a novel perspective to the narrative literature; namely, a new understanding of couples' storytelling interactions. If storytelling is comprehended as a meaning-making social practice, the importance of examining how stories are co-constructed, and thus how meaning is made, becomes evident.

This interactive and situated view of storytelling fits with the tenets of social constructionist theory (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Social constructionists argue that understandings of meaning and identity are co-constructed through dialogic interactions, which are shaped by the distinct environments in which they take place (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1997, 2009). From a social constructionist perspective, it is through our use of language that we come to develop understandings of the world around us and make sense of who we are within that world (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Social constructionists criticize popular conceptualizations of the "self" as something that is inherent to individuals and relatively unchanging across circumstances (Gergen, 2009; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). From the social constructionist perspective, our sense of identity is created and negotiated through relationships; it is always developing and being worked out between people as they engage with one another (Gergen, 2009; Wortham, 2001). Thus, like stories, identity is co-constructed. In the present research, I am investigating how participating couples and I go about co-constructing a sense of identity for their relationship, which will contribute to the social constructionist literature on identity- and meaning-making.

Gergen (2009) used the term *co-action* to describe the ways in which meaning and identity are created through coordinated action, or through the flow of acting and responding that takes place between people when they interact with one another. He

argued that “there is no action that has meaning in itself, that is, an action that can be isolated and identified for what it is” (Gergen, 2009, p. 33). Instead, our words and actions only come to have meaning when they are responded to by others in particular ways. For example, when a research interviewer says something to an interviewee, their speech is given meaning as a question when the interviewee responds with an answer. The interviewee’s response can be known as a suitable interview answer when the interviewer nods and goes on to ask her next question. Thus, the interviewer and the interviewee collaborate, through their responses to one other, to give meaning to the words that are being exchanged between them.

Shotter (1997) presented a similar concept of *joint action*, and emphasized the spontaneous and responsive ways in which people manage their interactions. According to Shotter (1997), we are constantly being called upon to respond in the here-and-now to whatever is coming up in our interactional terrain. In order for our interactions to be meaningful, we must make efforts to coordinate what we are saying and doing with what others are saying and doing in response to us. It is through this ongoing current of co-action or joint action that we come to experience a sense of meaning and a sense of “self” in relation to those with whom we interact (Gergen, 2009; Shotter, 1993). In analyzing how cohabitating partners talk and tell stories, I am hoping to gain valuable knowledge about how joint action can be accomplished through storytelling conversations.

Bavelas, Coates, and Johnson (2000) conducted an experimental study that demonstrated the impact that listeners’ responses (or lack of responses) can have on story construction. The researchers put participants, who did not know one another, into pairs, and had one participant tell a story while the other participant acted as a listener.

Listeners were placed into one of two experimental groups, in which they were invited to engage in tasks that either encouraged them to attend to the speaker (e.g., prepare to summarize their story) or that distracted them from the speaker's story (e.g., count the number of words the speaker used that started with the letter *t*).

Bavelas et al. (2000) found that when listeners were distracted, they provided significantly fewer responses to the speakers' stories, particularly responses that related directly to what the narrators were saying. They also found that when listeners provided fewer and less specific responses, speakers told stories that were rated to be of poorer quality by observers, as determined by the number of negative features (e.g., ending abruptly, speaking with hesitation, justifying the story) that were included in the story's ending. On the basis of these results, Bavelas et al. concluded the following:

Even in highly asymmetrical dialogues, speaker and listener roles are not fixed and separate. Rather, their relationship is reciprocal and collaborative, in that the narrator elicits responses from the listener and the listener's responses affect the narrator. In spontaneous storytelling, the interlocutors interact together to produce the narrative (p. 951).

Thus, the results of this study speak to the power of collaborative action, and demonstrate the effects that can occur when this flow of acting and responding is disrupted.

As we are responding and coordinating our talk with others, we are always positioning, performing, or enacting our "self" in purposeful ways (Bamberg, 2004b; Wortham, 2001). In understanding storytelling as a discursive practice, researchers can look at how meaning and identity are "done" in conversation (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). In other words, we can examine how people construct and present a sense of who

they are to others in their talk and storytelling. Wortham (2001) contended that storytellers both *represent* themselves as particular characters in the content of their stories, and attempt to *enact* those versions of their “self” as they communicate these stories to others. Similarly, Bamberg (2004b) referred to the ways in which “the *I* as a character who has emerged in the story-world is made relevant to *me* as the speaker in the here and now” (p. 223, italics in the original). Thus, identity is constructed not only in the ways that we talk about and present ourselves to those around us, but also in the ways in which we act out that self in relation to others.

But this is still only one side of the identity interaction. As we are acting out narrative versions of our “selves,” we often have to defend or account for those versions to others, who contest our identity claims (Bamberg, 2004a, 2004b; Shotter, 1987). Bamberg (e.g., 2004b, 2004c, 2007, & Georgakopoulou, 2008) turned to what he calls *small stories*, which are created through everyday conversations, to examine how people make claims about themselves and negotiate those claims with others. In order for our claims of “self” to gain credibility, we need to be able to justify those claims to others, and convince them to take them up in their dealings with us (Bamberg, 2004a, 2004b; Shotter, 1993).

Again, the task of identity construction is an interactive and dynamic one, as people are continuously negotiating and positioning themselves, as well as one another, as they talk and tell stories. To use a narrative metaphor, as we are co-narrating stories about our lives and experiences, we are also co-editing these stories with one another (Strong & Knight, in press). In this study, I investigate how couples interact with one another, and with me as the research interviewer, to co-narrate a storied sense of their

relational identity. This includes examining the ways in which partners negotiate and modify one another's claims about the nature of their relationship, both with me and with one another.

While identity creation is a constructive and creative process, it is not one that proceeds without guidelines or established norms (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). The ways in which we construct and understand identity are informed by shared cultural ideas about what it means to "have" an identity (Gergen, 2009; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Theorists who view identity as a dialogic project often call upon the work of Wittgenstein, who argued that, in particular contexts and environments, groups of people socially construct guidelines, or *grammars*, that inform how words are to be used and how meanings are to be understood (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Lock & Strong, 2010; Shotter, 1993). The ways in which we talk about and understand identity are shaped by particular grammars. In North America, these grammars are informed by the individualistic views that currently permeate the dominant culture (Gergen, 2009).

According to these views, people have an individual identity that belongs to and exists within them (Gergen, 2009). So as we go about constructing a sense of "self" within the North American context, we often get caught up in language games that inform how we understand the "self" as something with an essential and internal existence, rather than as something that is socially constructed (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). The world of research interviewing also has its own set of grammars, with culturally shared understandings regarding the roles to be played by interviewers and interviewees (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). The ways in which aspects of the research

environment can influence the storytelling process will be explored further in the following chapters.

### **Co-constructing a Sense of Relational “We-ness”**

Much like how we co-construct a sense of individual identity in our talk and interactions, we also work to develop relational identities that link us to important others (Shotter, 1987). For example, we may build mutual identities that define us as teammates, coworkers, family members, or romantic partners. In Chapter One, I introduced the concept of “we-ness,” which for the purposes of this research, I defined as romantic partners’ articulated experiences of being linked together by a shared identity, which belongs mutually to both partners and is created through their ongoing interactions with one another.

Sociologists Berger and Kellner (1964) put forth one of the earliest discussions of identity co-construction in romantic relationships (Davies, 1987; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). They described the process of meaning and identity construction as one of *nomos*-building, with *nomos* being used to refer to the sense of order that one creates for one’s life. Like contemporary social constructionists (e.g., Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2009), Berger and Kellner argued that meaning is created through conversational relationships and the coordination of interactions:

As of the marriage, most of each partner’s actions must now be projected in conjunction with those of the other. Each partner’s definitions of reality must be continually correlated with the definitions of the other...the identity of each now takes on a new character, having to be constantly matched with that of the other (p. 10-11).

Gubrium and Holstein (2009) described Berger and Kellner's *nomos* as a sort of relationship identity which "defines who and what they are together as husband and wife" (p. 131).

But while Berger and Kellner (1964) argued that *nomos*-building takes place in a variety of relationships, they awarded special privileges to the marriage union. They claimed that, as the most important form of human relationship, marriage plays a greater role in shaping and maintaining people's understandings of reality than less important relationships. Berger and Kellner also suggested that *nomos*-building begins after couples have entered into marriage: "In terms of each partner's biography, the event of marriage initiates a new nomic process" (p. 11). Other examinations of reality construction in relationships have also focused primarily on marriage (e.g., Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004; Kefalas, Furstenberg, Carr, & Napolitano, 2011; Skerrett, 2010; Stephen, 1994). In this research, I adopt a more expanded view of "we-ness" as an experience that is not exclusive to marital relationships, and that can be initiated and developed at many points in a relationship.

My understanding of relational "we-ness" is also informed by Shotter's (2007) writings about "knowing of the third kind," which he described as "a continually changing *felt* kind of knowing to do with how to *direct* and thus *organise* our own behaviour *from within* our performance of it while engaged in activities with others like ourselves" (p. 132, italics in original). Shotter argued that, as people interact and respond to one another through joint action, they mutually construct an understanding of how they are to act and behave together in that relationship (Lock & Strong, 2010). When talking about joint action, and knowing of the third kind, Shotter (2008) emphasized that this is

something that occurs “in the momentary relational spaces existing both between us and between us and our circumstances” (p. 350); as such, it cannot be attributed to any one person. I understand “we-ness” in a similar manner: It is a form of “self” that does not belong to one partner or another, but that is jointly constructed and shared between them.

Johnella Bird’s (2004) relational consciousness also speaks to the “shared space” that is created between partners. Bird theorized that, as it is through language that relationships are constituted, partners are continually working out a sense of meaning and relationship in their conversations with one another (Ness & Strong, in press). She argued that couples (and their therapists) must attend to the meanings that are being co-created in their interactions (Bird, 2004). As these understandings do not belong solely to either partner, they may not reflect the partners’ expressed intentions for interacting with one another in particular ways (Ness & Strong, in press). Engaging a sense of relational consciousness involves recognizing how understandings are co-constructed in a space of “we-ness,” and thus cannot necessarily be predicted or owned by the individuals involved (Bird, 2004; Ness & Strong, in press).

The understanding of “we-ness” as co-constructed and externalized that I take up in this research is a point of departure from other descriptions of “we-ness” presented in the literature on couples therapy. For example, Gottman (1999), a prominent scholar in the field of marriage and family therapy, described “we-ness” as an individual’s inclination to identify themselves as part of a couple rather than as a separate person. While Gottman related “we-ness” to a kind of relationship identity, his understanding of “we-ness” is informed by individualistic assumptions about identity. “We-ness” is described as something that a husband can have or not have, and something that a wife

can have or not have. Thus, while Gottman seems to view “we-ness” as something that individuals can bring to their relationships separately, I hope to co-construct with couples, through collaborative action, a sense of “we-ness” we can all agree to and that we all have a stake in constructing.

This individualistic view is also evident in Skerrett’s (2010) examination of married couples’ stories about “we-ness,” which she defined as “a kind of thinking that reflects reciprocity and integration of the other’s perspective in one’s own” (p. 505). Skerrett drew upon models of individual development, such as Erikson’s ideas about the importance of generativity in mid-life, to make sense of participants’ stories. Partners were initially interviewed separately. They were asked to provide an individual life story and to identify a theme that seemed to capture that story. The couples were then interviewed together, and “given instructions on how to blend their life stories into a couple story based on utilizing each individual life theme” (p. 506).

While Skerrett (2010) sought out and analyzed couples’ stories, the process of joint storytelling was understood to be a matter of bringing individuals’ stories together, rather than one of relationally co-constructing stories that belong to neither partner as individuals, but that are created through their interactions. I intend to examine how partners and I interacted with one another as we co-narrated stories of mutuality and “we-ness,” which was also a process of co-editing our developing stories as we shaped them into something that we could all agree to (Strong & Knight, in press).

Within the literature on stories, meanings, and identities, there has been a tendency to focus on individuals’ stories and individuals’ constructions of identity. In the present research, I am going beyond this focus by examining jointly constructed stories

about relational “we-ness.” My hope is to gain a greater understanding of how people interact with and respond to one another as they co-construct a sense of shared relational identity. The methods that I use in this study (i.e., conducting interviews with both members of a couple) will contribute to the literature on dyadic interviewing, which has not been widely employed in research on couples and families (Beiten, 2008; Gale, n.d.). The findings of this research will also be helpful for couples and family therapists in terms of informing how they can go about assisting and facilitating couples in co-constructing a stronger sense of mutuality and “we-ness” in their relationships.

### **Why Do Couples’ Stories Matter?**

It is through narrative that we come to make sense of our lives, experiences, and relationships (Bruner, 1991). Stories also influence our understandings of what is considered to be moral or immoral behaviour in our interactions with others (Nelson, 2001). Furthermore, stories have the power to connect people and to hold them together through a sense of shared past and anticipated future (Frank, 2010). Stories can also separate us, though, particularly stories that pay tribute to dominance and control over others (Nelson, 2001). The stories we live by shape the experiences that we view as significant, and can limit or facilitate our hopes for different kinds of futures. And it is not just the telling of “big” life stories that is significant: The storytelling that occurs in our day-to-day conversations with those around us works to shape our broader understandings of meaning and identity (Bamberg, 2006).

A recognition of the powerful role that stories play in our meaning-making processes, which can serve as either “a gift or a danger” (Frank, 2010, p. 2), is foundational to the practice of narrative therapy. According to White and Epston (1990),

the forefathers of the narrative therapy approach, people often encounter difficulties when they are living by stories that are *problem-saturated*. These stories tend to focus on the troubling aspects of our experiences, and lead people to construct negative conclusions about themselves (e.g., “I do not measure up to the expectations of others”), their world (e.g., “The world is a cruel place”), their relationships with others (e.g., “No one has ever loved me”), and their possibilities for the future (e.g., “I will never amount to anything”).

The intention behind narrative therapy is to work with people to deconstruct stories that have been shaping their lives in unhelpful ways, delegitimizing them as claims to truth, and recognizing that there are multiple ways of making sense of experiences (Parry & Doan, 1994). Further, the intent is to co-author alternative stories that give voice to people’s values, agency, and power, and that are more facilitative of positive constructions of the “self” and increased possibilities for the future (White, 2007).

The stories that define and make up our romantic relationships can also become problem-focused (White, 2011). Because of the individualizing tendencies that are common throughout Western society, problem stories tend to get us blaming our partners and their internal faults and weaknesses when things go awry (White, 2011). Problem stories can negatively impact romantic relationships by orienting partners to the difficult interactions that take place between them, while leading them to anticipate a future in which the relationship continues unhappily or ends entirely. Couples can also encounter problems in their relationship when they are attempting to speak to one another from different discourses (Ness & Strong, in press). For example, a partner who understands his cohabitating relationship as a step toward marriage may find himself in conflict with

his partner, who makes sense of living together as a source of convenience rather than commitment, when attempting to talk about their future together.

In contrast to problem-saturated stories, relationship stories of mutuality and “we-ness” can serve as a resource for couples, allowing the positive and supportive aspects of their relationships to take a more central role in their stories. Further, when couples are able to develop a shared relational discourse, or at least a mutual understanding that they are co-creating meaning within that relationship (Ness & Strong, in press), partners may be able to navigate differences and disagreements that do arise in a more collaborative manner. Further, couples’ stories of “we-ness” can encourage them to examine meanings and realities arising out of their interactions, rather than traits or characteristics seemingly internal to their partner (White, 2011).

In conducting this research, I engaged participating couples in exploring ways through which they developed and strengthened “we-ness” in their relationships. In doing so, I hoped to better understand how couples (and their therapists) can facilitate “we-ness” conversations, even when couples find themselves in difficult times. Using the language of narrative therapy, stories of “we-ness” can serve as alternatives to problem stories, and can highlight ways in which couples construct and sustain a sense of togetherness. As “we-ness” is something that is constantly developing, articulating stories of mutuality and “we-ness” can strengthen and support a couple’s sense of relational connectedness, and thus are well worth exploring.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I presented a history of marriage and cohabitation in dominant North American society, demonstrating that, while once viewed as improper and

immoral, cohabitation has now become common among couples. As cohabitation has increased in popularity, the ways in which cohabitation is talked about and understood have also become more diverse. I outlined some of the dominant cohabitation discourses that are currently circulating within North America, including “cohabitation as a test for marriage” and “cohabitation and the decline of the family.”

This diversity of discourses could provide a challenge for cohabitating couples, who are called upon to build a shared understanding of their relationship (i.e., what their relationship is about, where they are going as a couple), which they may have to account for to those around them. I referred to this shared understanding or sense of relational identity as “we-ness,” and drew upon the ideas of Shotter (1987, 1993, 1997), Gergen (2009), and Bird (2004) to assemble an understanding of “we-ness” as something that is constructed and shared through collaborative action. From the social constructionist perspective, identity and meaning are actively and socially co-constructed through dialogue, including acts of talk and storytelling. Examining how cohabitating couples interact with one another, and with me as an interviewer, to tell stories about their relationship will provide me with an understanding of how people go about co-constructing a sense of shared meaning and identity, and how this process can be facilitated in therapy.

### **Chapter Three: Research Methodology and Design**

In this research, I examine how cohabitating partners and I interacted with one another to co-construct shared stories and relational identities through storytelling. My research questions were as follows:

- How do cohabitating couples talk and tell stories about their relationships, particularly about how they have developed a sense of mutuality and “we-ness” between them?
- How do I, as the research interviewer, contribute to the ways in which participating couples talk and tell stories about “we-ness”?

#### **Research Paradigm**

I approach this research from a social constructionist perspective. As outlined in Chapter Two, social constructionists argue that our understandings of reality are co-created through our interactions with one another. These interactions are situated in particular social, cultural, and historical contexts, and are mediated through our use of language (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2009). According to social constructionist theory, we are always engaged in relationships, whether these are relationships with others in our external environments or with inner dialogues and meanings (Gergen, 2009; Lock & Strong, 2010). And it is through these ongoing relationships that we come to experience a sense of meaning and identity (Gergen, 2009). From the social constructionist perspective, meaning-making exchanges occur within a back-and-forth flow of acting and responding, referred to in the previous chapter as joint or co-action (Gergen, 2009; Shotter, 1987, 1993).

Social constructionists oppose the view that there are essential truths or realities that we can come to know through objective study (Burr, 2003). Rather, knowledge is understood to be socially constructed, including knowledge produced through research (Potter, 1996). When researchers are interacting with research participants, they are negotiating meanings and understandings that will be identified as research findings (McNamee, 1995). In social constructionism, the word *negotiating* is used to refer to the interactive way through which people propose and respond to potential meanings in conversation, exchanging and modifying words to collectively shape the topic of discussion into something that is agreeable to those involved.

While researchers have traditionally been viewed as neutral figures in the research process, social constructionists argue that researchers actively contribute to the knowledge that is accomplished with those labelled “participants” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003; McNamee, 1995). The practice of *reflexivity* relates to how a researcher examines his or her role in the research process and in the co-construction of research findings (Willig, 2001).

As I approach this work from the standpoint of social constructionism, I reflexively attend to how I was influencing and shaping this research, and co-producing stories through my interactions with participating couples. McNamee (1995) wrote that, as researchers, “our task is to elaborate the processes by which we *construct* particular views of the world – and these processes are rooted in *what we do together* – our situated, joint activities” (p. 72, italics in original). So while I examine how couples engaged in joint action to co-construct stories of “we-ness,” I recognize that I played a central role in these exchanges. Not only were there interactions taking place between the participants

themselves (i.e., between the members of each couple), but also between the participants and myself. The nature of these interactions, and the contexts in which they took place, impacted the meaning that was co-constructed and the data that was “collected.” In this way, I served as a mindful co-author and co-editor to couples’ stories, and a dynamic participant in this process of developing “we-ness.”

I use the prefix *co-* (e.g., co-construct, co-develop, co-narrate) throughout this thesis to reflect the perspective that such processes occurred within social interactions, and were mutually influenced by those who participated in them (Gergen, 2009). Many forms of qualitative research talk about accessing participants’ “own” stories or voices (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). I take the view, however, that as stories are co-constructed, they do not belong to individuals in isolation but to all those who have had a stake in their creation, including myself as a researcher (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

Furthermore, from the perspective of social constructionism, the work of meaning-making is ongoing. In our conversations with others, we are continuously co-constructing meanings and identities (Shotter, 1987, 1997). In this research, participants’ stories are not understood to be finished or rehearsed tales, but accounts that were composed for the purposes of my study (Bamberg, 2004a; Frank, 2010). Nor are couples’ co-constructions of “we-ness” regarded as complete. Rather, as we were storytelling, the couples and I were developing and managing their emerging narrative plotline as a couple, which also served as an ongoing sense of relational identity for the partners.

Bamberg (2011) wrote that individual identity is socially constructed to answer the question, “Who am I?” Similarly, relational identities can be co-developed in response to “Who are we?” questions for collections of people such as couples. In this

thesis, I use the terms “we-ness” and relational identity interchangeably; “we-ness” is a word I have given to a relational identity that links partners together and provides them with a sense of who they are as a couple, rather than as separate individuals.

When relational identity is examined as a narrative plotline, “we-ness” becomes relevant not only to the present state of a couple’s relationship, but also to their sense of shared history and mutual understanding of where their relationship is going in the future (Ricoeur, 1988). Plotlines link events and experiences together through time, and provide us with a means of understanding past experiences (Bruner, 1991). These storylines also serve to direct us toward the kind of futures they project; shaping what we consider to be possible and likely for our lives and relationships (Frank, 2010). Thus, there is much at stake in conversations about “we-ness”; namely, participating couples’ sense of who they are and where they are going as partners.

In analyzing my storytelling interactions with couples, I examine how participants and I co-managed narrative storylines as they were emerging, and give consideration to the stakes that were involved in this storytelling work. In doing so, I make use of an *editor* metaphor, describing participants and I as co-editors in the process of joint storytelling (Parry & Doan, 1994; Strong & Knight, in press). As participants and I were co-narrating new stories about “we-ness,” we were also monitoring, modifying, and negotiating these storylines as they developed. Through acting as co-editors, participants and I were each able to shape these stories into something that we could all agree with.

To examine how participants and I managed developing relationship narratives, I draw on Silverman’s (2001) studies of the management of *delicate objects* in conversation. He demonstrated that, when people are discussing sensitive or important

topics, they tend to proceed carefully in their talk, tactfully negotiating the object of discussion while maintaining the moral status of all those involved. In my research, I understand “we-ness” to be a delicate conversational object of this kind.

As described above, conversations about “we-ness” have important implications for a couple’s ongoing sense of relational identity. These conversations can be sensitive in that there is sometimes the risk that, when talking about their relationship, one partner may say something that the other does not agree to, or may make claims about the relationship that they have not previously discussed. Thus, as we engaged in conversations about “we-ness,” couples might have been working to keep things *acceptably familiar*, or engaging in ways of talking that approximated what they believed their partner was likely to agree to (Lock & Strong, 2010).

My research paradigm is also informed by the principles of action research, which is based on the idea that taking part in research activities can impact the lives of both researchers and participants in important ways (Bradbury & Reason, 2003). While I am not conducting an action research study, where “participants” are typically involved in designing and answering research questions (Bradbury & Reason, 2003), I view my research as a reflexive activity that has important stakes for me, as well as for participants – particularly in terms of the impact that our conversations could have on their ongoing sense of “we-ness.”

Also relevant to my research is Goffman’s (1967) work on *face*, which he defined as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [or herself]” in their interactions with others (p. 5). Goffman contended that, in conversation, we often work to maintain the face we have claimed for ourselves, as well as to support the face of others.

Bamberg (2004b) and Wortham (2001) developed similar understandings of identity as something that is positioned, constructed, and negotiated through dialogue. Thus, face could also be understood as a positive sense of identity.

For the couples in my study, the concept of face might relate to their public image as individuals, as well as to their image as a cohabitating couple. For example, as they were participating in my study on “we-ness,” the couples and I might have had an interest in maintaining their face as that of a close, connected couple with a strong sense of “we-ness.” Further, I might have been concerned with maintaining my face as a research interviewer, perhaps as one who was skilled and sensitive in my interactions with participants. Attending to face is important in social constructionist research, as the images that we negotiate for ourselves in our interactions with others are often taken up as internalized images, and thus contribute to our own sense of “self” or relational identity (Bamberg, 2009; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

To examine the co-construction of identities from a social constructionist perspective, I also draw upon positioning theory. Positioning theory specifies that, as they are interacting, people take up different positions in relation to one another. A position can be defined as “a metaphorical concept through reference to which a person’s ‘moral’ and personal attributes as a speaker are compendiously collected” (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 17). Thus, the positions that people take up in conversation say something about who they are at that time. Korobov and Bamberg (2007) wrote that identity is made up of the various positions that we speak from in our interactions with others. Within cultures, positions are socially constructed and recognizable roles, associated with

normative expectations regarding the kinds of duties and acts that those who adopt a particular position are likely to perform (Davies & Harré, 1999).

From the perspective of positioning theory, positioning is fluid, as people may change positions many times during a conversation (Harré, 2010). The positions that they take up at a given time, however, will shape the stories that they tell and the meanings that they make through these stories (Harré, 2010). Like meaning-making, positioning is an interactive process. People can invite or pressure one another into adopting particular kinds of positions, but they can take up or resist those positions in turn. In my research, I examine the positions that participants and I spoke from as we were co-narrating and co-editing stories of mutuality and “we-ness,” and how these positions influenced our acts of storytelling.

In presenting my social constructionist perspective, I want to outline what I mean when I say that I examined “shared” stories or “shared” understandings composed in my conversations with participants. Strong (2005) argued that, in our dealings with others, it is difficult to know when we are sharing similar understandings, as “people cannot literally cross-verify each other’s interpretations (by pointing to inner cognitions)” (p. 513-514). As such, I make sense of understanding as something that is conversationally negotiated (Strong, 2005). As participants and I were co-narrating and co-editing stories of “we-ness,” we were working to develop a storyline that we could mutually agree to at that moment, and that provided us with the means of continuing in conversation together (Shotter, 1997). Clark (1996) took a similar view with his concept of common ground, which he used to address how people co-constitute and interact from information that they believe to be shared between them.

As understanding is a conversational project, we can look to turn-taking in conversations to get a sense of whether people seem to be developing a common understanding between them (Strong, 2005). In my research, when participants and I demonstrated agreement with developing plotlines, and were able to coordinate our talk in terms of how we took turns and responded to one another, this suggested to me that we had developed an emerging understanding that was sufficient enough to allow us to go on with storytelling (Strong, 2005). When we acted in disagreement or became discoordinated in our interactions, however, I took this as a sign that a misunderstanding might have occurred. In these scenarios, I am interested in examining how we negotiated across differences, and made attempts to co-construct a sense of agreement and a narrative plotline that we could agree to continue on with (Strong, 2005).

### **Theoretical Framework**

In conducting this research, I also made use of a narrative framework. More specifically, I employed Gubrium and Holstein's (2009) approach to what they call "analyzing narrative reality." As described in Chapter Two, Gubrium and Holstein understand storytelling as an active social process, and emphasize the influence that context, which is often overlooked in narrative research, has on the work of storytelling. While stories told by participants are examined in this form of narrative analysis, the primary focus is on the process of storytelling. Thus, in my analysis, I oriented more toward the act of *narrating* and how this act was performed than toward *narration*, or the stories that resulted from this act.

Gubrium and Holstein (2009) describe two components that make up their view of narrative reality: narrative work and narrative environment. Narrative work relates to

what Gubrium and Holstein identify as the *hows* of storytelling, or the purposeful ways in which stories are put together. Narrative work may involve, for example, how storytellers link particular events together as they tell a story. Narrative environment refers to the surroundings in which storytelling takes place, including a story's audience, intended functions, potential consequences, and aspects of the local culture (e.g., shared ideas about what makes a good story). Gubrium and Holstein label the features of the narrative environment the *whats* of the storytelling process.

Gubrium and Holstein (2009) contend that there is a reflexive relationship between narrative work and narrative environment, such that these aspects of narrative reality influence one another. When storytellers are co-narrating a story, they take into account relevant aspects of the narrative environment (e.g., who makes up the audience) to create a story that makes sense within that context, and that will serve the particular purposes and functions for which the story is being told. Thus, narrative environments shape how people do narrative work. But narrative environments are also influenced by the work of storytelling. By accomplishing particular social functions or creating certain kinds of consequences as a result of storytelling, stories can change the very environments in which they are developed (e.g., by changing the relationship between a narrator and their audience). Thus, while narrative contexts inform the nature of storytelling, stories also shape their environments in turn (Bruner, 1990).

Gubrium and Holstein (2009) present a number of considerations to attend to when analyzing narrative reality. In terms of narrative work, these considerations include activation, collaboration, control, linkage, composition, and performance. When considering activation, analysts examine how storytelling is initiated in the back-and-

forth flow of conversation. They might ask the question: What is going on in the conversation that invites the telling of this particular story? Analysts can also examine how storytellers maintain the space they need to tell stories. The norms of conversation typically involve a rhythm of turn-taking between speakers, while storytelling requires a storyteller to “hold the floor until the story is hearably complete” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 45). As such, an analyst might ask: How does the storyteller negotiate space for storytelling with their fellow conversationalists? From the perspective of Gubrium and Holstein, analyzing activation is important in that how stories are invited and activated can have a significant impact on how they are told.

The analysis of collaboration involves looking at how people collaborate to conversationally co-construct stories (Gubrium & Holsten, 2009). For example, collaboration includes the ways in which listeners encourage storytelling; this may be done through nods of agreement or the use of encouraging words and statements such as “Go on” or “Mmhmm” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 93). Collaboration also relates to how multiple speakers interact with one another to shape developing stories. Questions asked by research interviewers such as myself, for instance, invite couples into certain kinds of responses and thus shape their storytelling. Closely related to collaboration is the consideration of control, which refers to the ways in which speakers negotiate who is going to speak and what a developing story is going to include (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). I also refer to this process as *co-editing*. Analyzing control involves considering how people exercise their influence over the storytelling process, disagree with accounts being presented in conversation, and compete for space to speak among other potential speakers.

Analyzing linkage involves looking at how participants connect various events and experiences together while storytelling (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Independently, experiences do not have significant meaning. It is only when they are linked to other experiences that they become meaningful by way of the particular connections that are made. When analyzing linkage, a researcher might consider: How are participants making meaning by linking these events together in this way? Gubrium and Holstein (2009) also recommend that analysts attend to composition when analyzing storytelling. This concern relates to the larger plots and themes by which stories are organized, and is another aspect of narrative work. Gubrium and Holstein note that composition varies across narrative environments, as the plots and themes of stories are composed to meet the needs of a given context.

The final consideration put forth by Gubrium and Holstein (2009) is that of performance, which relates to how people enact storytelling. When considering performance, an analyst might take into account what roles or positions storytellers take up in the telling of their stories. For example, in this research, participants and I acted from the positions of interviewees and interviewers, which are linked to cultural expectations regarding how we should behave when taking up those roles. Other examples of performative concerns include how speakers make use of vocal tones or emphases, expressive or elaborative language, or humour when storytelling.

In addition to the considerations of narrative work, Gubrium and Holstein (2009) also explore several narrative environments, including close relationships and local cultures, and consider how these environments might influence narrative work. For

example, they discuss how family myths can inform stories constructed about those within a family, including myths about the “bad child” or the “overbearing mother.”

Within the context of heterosexual romantic relationships, gendered discourses often become relevant. Tannen (1994) has used a discourse analytic perspective to examine differences in how men and women tend to perform conversational acts, as well as dissimilarities in the roles that they often adopt when speaking. For example, she found that men and women often took up gendered discourses in relation to marriage. Women were more likely to speak from a position that valued marriage, while men were most often depicted as wanting to avoid or put off marriage. From the perspective of positioning theory, gender is a position or role, associated with particular discourses, that people can take up and speak from in their interactions with others (Baxter, 2003).

In my research, I examine how participants and I engaged with gender positions when talking about their relationships, as well as the discourses that we drew upon or stood against in doing so. I also pay particular attention to the research context in which our conversations were taking place, and how features of this context might have shaped our work of storytelling. Finally, I examine how participants and I took up different discourses from the North American culture in which we were engaged, particularly those discourses about cohabitation that I outlined in the previous chapter.

Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) approach to analyzing narrative reality was appropriate for answering my research questions, as it enabled me to focus on the processes and interactions that were involved in storytelling, and particularly my role in these interactions. For example, I was able to examine how participants and I

collaborated to co-construct stories, as well as how we exercised control in efforts to shape and co-edit the stories that were developing between us.

This method of analysis also enabled me to examine the social actions that were being performed through our storytelling conversations, such as how we were co-constructing meanings and relational identities. Participants and I were also managing the stakes involved in our storytelling; for participants, these stakes included their sense of identity as a couple. Finally, Gubrium and Holstein's approach to narrative analysis takes into account the context of storytelling, through which I was able to examine how aspects of our environment (e.g., research setting, North American discourses on cohabitation) were taken up in the process of storytelling.

### **Methods for Data Collection**

Data was collected using two methods: a narrative writing activity and a semi-structured interview. For the story-writing activity, I invited each participant to write a one-page story about their relationship, including information on how their relationship began, when they began to consider cohabitation, and a moment or event that had occurred since they began living together that seemed to increase their sense of closeness (see Appendix A for written instructions). I asked participants to write these stories independently, and to refrain from sharing them with their partner before our next meeting.

The purpose of this writing activity was to encourage participants to begin constructing stories about "we-ness," which would facilitate conversation in the joint semi-structured interviews that followed. I initially intended to compare participants' individual stories to the joint stories that we constructed in our interviews. But as I

became more interested in the process of storytelling, and in examining how participants and I interacted to mutually shape stories of “we-ness,” I decided that analyzing these individual stories would not be useful for answering my research questions. Thus, the stories that were written by the individual participants were not analyzed for this project.

In this semi-structured interview, I also asked participants about the history of their relationship and how they have constructed a sense of “we” within that relationship (see Appendix B for interview questions). I interviewed members of each couple together, as my interest lies in the interactive nature of story-telling – an activity related to my role as a counsellor in training. Again, I acknowledge that not only was an interaction occurring between myself and the couple during these interviews, but that the members of each couple were also interacting with one another as they co-constructed stories. Interviewing couples enabled me to consider the dynamics involved in conducting what has been referred to as dyadic interviews, or interviews involving two participants (Gale, n.d.). I understand such interactions to be triadic, however, as both the participants and I were active in co-shaping accounts. Little research has been conducted examining the dynamics of interviews with multiple participants, which are presently underutilized and would be particularly useful for research with couples and families (Gale, n.d.).

### **Procedures for Data Collection**

After receiving ethics approval for this study from the University of Calgary’s Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board, I began recruiting cohabitating couples through a variety of means, including: posters (see Appendix C) placed around the University of Calgary campus; electronic notifications sent through a Faculty of

Education list-serv, posted on the Graduate Students' Association website, and forwarded through several undergraduate student centres on campus; and an article written about my research in the University of Calgary student newspaper (see Appendix D). My recruitment materials included information on the purposes of the study, eligibility criteria, and the compensation offered to participants, which was entrance into a draw for a \$100 gift card to a restaurant of the winning couples' choice. I aimed my recruitment materials primarily at university students because I was aware that many couples of university age are in cohabitating relationships.

Those who were interested in participating in the study were invited to email me. When I responded, I asked potential participants to answer several questions to determine their eligibility for the study (see Appendix E for screening questions). I required that participants be at least 18 years of age and currently live with their partner. Since research suggests that individuals who have been previously married often have different cohabitation experiences than those who have not (Stanley, Rhoades, Amato, Markman, & Johnson, 2010), I only included couples in which neither partner had been married. Further, I only selected couples in which neither partner had a child, as research has indicated that, in terms of cohabitation patterns, couples with children tend to differ from couples without children (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). And as I expected that cohabitation discourses and understandings would likely be quite different for same-sex versus heterosexual couples, I only included heterosexual couples in the sample as well.

After interested couples were determined to be eligible for participation, I arranged to meet with them in person. I met the majority of participants in a private room located on the University of Calgary campus, though I did meet with one couple in their

home. In this initial meeting, I provided the couples with information on the purposes and procedures of the study, and invited them to ask questions or raise concerns regarding their participation. When each of the partners agreed to participate, I asked them to sign a consent form (see Appendix F), and provided them with copies of this form in our next meeting. I also gave participants the opportunity to select the pseudonym that would be used to identify them in this thesis.

After consent forms were completed, I provided participating couples with written instructions for the story-writing activity, which I also explained to them verbally. Participants were invited to complete this activity at home, and to return their stories to me via email at least one day before their interview. It was expected that this story-writing activity would take each participant about one hour to complete. After I explained the instructions, participants were again invited to raise questions or concerns regarding the activity. Before we ended our first meeting, each couple and I scheduled a second meeting for the semi-structured interview. I also reimbursed them for any parking fees associated with our meeting.

The semi-structured interviews took place between one and three weeks after our initial meetings. Prior to beginning the interview, I asked participants if they had any questions or comments regarding the completed story-writing activity, and reminded them of the topics and experiences that we would be addressing in the interview. These interviews were audio-recorded, and took between 45 and 90 minutes to complete. I then verbally debriefed participating couples on the background and purposes of the study, and provided them with a written debriefing form (see Appendix G). Participants were again provided with compensation for their parking fees.

After transcripts from their semi-structured interviews had been prepared, I emailed each participant a copy of the transcript, inviting them to provide feedback on the information contained in the transcript within two weeks. Participants were also informed that if they did not respond within the two-week time period, I would assume that they approved of the transcript. Each couple was then entered into a draw to win a \$100 gift card for the restaurant of their choice. The winning couple was contacted via email, and the selected gift card was mailed to their home address.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this research, I examine how cohabitating couples and I co-narrated and co-edited stories about mutuality and “we-ness.” I approached this work from a social constructionist perspective, taking the view that stories and meanings are interactionally-constructed, dynamic, and context-shaped. More specifically, I draw upon a narrative framework outlined by Gubrium and Holstein (2009), who advocate for the analysis of storytelling as an active and purposeful social process. In the following chapter, I investigate the ways through which couples and I co-developed relational stories about mutuality and “we-ness,” and in doing so, how we managed the delicate storylines of their relationship and their ongoing sense of identity as a couple.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

### **Participants**

Seven heterosexual cohabitating couples participated in my study. As these couples were recruited through the University of Calgary, one or both members of the couples were students at the time of participation. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 35 years old, with an average age of 24.71 ( $SD = 1.19$ ) for women and 27.25 ( $SD = 2.01$ ) for men. The median length of relationship for participating couples was 24 months, with the shortest relationship having been established for 8 months at the time of participation and the longest for 96 months, or 8 years. Participating couples had been cohabitating for between 3 and 84 months (7 years), and the median length of time spent living together at the time of the study was 8 months. While four of the couples had been living together for less than one year, three couples had been cohabitating for between two and eight years. When completing their consent forms, participants were given the opportunity to select pseudonyms, which will be used throughout this thesis.

### **Procedures for Data Analysis**

The process of conducting qualitative data analysis, including narrative analysis, is cyclical (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). While I present the steps involved in my analytic process as though they occurred in discrete and ordered stages, I engaged in these practices at various times during my analysis, moving back and forth between them as necessary. I also received supervisory feedback throughout the analytic process.

I began the process of data analysis by reading and re-reading the transcripts (see Appendix H for transcription notation) and listening to the audio-recordings from the semi-structured interviews. I also reviewed my recruitment materials and the written

instructions for the story-writing activity, as this information was shared with participants and thus served as data in our process of story co-construction. I then read through each transcript again, searching out passages that related to Gubrium and Holstein's (2009) analytic considerations for narrative work, including collaboration and control.

Using a different coloured marker for each consideration, I began underlining these passages so that I could return to them for further analysis. I also made initial notes on what I was noticing in the interactions that were taking place in these extracts, and how they served as examples of particular analytic considerations. The same extracts sometimes related to multiple considerations; for example, both activation and collaboration. I then returned to each of the transcripts with a particular consideration in mind. For instance, I re-read the beginning of each transcript, as well as my recruitment materials and instructions for the story-writing activity, to analyze how storytelling was activated in our conversations.

I have included below a sample of text, which I will re-introduce in the results of my analysis, for the purpose of demonstrating my analytic procedure. This text was featured in my recruitment materials, and identified by me as an example of activation:

Extract 1: Recruitment materials

1 Are you currently living with your girlfriend, boyfriend, or romantic partner? Would  
2 you and your partner be interested in participating in a research study? The purpose of  
3 this study is to examine how couples who live together, but are not married, create  
4 shared stories when talking about their relationship. I will also be examining how  
5 couples build a sense of "we," or a sense of closeness in their relationship, through  
6 telling these shared stories.

After identifying this passage as related to activation, I wrote some initial notes on how I thought this text might serve to initiate the process of storytelling. Some of my notes included:

Extract 2: Notes on recruitment materials for analysis of activation

- 1 The subject of stories was first activated in the recruiting information (which
- 2 included posters, emails, etc.). Potential participants were informed about what types
- 3 of stories they would be asked to tell if they participated in this study: stories about
- 4 cohabitating couples, about “we-ness,” shared stories.

Next, I created a separate word document for each of Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) analytic considerations, and began collecting extracts from the transcripts that related to each consideration in a single document. I included Extract 2 in a document on activation.

I then grouped together extracts that seemed similar, such as extracts in which participants used similar words (e.g., cohabitation as a “next step”), were talking about related topics (e.g., marriage), or seemed to be doing similar things in their interactions (e.g., disagreeing with something their partner had said). I also transferred my initial notes from the transcripts into these documents, and expanded them by writing several sentences about the exchanges that were taking place in each extract. I grouped the text from my recruitment materials, featured in Extract 1, with the instructions from the story-writing activity, as both texts seemed to be influential in activating storytelling and both occurred prior to the semi-structured interviews. Thus, for this grouping, my means of organization was chronological.

As I worked on my analysis of each of Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) considerations for narrative work, I also analyzed how aspects of the narrative

environment might be influencing this work. For instance, in my analysis of control, I considered the research context, which includes commonly shared ideas about the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. I asked the following question: How might my role as interviewer privilege my efforts to control our conversations? My analysis of the narrative environment also involved reflecting on the various contexts (e.g., research environment) in which our storytelling took place, and noting aspects of these contexts that might shape our narrative work.

I also analyzed the other side of the relationship between narrative work and narrative environment, considering how the narrative work that we were doing seemed to be shaping or changing the circumstances of storytelling. For instance, as I analyzed my recruitment materials from the analytic perspective of activation, I made notes on how aspects of the research environment might have influenced the use of these texts. Some of these notes included the following:

Extract 3: Notes on recruitment materials and analysis of research context

- 1 Research ethics for recruitment: Must inform potential participants about the purpose
- 2 of the study, who is eligible to participate, and what would be expected of
- 3 participants. Recruitment materials also help to establish the purposes of the stories
- 4 we will tell (which will also shape how we put these stories together).

In this extract, I also referred to one of the ways through which the recruitment materials might have shaped the narrative environment; that is, by influencing our understandings of the purposes of our storytelling (lines 3-4).

The next steps in my analysis involved writing up an analysis section for each of Gubrium and Holstein's (2009) analytic considerations. During this process, I outlined the ways in which those considerations were being "done" in my conversations with

cohabitating couples, selected sections of the transcripts that served as rich examples of each consideration, and explored the narrative environment and its relationship to our ongoing narrative work. Once a draft of my analysis was complete, I returned to my transcripts again, looking for extracts that did not fit with my results (Potter, 2004). These instances were used to modify my analytic claims or were described as exceptions. I will present the results of my analysis in the following sections on activation, linkage and composition, collaboration, control, and performance.

### **Activation**

As outlined in the previous chapter, activation is concerned with how storytelling is initiated in the course of a conversation (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). From a narrative-in-interaction perspective, occasions for storytelling, as well as stories themselves, are co-constructed through dialogue (Bamberg, 2004b). In the context of a research interview, storytelling is typically activated through the interviewer's use of questions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). In my analysis of activation, I examine the ways through which I invited participants into storytelling using semi-structured interview questions, as well as how storytelling was activated through the use of recruitment materials and participation in the story-writing activity. I also investigate how participants took up these invitations to storytelling, and how we negotiated who would begin storytelling and where our stories would begin.

**Recruitment materials.** While recruitment materials typically receive little attention in the analysis of research data, they are important in considering the process of story activation. The recruitment materials that I used to attract potential participants to my study, which included the following text (see Appendix C for full recruitment poster),

can be understood as the initial invitation to storytelling. I previously included an extract from these materials when outlining my analytic procedure, and reproduce this extract here:

Extract 1: Recruitment materials

- 1 Are you currently living with your girlfriend, boyfriend, or romantic partner?
- 2 Would you and your partner be interested in participating in a research study? The
- 3 purpose of this study is to examine how couples who live together, but are not
- 4 married, create shared stories when talking about their relationship. I will also be
- 5 examining how couples build a sense of “we,” or a sense of closeness in their
- 6 relationship, through telling these shared stories.

Recruitment materials are used to inform potential participants about the purposes and activities of a research study, with the expectation that those who respond will be willing to take part in the proposed activities. In outlining the purposes of my study, I indicated that participation would involve storytelling (lines 4 and 6). I also activated the planned topic of storytelling (“How couples build a sense of ‘we,’” line 5), introducing my understanding of “we-ness” as a sense of closeness between partners.

Further, I used my recruitment materials to create a link between cohabitation and “we-ness,” sharing the expectation that cohabitating couples could have experiences of “we-ness” and could tell stories about those experiences as well. As the norms of the research process suggest that participants should attempt to talk about topics selected by the researcher (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003), I expected that any information that I provided on the subject of my study would shape the stories that participants and I created together.

Thus, from my initial contact with potential participants I was inviting them to engage in storytelling, and shaping the intended nature of our stories as well. Therefore,

when potential participants responded to my recruitment materials by contacting me for further information, or to volunteer to participate, they demonstrated their interest in taking up this invitation.

**Story-writing activity.** The story-writing activity, which participants completed before taking part in the semi-structured interview, was also intended to activate the process of storytelling. I provided participants with the following guidelines (see Appendix A for full written instructions):

Extract 4: Story-writing activity instructions

- 1 For this activity, you are invited to write a one-page story about the history of your
- 2 relationship. In this story, please include information on:
- 3 How you and your partner became a couple
- 4 When you began to consider moving in together as a good option for your
- 5 relationship
- 6 A moment or experience you have had while living together that seemed to strengthen
- 7 your sense of being a couple
- 8 It is very important that you write this story on your own and **do not share it with**
- 9 **your partner.**

As couples might not talk about moments of “we-ness” as such, I thought it would be helpful to have them reflect on their relationship, and possible examples of “we” moments, prior to the interviews. Thus, this activity was intended to activate storytelling in our face-to-face conversations.

In asking participants to write about specific events from their relationship (lines 3-7), I was also suggesting an initial structure for their developing stories, which relates to Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) analytic considerations of linkage and composition. As they wrote up their stories, participants also had the opportunity to begin structuring relationship narratives, which might have shaped how they contributed to the stories told in the interviews. Furthermore, in outlining events for the participants to discuss, I was

reflexively informing them about the kinds of experiences I considered to be important for understanding stories about their relationship. So, much like the recruitment materials, information that I provided to participants for the purposes of the story-writing activity was intended to activate storytelling about “we-ness.”

Many participants made reference to the story-writing activity during their joint interviews. I had asked each partner to complete a story independently (this information was emphasized in bold font in the written instructions, as shown in Extract 4, lines 8-9), though several couples indicated that they were so excited to share their stories with one another that they had done so before the interview. Further, a number of participants talked about how they had considered what their partner might be writing while they were putting together their own story. Though they were not constructing these stories together, participants’ stories might have been influenced by their expectations for their partners’ stories. And while the intention of the story-writing activity was to encourage individual participants to begin the process of storytelling as a precursor to joint storytelling, it also seemed to encourage such joint storytelling, as several partners brought their individual stories together for comparison and discussion. Thus, the process of story co-construction was not limited to our formal research activities, but also took place in informal discussions between partners.

**Interview introduction and questions.** While the recruitment materials and instructions for story-writing served to shape and initiate storytelling, our conversations primarily took place during the semi-structured interviews. I began these interviews by reading a statement that I had prepared as a form of introduction (see Appendix B for interview introduction and questions):

#### Extract 5: Interview introduction

1 Today I am going to be asking you about some things that you might not have talked  
2 a lot about in the past. I will be asking questions about your relationship and your  
3 experiences of living together, and I am hoping to get a better understanding of how  
4 you may have come to create a sense of “we,” or a sense of being a couple, in your  
5 relationship. I am going to ask questions about some of things that I asked you to  
6 write about in your individual stories, such as how you first became a couple. I would  
7 like to see if our ways of talking bring up shared versions of these stories, though this  
8 may not always be possible.

My intention in sharing this statement was to introduce participants to the kinds of responses and stories that I would be inviting during our interviews. Again, I expected that, as research participants, the couples would orient their stories to the topics that I had outlined in the recruitment materials, story-writing activity, and this introduction.

I also noted that I might be asking about things, such as moments of “we-ness,” that the couples had not explored together in the past (lines 1-2). I wanted to acknowledge the possibility that participating couples might be discussing, with me, topics that they had not previously explored together; as such, I did not expect them to have previously agreed-upon stories and anticipated that they might have to negotiate and co-edit their stories as they were being developed. I also used this introduction to indicate that I was interested in studying shared stories, which is another aspect of the study that I expected would affect the nature of our conversations. For example, my request for shared stories might have encouraged partners to provide and seek out indications of agreement from one another during the process of storytelling. As I explored in Chapter Three, my use of the words “shared stories” refers to my interest in developing plotlines that participants and I demonstrated agreement with, or allowed to continue in the conversation.

After reading the interview introduction, I began to ask participants the questions that I had prepared for our interviews, including: “What made you interested in participating in this study?”; “Tell me about how you first got together as a couple”; and “When did you first start to consider living together as a good option for your relationship?” According to Gubrium and Holstein (2009), interview questions can be understood as explicit requests for storytelling. I purposefully placed these particular questions, which were also addressed in the story-writing activity, at the beginning of the interview because I thought they might be easier to answer than questions about “we-ness.” Thus, these initial questions were intended to help us co-construct a relational history, as well as to ease us into the process of storytelling. As the interview was semi-structured in nature, I often posed questions that were based on participants’ initial responses before continuing with these planned questions.

In analyzing how we initiated acts of storytelling (through my use of questions and responses and participants’ responses), I examine how we worked out who would take the initial storytelling roles and explore where our narratives began. I will describe each of these considerations below.

**Who began storytelling?** I posed my initial interview questions to both members of the participating couples. As the rules of conversational turn-taking indicate that only one person should speak at a time (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009), each couple was faced with the task of working out who would respond first. Some couples negotiated this task explicitly. In the following extract, Bobby advised his partner Dana to begin the story (line 3):

Extract 6: Selecting an initial speaker I

- 1 Marnie: Sounds good. Alright so tell me about how you first (.) got together as a  
2 couple.  
3 Bobby: You tell her.  
4 [((All laughing))]  
5 Dana: So (.) we (.) well we were living out in XXXX. We're both from here but  
6 we didn't know: each other here. And so (.) I went out to music school at  
7 XXXX and then Bobby went to XXXX (.) but his best friend (.) was in (.)  
8 like (.) the year ahead of me in college so I was hanging out with him (.)  
9 and then (.) yeah (.) he brought Bobby to: a Halloween party (.) and we  
10 both don't really like dressing up for Halloween (.) although this year we  
11 finally did.  
12 Bobby: Yeah.  
13 Dana: But (.) um. Yeah (.) we: met there and we started hanging out cause like (.)  
14 Bobby didn't like his engineering friends ((Laughing)) cause they weren't  
15 as cool as the music people. So he became a part of our (.) kind of our...  
16 Bobby: Yeah.  
17 Dana: Music group of friends and yeah (.) he was hanging out with us all the  
18 time and then we (.) like (.) we would always talk and hang out while we  
19 were there.  
20 Bobby: Yeah.

Earlier, I stated that I am examining relational plotlines as delicate conversational objects, or narratives that need to be carefully negotiated between myself and participating couples (Silverman, 2001). While we cannot know what Bobby's intentions were in asking Dana to begin storytelling, Silverman (2001) and Maynard (1991) noted that one of the ways speakers can demonstrate caution in their talk is through inviting others to speak on a particular topic before they contribute their opinion.

As can be seen in this extract, Dana took up Bobby's request to begin storytelling without objection (line 5), and proceeded to complete a relatively long turn at talk (lines 5-11). Thus, in making his request, Bobby gave up the speaking floor to Dana, and she maintained the floor for most of this extract. Bobby provided encouragement for her to continue through the use of "Yeah" statements (lines 12, 16, and 20). These statements

suggest that Bobby agreed with the story that Dana had been sharing, and that he was continuing to cede the conversational floor to her.

In several of my other interviews, when one person would make a request that their partner speak, this partner would often take a long turn at talk in response, thus acknowledging that their partner had given up the primary speaking role to them. Responding to an invitation to talk is also an affiliative move, and may serve to maintain participants' face as cooperative partners (Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006).

With other couples, however, one partner would begin the story without any obvious communication between the partners regarding who would take the lead (though perhaps they had determined this prior to the interview). In these instances, the first partner would usually take a shorter turn at speaking before their partner joined in the storytelling, as was the case with Victoria and Jarome:

Extract 7: Selecting an initial speaker II

- 1 Victoria: Um (.) we ended up at the same house party (.) house warming party and
- 2 um (.) he was working with my friend and so it was like the first time he
- 3 came to one of those parties. It was really cool.
- 4 Jarome: She couldn't resist me. Let's be honest here.
- 5 Victoria: Pretty much. Yeah (.) so I don't know we just met and then started
- 6 talking and hit it off (.) hey?
- 7 Jarome: Yeah. It worked out well didn't it?

Without establishing who would speak first, couples such as Victoria and Jarome seemed to share the storytelling floor more equitably than those couples who negotiated their initial turn. This was evident through their shorter turns at talk (e.g., turns of less than one line in lines 4 through 7) and more frequent changes in speakers (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974).

When speaking roles were explicitly negotiated between partners, some couples indicated to me that a particular part of the story “belonged” more to one person’s experience than to their partner’s, and thus was theirs to contribute to the conversation. In the following extract, Abbie and Bob indicated simultaneously that the tale of how they had become a couple should be narrated by Bob, as he had pursued a relationship with Abbie initially:

Extract 8: Who begins?

- 1 Abbie: [You want to start?]
- 2 Bob: [I think (.) I think] I have to start that one. Yeah (.) um (.) I don’t know.
- 3 Me- we went to high school together but we weren’t really (.) close or
- 4 anything and then...we started crossing paths in (.) after high school. We
- 5 had one mutual friend that we were both pretty close with and...he
- 6 brought me to what happened to be her (.) going away party
- 7 and...coincidentally that was the same night I decided I was gonna ask her
- 8 on a date and then she left for four months so (.) I found her on Facebook
- 9 and...you know (.) bugged her until she went on a date with me.
- 10 Abbie: ((Laughing)) Yes (.) so can I add to this?
- 11 Marnie: Of course.
- 12 Abbie: Okay.
- 13 Marnie: Whatever you want to...[add.]

Thus, speakers were sometimes selected, either by their partners or by myself, for the perspectives that they would contribute to a developing story.

After Bob began the story above (lines 2-9), Abbie asked me whether she could contribute to the conversation as well (line 10). How storytellers request or maintain the conversational space they need to tell a story is another important aspect of activation (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Within our research interviews, there were three people who might attempt to speak at any one time: two participants and me as the research interviewer. So in addition to negotiating with one another who would speak at a given time, the participants also had to compete with me for space to tell stories (Gubrium &

Holstein, 2009), or in the terms of conversation analysis, for the *conversational floor* (Edelsky, 1981).

In this extract, Abbie made a clear request to continue storytelling (line 10). I replied by confirming that Abbie could add to the story (line 11), and she continued to talk about how she and Bob had become a couple (not shown in this extract). That Abbie asked me whether she could speak after Bob acknowledged my role as the researcher, who is typically understood to hold more power over the direction of an interview than a research participant. Making this request also acted to maintain Abbie's face as an interviewee. She deferred to me as the interviewer, which a person might be expected to do when fulfilling the role of participant (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, 2009).

As an active participant in these storytelling conversations, I could have asserted my turn to speak in any of the above extracts. Instead, I posed my initial questions, and then allowed each partner to respond multiple times without taking a turn of my own. As the interviewer, I did not interject when participants continued speaking, as I wanted to provide them with a significant amount of space to contribute to our stories and to act as the primary speakers during the interviews.

Participants used several different means to create space for their contributions to our developing stories. As was the case with Abbie, this sometimes involved making an explicit request to speak. Other participants used *pre* or *preface* statements (Terasaki, 2004) to indicate that their story was either "odd" or "long." According to Gubrium and Holstein (2009), "offering a preface signals that the speaker has a story to tell, thus announcing the reasonable expectation that the next speaker will allow the prospective

storyteller to speak again and at length” (p. 47). Consider the following exchange

between Tommy, Sally, and myself:

Extract 9: Using a story preface

- 1 Marnie: So tell me about how you first got together as a couple  
2 Tommy: Um...((Laughs))  
3 Sally: Yes (.) do tell.  
4 Tommy: [((Laughing))]  
5 Marnie: [((Laughing))]  
6 Tommy: We...there...it was- it was a bit of an odd story. The first time (.) we first  
7 got together (.) I guess it's been nine years ago now (.) originally. Umm  
8 our- our mothers actually worked together (.) at a department store. And  
9 my mother was desperate to just get me out of the house (.) basically.  
10 And so she latched on to a story that Sally's mother told (.) where Sally's  
11 grad (.) was coming up and her- her date had had to cancel because of  
12 another request and so my mother in all of in (.) mostly motivated out of  
13 the need to get me (.) out of the house was just like oh my- my son will  
14 totally go. He's- he's very nice and sweet. Anyways so they basically set  
15 us up on a blind date. For her high school grad. Um yeah (.) and that was  
16 about it. ((Laughs)) We (.) we went and it worked out you know (.) it  
17 was (.) um I don't know how much of the initial get-together you need  
18 cause we (.) we went to- we went to the grad (.) the grad was fun. Um  
19 we started dating after that. Um Sally was actually leaving for school (.)  
20 um...She was headed off to XXXX so that was in (.) April (.) late April  
21 or early May. So we dated through kind of the rest of the summer and  
22 then she went to XXXX.

Tommy responded to my initial question, after he was encouraged do so by his partner Sally (line 3), by saying that he was about to tell an “odd story” (line 6). This preface demonstrably served to prepare listeners such as myself to give Tommy the space that he required to tell this story, even if it was one that seemed unexpected, or that did not follow the course of a typical relationship story (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Tommy then took a very long turn to tell this story (lines 6-22), the length of which seemed to justify the use of such a preface. Bobby and Dana also referred to their story as “long,”

“complicated,” and “kind of up and down” during their response to my initial interview question.

Like the process of story co-construction, establishing space for storytelling involves a speaker making a claim on that space, as well as other potential speakers granting it to them. After responding at length to one of my initial interview questions, Dana and Bobby apologized for the length of their response:

Extract 10: Creating space for long responses

- 1 Dana: That was a long answer to your question. I'm sorry.
- 2 Bobby: Sorry.
- 3 Marnie: Long answers are good in this (.) in this context. So (.) just a couple of
- 4 questions to follow up. But (.) was it significant for you that you sort of
- 5 had this friendship before transitioning into a different type of relationship?

I responded to this apology by stating that it was appropriate and desirable for research participants to talk at length (lines 3-5). Thus, I acknowledged the research context and how it influenced our turn-taking and storytelling roles. Further, I set up an expectation that Bobby and Dana would continue to provide long and detailed responses, and so shaped the storytelling environment at the same time as I acknowledged it.

To summarize, the activation of storytelling within our research interviews involved negotiating initial speaking roles, both between partners and between the participants and me. While some couples worked out in conversation who would begin storytelling, other participants moved into speaking without any verbal negotiation. How this initial speaking role was allocated seemed to influence the ways in which couples took turns at the beginning of our interviews. In order to maintain space for storytelling in our conversations, couples requested opportunities to contribute to the story, and used story prefaces to warn potential speakers about the space their story would require. In the

extracts I provided, it can be seen how establishing speaking roles is an interactional process, requiring not only that someone claim or take up a speaking role, but that others encourage or permit them to do so.

**Where do stories begin?** Labov (2010) remarked that this is a question that all storytellers must address before beginning a story. And according to Gubrium and Holstein (2009), this decision will likely be shaped by the narrative circumstances that activated the telling of a story, such as its intended purposes. By initiating storytelling through my use of interview questions, I expected that the particular questions that I asked (e.g., “Tell me about how you first got together as a couple”) would provide a place for the stories to begin. What I noticed in both the written stories and in the semi-structured interviews, however, was that participants instead started with how they had met. Consider the following extract from my interview with Charles and Layla:

Extract 11: Beginning the story

- 1 Marnie: [((Laughs))] Alright. Um so we’ll just start by some of the questions um  
2 that I had you talk about in the other story. So tell me about how you first  
3 got together as a couple.  
4 Layla: Uh we were both in XXXX. Uh and...we met at the kick-boxing club we  
5 were both in kick-boxing and...I think you were at the college (.) and I  
6 was at the university (.) when we first met. But we ended up both being  
7 at the university and having some classes and stuff together (.) and just  
8 hanging out with the same (.) people and...that...  
9 Charles: Yeah. I- I don’t know. We met at the gym and then (.) had the same (.)  
10 social groups. We were hanging out as (.) groups really and spent (.) a lot  
11 of time at the gym. Skipping class really. [At least]  
12 Layla: [((Laughs))]  
13 Charles: I was. And uh (.) so we started hanging out as groups and then (.) uh  
14 eventually we just kind of (.) started hanging out (.) just the two of us  
15 and...then one day it was assumed that we were dating I guess.

Though I did not ask for this information, Charles and Layla’s story about how they became a couple started with how they had met (lines 4-5). Most of the other couples that

I interviewed began their stories in this manner as well. I did not consider this matter when I was designing the interview questions, but perhaps a narrative about how partners met provides the appropriate background or *orientation* (Labov, 2010) for the story of how their romantic relationship began, and thus serves as a more suitable place for such stories to begin. Couples have likely had conversations about how they met and became a couple in the past, and may have developed habits of storytelling that influenced how they began their stories when talking with me (Tannen, 2007). This extract also demonstrates that, while I can invite particular kinds of responses as the researcher, participants still had creative freedom in terms of how they constructed those responses.

**Inviting stories of “we-ness” and silencing problem stories.** As the researcher, I entered into the interviews with an understanding of the stories that I wanted to construct with participants, namely stories about relational “we-ness.” In inviting and co-constructing these stories with participants, though, I had to “silence” or ignore other types of stories that could have developed, such as relationship stories that are problem-focused, to use the language of narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990). In the following extract, I asked Victoria and Jarome to describe a “we” moment, and they responded by talking about the topics that usually created arguments between them:

Extract 12: Inviting “we” stories

- 1 Marnie: Okay. So tell me about a moment or experience that has occurred since
- 2 you began living together that seemed to strengthen your sense of being
- 3 a couple?
- 4 Jarome: This is the hardest question. Cause (.) there’s lots of (.) you know we’ve
- 5 only been living together for seven or eight months. It’s- and we’re
- 6 pretty agreeable with each other. Um (.) so (.) we don’t really fight
- 7 about very much unless it’s sports.
- 8 Victoria: No (.) he fights about sports. I’m just like (.) what?
- 9 Jarome: Besides that we don’t fight about anything else.

- 10 Victoria: And his mom baggage. That comes up once in a while.  
11 Jarome: Um (.) but...  
12 Victoria: We don't really fight about it though. I think it's more like (.) it  
13 surprises us and then we have to like figure it out.  
14 Jarome: Other than that it's like (.) it's pretty chill (.) pretty relaxed.  
15 Marnie: Mmhmm. Did you have any moments that you thought of that really  
16 strengthened your sense of being a couple since moving in together?

While Victoria and Jarome's responses began to turn our storytelling toward problems, I countered this turn by repeating my initial question about moments of "we-ness" (lines 15-16). This is one example of how I exercised narrative control over the developing stories.

While I could have followed the conversational direction introduced by Victoria and Jarome, asking questions about arguments and the potential problems associated with living together, my intention in conducting this research was to co-construct stories of "we-ness." This intention guided my subsequent question, which attempted to turn our conversation back to "we" moments (lines 15-16). If this conversation had been occurring in a different context, in couples therapy perhaps, I might have oriented to different aspects of the developing story, such as by focusing on problems instead of "we-ness." Gubrium and Holstein (2009) refer to silencing as the "flip side" of activation; in order for certain stories to be told, other stories must be ignored. While I acted to pass up particular stories in the previous extract, this silencing could be accomplished by any of the participants in our conversations. I will explore this issue further in my section on narrative control, or the processes through which participants and I co-edited our developing stories.

**Section summary.** In my analysis of activation, I demonstrated how I used my recruitment materials, instructions for the story-writing activity, and selected interview

questions to invite participants into telling stories about “we-ness” with me. As they responded to these invitations, participants worked out between them who would begin storytelling, either through explicit negotiation or through self-selection by one of the partners. The ways through which participants determined their initial storytelling roles seemed to influence their immediate pattern of turn-taking. And while I invited participants to begin their stories by talking about how they had become a couple, many couples elected to start with how they had met, which seemed to provide important orienting information for the developing story.

### **Linkage and Composition**

Analyzing linkage and composition involves investigating how people connect different events and experiences together in stories, and develop these linkages into broader narrative themes and plots (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). While these aspects of storytelling have received significant attention in other approaches to narrative analysis, Gubrium and Holstein (2009) offer a unique perspective by arguing that themes and plots are actively composed by storytellers based on the purposes and circumstances of storytelling. Thus, when examining a story’s content and organization, analytic attention is oriented toward how speakers put events and stories together in order to convey particular meanings to listeners (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). In outlining my analysis of linkage and composition, I focus particularly on how participants and I composed stories about cohabitation and “we-ness.”

**Cohabitation.** As I described in Chapter One, I was interested in studying cohabitation because I wanted to better understand how cohabitating couples co-construct meaning in their relationships. During our storytelling interactions, in which I was an

active participant, I found that the meaning of cohabitation was most often conveyed through the position it was given relative to marriage. In our stories about “we-ness,” we also developed themes about cohabitation as a committed and future-oriented relationship.

*Cohabitation as a step toward marriage.* While I did not intend to ask participants any questions about marriage, the topic was introduced by participants in all but one of the interviews. Thus, marriage and cohabitation were closely linked in our stories. Many participants talked about cohabitation as a step taken in preparation for marriage, as living together allows couples to test their compatibility before making the decision to marry. Thus, in the common story of a relationship, cohabitation was often said to follow dating and precede marriage (Huang et al., 2011). As this was one of the popular discourses on cohabitation that I outlined in Chapter Two, it seems as though many participants were taking up and speaking from this discourse as they made sense of their relationships (Bamberg, 2004b). I will use an example from my interview with Abbie and Bob to demonstrate this manner of linking marriage and cohabitation:

Extract 13: Cohabitation as a step toward marriage

- 1 Abbie: Um but I always...saw the value...I just think (.) it's such a- a valuable
- 2 learning experience to live with someone before you get married.
- 3 Marnie: Mmhmm.
- 4 Abbie: Because...not that ((exhales)) I'm saying it's an easy way out but (.) if you
- 5 live together and realize (.) no this isn't gonna work (.) we are- you know
- 6 we conflict too much about these (.) you know important values in our
- 7 life...we should not get married.
- 8 Marnie: Mmhmm.
- 9 Abbie: It's a lot easier to walk away from that than (.) you know getting married
- 10 and having to file for divorce and...so I just (.) I don't know I just thought
- 11 it was important. It's...
- 12 Bob: I- you kind of look at it as a trial marriage.
- 13 Marnie: Mmhmm.

14 Bob: Everything else is the same.

In this excerpt, Abbie presented cohabitation as “a valuable learning experience” (lines 1-2), as living together allows couples to find out whether they “conflict too much about these (.) you know important values in our life” (lines 6-7). Central to this argument is the depiction of cohabitation as a relationship that is more straightforward to exit than a marriage: “It’s a lot easier to walk away from this than (.) you know getting married and having to file for divorce” (lines 9-10). Through Abbie’s descriptions of cohabitation as a learning experience, cohabitation comes off as a responsible thing to do before marriage (Silverman, 2001). She and Bob, in turn, can be heard as responsible people for making the decision to cohabit.

In line 12, Bob demonstrated agreement with the story Abbie had been developing, and drew a strong link between cohabitation and marriage by describing cohabitation “as a trial marriage” (line 12). Bob then claimed that “everything else is the same” (line 14), suggesting that the only difference between cohabitation and marriage is what it takes to end these relationships. This is an important claim in positioning cohabitation as a test for marriage, such that, in order to serve as a useful test, cohabitation must approximate marriage in some way (Smock, 2000).

Stories about cohabitation as a preparation for marriage provided a strong sense of future for couples’ narratives, as demonstrated in how they agreed that they were progressing toward marriage, though not always with a sense of when that transition would occur (Rhoades et al., 2009b). And while cohabitation was depicted as a serious kind of relationship in these storylines (e.g., through Bob’s comparisons to marriage in

lines 12 and 14), it was understood to be a temporary relational state: if couples did not get married, then they would likely break up.

*The risks of cohabitation.* Abbie's talk about conflict (lines 4-7) in the above example introduced another theme that participants and I co-developed in our cohabitation stories. Moving in together, whether married or not, can be a risk, as couples may discover that they are not compatible after all. These risks were often articulated when we were co-constructing stories about couples' reasons for cohabitation. This example, from my interview with Rita and Rooney, was composed in response to a question that I asked about their views on cohabitation prior to the time when they began living together:

Extract 14: Cohabitation as a risky activity

- 1 Rita: Yeah well like- I mean I've still- see:n that it (.) doesn't (.) work out for a  
2 lot of people. Like we had (.) or we have a friend that (.) uh lived with her  
3 boyfriend until (.) they ((Laughing)) couldn't live together any more and  
4 just (.) broke up. So I (.) uh mean we like- you can still see it not working  
5 out (.) for people but I just...
- 6 Marnie: Mmhmm.
- 7 Rita: Not that our relationship is (.) an exception but I...
- 8 Marnie: Mmhmm.
- 9 Rita: Just think we might be (.) better at it ((Laughing)) than some other  
10 people...So I think it's j- like it's still like a (.) like kind of chancy thing?  
11 And...
- 12 Marnie: Mmhmm.  
13 But...it just (.) in this case (.) it's working out pretty well.
- 14 Marnie: So it depends on the relationship and the couple [and...]
- 15 Rooney: [Mmhmm.]
- 16 Rita: [Yeah.]

In this passage, Rita narrated the risks associated with cohabitation by offering a cautionary tale about a friend who broke up with her boyfriend after they began living together (lines 2-4). Telling a story about someone outside of their relationship allowed

Rita to talk about the stakes of cohabitation in a way that was distant from her own relationship with Rooney. Rita repeated several times that cohabitating relationships often do not work (lines 1-5), and described cohabitation as a “kind of chancy thing” (line 10), thus emphasizing the delicacy of this union.

But while Rita downplayed the claim that their relationship was an exception to such risks in line 7, she went on to argue that “in this case (.) it’s working out pretty well” (line 13), as she and Rooney “might be (.) better at it ((Laughing)) than some other people” (lines 9-10). Thus, Rita used the statement “in this case” (line 13) to preface a contrasting clause (Hunston, 2001). While acknowledging that there are significant stakes involved in cohabitation, Rita positioned their relationship as being successful despite these risks.

Goffman (1967) noted that face can be maintained when making claims about the “self” by performing such claims with “belittling modesty, with strong qualifications, or with a note of unseriousness” (p. 16). When claims are composed in such a way, speakers can be heard as cautious and reserved, and thus their claims become more difficult for others to challenge (Goffman, 1967). In this example, Rita used modesty and qualifying statements (e.g., “Not that our relationship is (.) an exception,” line 7), as well as humour (she laughed in line 9), as she made claims for the success of their cohabitating relationship. While cohabitation was often linked to the risks that may be involved in this kind of relationship (i.e., incompatibility and conflict), participating couples and I tended to co-construct narrative storylines that positioned them outside of these risks, as in Extract 14 from my interview with Rita and Rooney.

*Cohabitation as an alternative to marriage.* In other conversations, cohabitation was situated as an alternative to marriage, rather than as a step toward it. This was another popular cohabitation discourse, which I explored in Chapter Two, that participants seemed to draw on in their relational stories. In these cases, couples described having minimal interest in the institution of marriage, and positioned it outside of their projected plotline as a couple. Many of the couples who took up this discourse questioned marriage and its potential contribution to their relationship, as in the following example from my interview with Dana and Bobby:

Extract 15: Cohabitation as an alternative to marriage

- 1 Bobby: We don't (.) feel like we need like the (.) I guess like (.)  
2 [title of marriage or something.]  
3 Dana: [Like I don't really want to] call you my husband. And I don't- I don't-  
4 and it's the title of marriage. Yeah! I don't need (.) that for anything.  
5 Bobby: Yeah.  
6 Dana: I don't (.) understand what it (.) does (.) for us.  
7 Bobby: [Well that's the thing-]  
8 Dana: [For other people I get it right?]  
9 Marnie: Yeah  
10 Bobby: For- yeah like (.) for other people like (.) you know. But us it's like well  
11 we've been together so- for so long and all this kind of stuff and (.) you  
12 know (.) if we got (.) married tomorrow it's like (.) well really (.) what  
13 would be different?  
14 Dana: Yeah like what does it do for us?

In co-constructing their position on marriage, Dana and Bobby talked about marriage in terms of a "title" (line 2 and 4), which seems to emphasize the legal aspects of the union (though cohabitation is becoming increasingly legalized itself; Arnett, 2004). Further, they depicted their relationship as being comparable to a marriage already: "Well really (.) what would be different?" (lines 12-13). Through this comparison, Bobby and Dana

claimed for their relationship all that we culturally associate with marriage, including ideas about commitment and permanence (Silverman, 2001).

Rather than taking a general stance against marriage, Dana and Bobby defined this position as personal, and separated their preferences from the preferences of others: “For other people I get it right?” (line 8). Limiting this stance in such a manner could be a means of maintaining face (Goffman, 1967), since opposing marriage is a potentially controversial position, and thus one that others might be likely to challenge.

Couples who depicted cohabitation as an alternative to marriage often did so by linking their relationship to commitment, emphasizing that it is not marriage alone that invites a sense of commitment between partners. Consider the following example from my conversations with Charles and Layla:

Extract 16: Building “we-ness” and commitment without marriage

1 Charles: “We” is something separate from (.) than marriage and I think you can  
2 build “we” and commitment without having a ring or a wedding or being  
3 married.

In this extract, Charles positioned “we-ness” as something that can be built outside of marriage (lines 1-3), claiming that it is not connected to the symbols and rituals of marriage such as rings or weddings (line 2). In taking up this position, Charles opened the possibility that, while he and Layla are not married, they might still have developed a sense of “we-ness” within their relationship.

While participating couples generally demonstrated agreement regarding whether they intended to marry in the future, there were some differences in the ways that Layla and Charles talked about marriage. Though both argued that marriage is not necessary for relational commitment, Layla positioned herself as wanting to get married at some point

in the future. In talking about this desire, however, both she and Charles emphasized her interest in the wedding ritual, enabling her to claim that their relationship would not change, even if they had a wedding:

Extract 17: A marriage or a wedding

- 1 Layla: You know it's not that (.) [neither one of us wants a marriage.]  
2 Charles: [We're not opposed to marriage.]  
3 Layla: It's that (.) I want a wedding.  
4 Charles: Yeah.  
5 Layla: But I'm willing to wait till (.) whenever to be able to have the wedding  
6 that I [want.]  
7 Charles: [Yeah.]  
8 Layla: Because we have a (.) marriage ((Laughs))  
9 Charles: Yeah.  
10 Layla: We just don't have a wedding. So it'll be (.) whatever (.) when we can  
11 afford to have the wedding that we want to have then (.) we'll have a  
12 wedding but (.) it's not gonna change anything from (.) now to (.)  
13 tomorrow to whenever.  
14 Charles: Yeah (.) I guess (.) in a lot of this (.) I guess what my point (.) maybe  
15 glossed over it (.) it's not opposed to marriage or even a wedding. It just  
16 we are married so why rush into getting married when we are not  
17 financially in the position to do it.  
18 Layla: Right.

As Layla described her desire for a wedding, Charles frequently provided demonstrations of agreement and encouragement with his use of the word “Yeah” (lines 4, 7, and 9). This passage differed from others in their interview, as Charles and Layla would typically let one another talk for extended periods of time without commenting or interjecting.

Charles' frequent demonstrations of agreement here could indicate that a delicate object (i.e., their shared understanding of marriage and its prospective place in their relationship) was being co-managed in this narrative segment, which Charles seemed to be closely monitoring as an active listener.

*Cohabitation as serious, committed, and future-oriented.* Whether or not the couples intended to marry, they all co-constructed their relationships as being serious, committed, and future-oriented. These kinds of claims seem important for maintaining a positive public image as a couple, as well as for confirming with one another, through their developing storylines, that they are invested in future of their relationship. Jarome, in the following extract, spoke to the future-orientation of his cohabitating relationship with Victoria:

Extract 18: Cohabitation with a purpose

- 1 Marnie: And if (.) for you if marriage sort of has that order (.) and structure where  
2 does (.) cohabitation (.) compare?  
3 Jarome: Um (.) well (.) cohabitation is (.) not a bad thing (.) um but there had better  
4 be a purpose to it. Um because if there's no purpose to it (.) then there's no  
5 point in living together for a long period of time. You gotta go somewhere  
6 (.) with your relationship right?  
7 Marnie: Mmhmm.  
8 Jarome: You just don't live together for the sake of it. It's a big responsibility. Uh  
9 it's a big attachment. It's a big everything.  
10 Marnie: Right.  
11 Jarome: So you want to make sure that it's actually gonna (.) end up somewhere.  
12 Marnie: Mmhmm.  
13 Marnie: Um (.) at least that that potential exists.

Jarome began by arguing that, in regards to cohabitation, “there had better be a purpose to it” (lines 3-4), as “you gotta go somewhere (.) with your relationship right?” (lines 5-6). He connected this purpose with the importance of cohabitation, which he stressed through the use of vocal emphasis: “It’s a big responsibility. Uh it’s a big attachment. It’s a big everything” (lines 8-9). Jarome talked about cohabitation as something that should not be entered into lightly, and thus should involve a decision about the prospective future of a relationship.

While the projected storyline for Jarome and Victoria's relationship included marriage, couples who did not plan to marry also spoke about their relationship with a strong sense of future direction. This direction was expressed through intentions of staying together in the long-term. Talking about cohabitation as a serious and future-oriented relationship would likely contribute to a couple's social face as a committed pair, as well as to their understandings of one another as devoted partners.

*Challenges to cohabitating relationships.* While the cohabitating couples who participated in my study emphasized the committed and serious nature of their relationships, they also described challenges they faced from others regarding their unmarried state. These challenges attempted to position cohabitating couples, especially those who had been living together for a number of years, as being uncommitted. Such challenges can be seen as risks to their public and "self" image as serious and committed. In this example, Layla narrated a story about how her family members have not fully accepted Charles into the family because he and Layla are not married:

Extract 19: Cohabitation, marriage, and family pictures

- 1 Layla: And um (.) my (.) mom especially is (.) I think hesitant to (.) accept  
2 Charles sorta into the family (.) with us not being married. Um (.) you  
3 know and there's definitely been (.) different (.) types of conversations  
4 that have been had about you know I've got brothers I've got four  
5 brothers. And (.) you know some of them are married and some of them  
6 aren't and whatever and the ones (.) you know (.) say we go to a wedding  
7 or something like that and who gets to be in the family pictures and who  
8 doesn't. If you're married then you're in the family pictures and (.) you  
9 know if you're not then whatever whereas you know Charles and I have  
10 been together for a [long]  
11 Charles: [I've been] around longer than [any of them]  
12 Layla: [than any of] yeah (.)  
13 my brothers' (.) wives or (.) any of them. You know that it's just like  
14 (.) but they're (.) now okay to be in the picture and (.) you know as of late  
15 it's been (.) different I think a little bit but (.) still there's still that

16 definite hesitation that (.) because we're not married then (.) you know  
17 he's (.) less a part of the family than (.) you know some of my (.) sister-  
18 in-laws and (.) that sort of stuff. Whereas you know and (.) I think in that  
19 then (.) really makes me think that no (.) what do you mean? No he's not  
20 (.) right. Like yeah (.) I get we're not married but (.) that doesn't mean  
21 that our relationship is any different than theirs you know.

As she told this story, Layla put her family's treatment of Charles in direct contrast with their treatment of her brothers' wives, who are included in family pictures while Charles is not (lines 7-9 and 14). It seems as though, particularly for Layla's mother (line 1), the married/unmarried distinction determines the importance of a relationship, rather than the length of time a couple has been together. When this distinction is taken up, it may be connected to religious or moral discourses that privilege marriage over cohabitation (Thornton et al., 2007). Layla directly articulated the challenge that Charles' exclusion from family pictures signals for their union: "I get we're not married but (.) that doesn't mean that our relationship is any different than theirs you know" (lines 20-21). While Layla and Charles spoke about their union as serious and committed, Layla's family seemed to draw a different sense of meaning from their status as a cohabitating couple.

As identities are co-constructed through social interactions, the meanings that others take up in regards to our relationships can influence our sense of identity (Bamberg, 2004a). In this example, Layla's family has a stake in their story as a couple, and may pose a challenge to Layla and Charles' understanding of their relationship as close and committed. Responding to these challenges by comparing their relationship to a married relationship (lines 20-21) serves as one way for cohabitating couples like Layla and Charles to defend against such claims.

**Developing “we-ness.”** In addition to talking about cohabitation, participants and I also co-constructed stories about how they had come to develop a sense of “we-ness.” I will outline here how we defined this sense of relational identity, composed plotlines of “we-ness” development, and discussed how partners had increased this sense of “we-ness” over their time together.

*Defining “we-ness.”* Before I began asking participants questions about “we-ness,” I shared with them a prepared introduction in which I outlined what “we-ness” meant for me:

Extract 20: Introducing “we-ness”

1 Marnie: So (.) in sort of the recruitment stuff or earlier you might have heard me  
2 talking about “we-ness.” So when I talk about that I mean sort of the sense  
3 of being a couple (.) of being connected to one another in some special way  
4 (.) being close and sharing something between you so (.) um (.) when you  
5 first saw this word “we-ness” or when I talk about it (.) what does it mean  
6 for you or what does it bring up for you?

My intention in providing this definition was to initiate and facilitate the telling of “we” stories. I also expected that, as an active and influential member in this storytelling, my narrations of “we-ness” would influence how couples talked about this sense of relational identity. In my analysis of collaboration, I will provide examples demonstrating how participants took up my language of “we-ness” in their responses. Here I explore in more detail the definitions of “we-ness” that participants and I co-developed in our storytelling.

First, we defined “we-ness” by how partners positioned themselves in relation to one another. Second, we talked about this sense of relational identity as something that was influenced by how others referred to the couple as a “we,” rather than as disconnected individuals. In the passage that I included above, I described “we-ness” as

“being connected to one another in some special way” (line 3). The definitions of “we-ness” that participants and I co-constructed addressed the nature of these connections more specifically.

First, when I asked about their understandings of “we-ness,” participants spoke about how they tended to position themselves relative to their partner in daily life, particularly when it came to decision-making. Here is how Abbie responded to a question about “we-ness,” which I included in the previous extract (lines 4-6):

Extract 21: Considering “us”

- 1 Abbie: Um... Yeah. I definitely think it makes sense. It...that’s how I view us. Like  
2 I view us as...I mean as a couple. Like as...together when I make decisions I  
3 consider...him and I consider (.) you know how it would affect us together  
4 and not just...me. Like I don’t just make decisions anymore based on...me.  
5 Bob: Mmhmm.  
6 Abbie: It’s more based on us.  
7 Bob: Mmhmm.

Abbie began talking about “we-ness” in a cautious manner, as demonstrated through the frequent pauses and instances of repair (e.g., “It...that’s how I view us. Like I view us as...I mean as a couple,” lines 1-2) in her talk. According to Silverman (2001), such *expressive caution* signifies that “we-ness” is a delicate conversational object that requires careful articulation. Within her response, Abbie talked about how she does not tend to consider herself in isolation any longer, but rather, in reference to Bob. For example, when making decisions, she considers the effects the decision will have on “us” (line 6) rather than “me” (line 4). In the stories that the participants and I co-constructed, “we-ness” was often defined in part by the connectedness that partners experienced in relation to one another.

Second, participants and I defined “we-ness” by how others positioned the members of the couple in relation to one another. In our interviews, many couples spoke about how others treated them like a “we.” The following quote from Tyler demonstrates this theme:

Extract 22: Being recognized as a “we” by others

- 1 Tyler: People started to (.) call us you know like that- or usually oh (.) hey Tyler  
2 (.) Amanda is coming too right? And we’re recognized as a single unit  
3 not really recognized as Tyler or recognized as Amanda, we were  
4 recognized as (.) “Tyanda.” ((Laughs)) [I just made that up right now.]  
5 Marnie: [You even have a couple name.]  
((Laughing))  
6 Amanda: Wow. I did not know we had a couple name. ((Laughing))  
8 Tyler: No I just made that up right now.  
9 Marnie: [Sure. ((Laughs))]  
10 Amanda: [That’s not something we] consulted with each other. ((Laughing))  
11 Tyler: That was more just to drive home the point. We’re (.) a single unit.  
12 Marnie: Right.

Tyler described how others relate to him and Amanda as though they are a “single unit” (lines 2 and 11), and jokingly used a joint nickname, which is an amalgamation of Amanda and Tyler (line 4), “just to drive home the point. We’re (.) a single unit” (line 11). Tyler justified this claim by describing how when others refer to one of the partners, they tend to refer to the other partner as well (lines 1-2).

*Developing a “we-ness” plotline.* During our interviews, I invited participants to talk about when they first began to notice a sense of “we” in their relationship (again, see Appendix B for interview questions). Couples described a number of important “we” moments, including hosting a party together, planning visits to see one another during long-distance relationships, establishing holiday rituals as a couple, and taking long walks together. While it was not always easy to specify a time when “we-ness” began to

develop, the majority of couples agreed that they began to experience it before they moved in together. Further, many couples claimed that this relational identity increased significantly after they began cohabitating. Bob and Abbie provide an example of this storyline:

Extract 23: Cohabitation increases “we-ness”

- 1 Marnie: Um so (.) when did you first start to experience this sense of “we” in your  
2 relationship?  
3 Bob: Um...it (.) well (.) always kind of it- it was definitely started happening  
4 before we were living together but (.) I think (.) since we were living  
5 together it’s accelerated...exponentially just because... you can’t  
6 just...not be there and be doing something else without the other  
7 person...needing to know about it right? So...when you do make a  
8 decision you basically the first thing that goes through your head...for me  
9 is- is okay well what’s Abbie going to...Like if (.) say my friends ask me  
10 to go do something I- I would think (.) okay well a- does Abbie want to  
11 come b- is she going to be (.) if she doesn’t want to come is she going to  
12 have something else to do...and stuff like that so. I definitely didn’t think  
13 that way...before I was in a relationship...or even living together. So I  
14 think that yeah (.) definitely (.) it just completely changes the way...  
15 [you think]  
16 Marnie: [Mmhmm.]  
17 Bob: about yourself and...your priorities change.  
18 Abbie: Yeah so as for when...((clicks tongue))...Like I’d say...definitely before  
19 we started living [together]  
20 Bob: [Yeah.]  
21 Abbie: But...  
22 Bob: Well I think that’s one of the things that...made us realize that we were  
23 ready to live together.  
24 Marnie: Mmhmm.

Bob began by suggesting that he and Abbie started to develop “we-ness” prior to moving in together (lines 3-4), though this sense of relational identity “accelerated... exponentially” (line 5) after they became a cohabitating couple. Bob then went on to offer an explanation for how cohabitation contributes to “we-ness,” talking about how cohabitation changes a couple’s sense of positioning relative to one another (lines 5-15).

In the narrative plotlines that we co-constructed, “we-ness” was also co-narrated as something that progressed over the course of a relationship, as couples had started to develop “we-ness” in their earlier stages of couplehood and it had gradually increased over time. This plotline is an optimistic one, as it implies that couples are likely to continue increasing their sense of “we” in the future (Madsen, 2007).

*The process of developing “we-ness.”* Participants and I also co-constructed stories about the ways through which the couples had come to develop a sense of “we-ness” between them, including: building a friendship before becoming romantically involved, engaging in open communication with one another, spending time together, and sharing and discussing common values. Couples also talked about the importance of sharing objects and physical space, as well as dealing with difficult situations together, themes which I will now explore in more detail.

A number of participants talked about developing “we-ness” through acquiring and sharing household objects and physical spaces, such as the home that they lived in together. Consider the following example from my interview with Amanda and Tyler:

Extract 24: Co-creating “our” space

- 1 Marnie: Um so (.) tell me about a moment or experience that has occurred since
- 2 you began living together (.) um that seemed to strengthen your sense of
- 3 being a couple.
- 4 Tyler: Ahhh I had a hard time thinking about specifics (.) even when writing my
- 5 story.
- 6 Amanda: Me too.
- 7 Tyler: [((Laughing))]
- 8 Amanda: [Um but] for me I guess it’d be like when we got this queen size bed.
- 9 Cause then it was like we had our own space so it wasn’t like we were
- 10 living with my parents as much.
- 11 Marnie: Right.
- 12 Amanda: It was (.) kinda like we have (.) these two rooms like I have two
- 13 bedrooms that are kinda designated as my space and now our space. So

14           (.) everything was moved in at this point like all your clothes and  
 15           everything like that. And so...

16 Tyler:    Yeah cause I- the way we had it before was like (.) we had one room that  
 17           was like (.) Tyler's room because it had my- the mattress I was sleeping  
 18           on and you had your bed in the other room. And then we brought them  
 19           together all of a sudden it was like (.) all right this is our room.

20 Amanda:  Mmhmm. And it was kind of fun to like (.) once that was (.) in place (.)  
 21           to kind of organize (.) ourselves around (.) all of our stuff around each  
 22           other's stuff.

23 Marnie    Mmhmm.

24 Tyler:    It- it became ours...not just (.) Tyler's and (.) Amanda's.

In this example, I invited Amanda and Tyler to talk about how they had developed “we-ness” in their relationship as a cohabitating couple (lines 1-3). Tyler initially responded by saying that he has had difficulty thinking about this process (lines 4-5). After indicating agreement (line 6), Amanda picked up the storytelling by introducing a tale about when she and Tyler had bought a bed together (lines 8-10). Amanda described this moment as significant in establishing a space that was shared between them: “Cause then it was like we had our own space” (line 9). Tyler continued with the storyline about space that Amanda introduced by emphasizing the importance of “our room” (line 19), and the process through which the space “became ours” (line 24).

Gubrium and Holstein (1995) noted that material objects can serve as “a visible representation of self that otherwise might not readily be communicated” (p. 563) in stories. In the above example, Amanda and Tyler talked about how they had developed “we-ness” through gathering objects both could articulate as “theirs,” and by co-creating shared space. Their manner of talking (“It- it became ours...not just (.) Tyler's and (.) Amanda's,” line 24) resonated with my understanding of “we-ness” as something that is co-constructed between partners. That Tyler and Amanda spoke about co-creating space

in response to my question about developing “we-ness” suggests that such space might be understood as a physical representation or indication of “we-ness” (Clark, 1996).

Another theme that I identified from our stories about “we-ness” was that times of trouble were often depicted as circumstances through which partners were able to increase their sense of relational identity. Rita and I, in the following example, developed a story about a time when she and Rooney had to work together to handle burst pipes in their home:

Extract 25: Dealing with trouble

- 1 Marnie: Yeah. So what was it (.) about you know (.) things going wrong (.) the  
2 pipes bursting that (.) um (.) for you (.) kind of increased that sense of  
3 closeness?  
4 Rita: Um (.) partially probably that we just didn't (.) have anybody else (.)  
5 to...uh...like (.) solve it for us or (.) something like that? Like our landlord  
6 at the time really had no...nothing to (.) offer us. Uh it's not like we were  
7 close to our parents or anything like that so it was (.) really just the two of  
8 us (.) um (.) in one place. So (.) and just even like physically close (.) like  
9 sitting (.) trying to fix the pipes like (.) one of us holding something or (.)  
10 trying to (.) hold the plug down while we plunged the other side of the  
11 sink so. [((Laughing))]  
12 Marnie: [((Laughing))]  
13 Rita: Just- I don't know just- probably not knowing what to do (.) but both  
14 being in the same boat.  
15 Marnie: Mhmm.  
16 Rita: Felt really close.

Frank (2010) contended that, in stories, we can understand the nature of characters by how they deal with trouble. In this extract, Rita talked about how she and Rooney had to work together on “trying to fix the pipes like (.) one of us holding something or (.) trying to (.) hold the plug down while we plunged the other side of the sink so” (lines 8-11). That Rita and Rooney managed this trouble with the pipes in a manner that conveyed teamwork contributes to an understanding of them as a united couple. Through the lens of

“we-ness,” trouble can be seen as something that allows couples to work together and become closer in the process (Miller & Stiver, 1998).

*The significance of our conversations about “we-ness.”* To end our interviews, I asked participants the following question: “What has it been like talking about this with me today?” Through their responses, participants and I talked about how conversations about “we-ness,” like the ones that I had invited them into during our interviews, served as a means for further developing “we-ness.” Bobby and Dana’s response to this question provides an example:

Extract 26: Developing “we-ness” through our interviews

- 1 Marnie: Yeah (.) very good. And just to conclude (.) what has it been like talking
- 2 about this topic with me?
- 3 Dana: Oh it’s good (.) I love...
- 4 Bobby: I feel like another “we” moment.

Bobby described our interview as “another ‘we’ moment” (line 4), which fits the reflexive mode of storytelling (i.e., telling stories through significant moments) that I had introduced to our conversations. Bobby and Dana later went on to describe how they intended to continue having conversations about “we-ness” when they went out for coffee together. This extract suggests that constructing joint stories about “we-ness” can serve as another way to strengthen a couple’s sense of relational identity.

Participating couples and I also discussed how talking about “we-ness” oriented our storytelling to relational closeness and togetherness, rather than to problems. The following extract from my interview with Victoria and Jarome speaks to the effects of this orientation:

Extract 27: Talking about mutuality rather than differences

- 1 Marnie: And is there something in the storytelling that you see as significant?  
2 Victoria: I don't know. Like...well (.) like we both know what areas we're not on  
3 the same page with but it's kind of neat to hear what we are on the same  
4 page with (.) yeah

Victoria noted that, as partners, she and Jarome have been more aware of differences between them than. As such, she described it as “kind of neat to hear what we are on the same page with” (lines 3-4), which serves as a claim that conversations about “we-ness” can invite partners to attend to points of mutuality rather than just differences.

Finally, in several conversations, participants and I explored the effects of talking about “we-ness” in a narrative form, which encourages the construction of relational plotlines that include past, present, and future (Ricoeur, 1988). Consider the following extract from my interview with Layla and Charles:

Extract 28: Bringing it all together

- 1 Layla: It's been good to reflect on everything (.) bring it all sort of together (.)  
2 right. Like it- like you said it's all conversations that we've had and yet to  
3 hear them all at once and (.) you know (.) talk about it all at once (.) it's  
4 like (.) oh (.) yeah (.) we have come a long way and we have (.) you  
5 know there's lots of decisions that we've made (.) either consciously or  
6 unconsciously that you know (.) it's just been (.) yeah (.) you know this is  
7 (.) how we got here and you know (.) it...  
8 Charles: Mmhmm. We have lots of conversations about next. What we're going to  
9 do next (.) next plan. And we do have conversations when we (.) you  
10 know (.) when when we reminisce. And things like that. But this has  
11 certainly made us look back through the progression of why we're sitting  
12 here today as opposed to always just driving forward (.) right.

Charles and Layla stated that, while they typically focus on the future of their relationship, or disconnected experiences from their past, our conversations served to “bring it all sort of together” (line 1). Co-constructing a narrative plotline, then, can contribute to a couples' sense of how they “have come a long way” (line 4), “why

[they're] sitting here today” (lines 11-12), and “what [they're] going to do next” (lines 8-9) as a couple. From the perspective of narrative and collaborative therapies, such narratives could provide couples with a sense of forward momentum, shaping their ideas of a preferred future together (Madsen, 2007).

**Section summary.** In my analysis of linkage and composition, I outlined the themes and plotlines that participants and I co-constructed in our stories about cohabitation and “we-ness.” While cohabitation was often given meaning by how it was linked to marriage, couples talked about their relationships as being serious, committed, and future-oriented, regardless of whether they intended to marry. I also explored how participants and I defined “we-ness” through the positioning of partners relative to one another, and narrated plotlines of relational identity that portrayed “we-ness” as being in a constant state of progression. Finally, we discussed some of the ways through which participants had developed this sense of mutuality over their time together. A number of participants described how taking part in their joint interview with me had contributed to their sense of “we-ness” at that time. Thus, through our storytelling conversations, participants and I were observably strengthening the very sense of relational identity that we were discussing.

### **Collaboration and Control**

Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) analytic approach to collaboration involves examining how people interact with one another to co-construct stories. Storytelling is not performed by individuals in isolation, but is shaped through the collaborative interactions of all those involved in a conversation (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

Collaboration is not always a seamless process, though; differences and competitions are

often created between potential storytellers. As such, analyzing control involves examining how people assert an influence over stories, such as through attempts to control the speaking floor, as they are being collaboratively constructed (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). In this section of my analysis, I first investigate collaboration and then control, as these considerations overlap significantly in terms of how they are enacted within a conversation. I examine how participants and I co-narrated a never-before-told story of mutuality and “we-ness,” as well as how we co-edited this emerging story to shape it into something that we could all agree to.

**Collaboration.** In my analysis, I identified several ways through which participants and I exhibited collaboration in our storytelling, including: taking turns speaking, finishing one another’s responses, encouraging continued storytelling, and inviting and responding to conversational topics such as “we-ness.” I will explore each of these acts in turn, providing examples of how participants and I performed them collaboratively within our conversations.

*Taking turns speaking.* One of the most obvious examples of collaboration can be seen in how participants and I took turns speaking during our interviews. As we added to the developing stories by asking questions and providing responses, we each played an important role in shaping the progress of our narratives. I provided a number of examples of turn-taking in the section on activation, and outlined how participants and I collaborated to begin acts of storytelling.

Turn-taking required ongoing negotiation over the course of our interviews, however (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). In analyzing how participants and I took turns, I noticed that, across interviews, participants and I tended to establish a similar pattern of

turns between us. This pattern would usually begin with me asking a question. The partners would then take turns responding, either once or multiple times, and I would provide encouraging statements like “Mmhmm” (which I will explore later in this section) between turns. When the participants indicated that they were finished speaking, often by returning to silence, I would continue the conversation by asking another question. This pattern of turn-taking was likely influenced by the research environment in which we were conversing, as the roles of interviewer and interviewee are typically associated with behaviours such as question-asking and responding, respectively (though I was responding to participants’ responses as well; Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). Through asking questions and providing responses, I was collaborating with the couples to co-construct these stories.

At times, participants and I had to more overtly manage how turns were distributed between us, often when turn-taking did not seem to be occurring in an expected manner (Sacks et al., 1974). For example, several participants asked their partners to increase their contributions to the storytelling, as in the following extract from my interview with Abbie and Bob:

Extract 29: Asking for help

- 1 Marnie: Okay (.) um and overall how do you think living together has affected your  
2 sense of being a couple?  
3 Bob: Hmm. That’s kind of a tough question.  
4 Abbie: ((Laughs))  
5 Bob: I think we always felt...like we were...together...since we started and...I  
6 don’t know if it affected our sense of being a couple. It might  
7 have...strengthened it slightly...possibly. I don’t know. But- I don’t know.  
8 I still feel...like we’re a couple...I guess more now than...before. Just like  
9 any (.) any step [would] for a couple.  
10 Marnie: [Mmhmm]  
11 Abbie: Mmhmm.

12 Bob: Help me out here. [((Laughing))]  
13 Marnie: [((Laughing))]  
14 Abbie: Yeah. I think that...living together has strengthened our  
15 relationship...umm...Yeah it's made (.) it's made me feel anyways  
16 that...this is...the right choice...and it's also helped me realize  
17 that...umm...relationships are...a lot of work and they're not...perfect  
18 and being together so much and having to deal with you know the  
19 mundane (.) tasks of...living...and doing those you know day in and day  
20 out together...I think it's really helped to strengthen...our relationship and  
21 how we function...as a couple.

I began this exchange by asking the couple to talk about how cohabitation had affected their sense of “we-ness” (lines 1-2). Bob replied by identifying this as a “tough question” (line 3). After Abbie laughed at Bob’s comment (line 4), he continued his response (line 5-9). He seemed to encounter difficulties in doing so, though, as indicated by his use of contradicting statements (e.g., “I don’t know if it affected our sense of being a couple. It might have...strengthened it slightly...possibly,” lines 5-7), frequent pauses, and repetition of the phrase “I don’t know” (lines 5-7). That Bob demonstrated such difficulty in responding to this question contributes to our understanding that it was a difficult one for him to answer. In the terms of Silverman (2001), Bob’s speech points to the delicate nature of talking about “we-ness.”

After Abbie used an “Mmhmm” statement (line 11), encouraging Bob to continue responding and declining an opportunity to respond herself (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998), Bob asked Abbie to assist him: “Help me out here” (line 12). Bob laughed after he made this request, thus performing it in a humorous manner, and I joined in by laughing as well (line 13). Jefferson (1979) observed that when a speaker laughs at the end of a turn, this signifies to listeners that laughter is considered to be a suitable response, and thus invites them to engage in laughter too. Laughing when making or hearing a request for help

could also be a means of maintaining face for the person making that request (Goffman, 1967). Abbie then took up Bob's request by contributing a response to this story about how cohabitation had affected their sense of "we-ness," though her response included numerous pauses as well (lines 14-21). As Abbie had been contributing actively throughout our conversation, Bob may have invited her assistance with answering this question in particular given the problems he encountered while constructing a response.

As the interviewer, I played a significant role in managing turn-taking in my conversations with participants. While I usually directed my questions to both members of a couple at the same time, allowing them to decide who would respond, I sometimes directed questions to one participant in particular. After Charles has contributed two long turns to a story about how he decided to move in with Layla, I used a question to invite Layla into responding as well:

Extract 30: Directing a question to a particular participant

- 1 Marnie: So (.) yeah (.) speaking of that (.) how was it for you for him to explain  
2 this idea he had?  
3 Layla: ((Laughing)) It was funny (.) and I remember at the time (.) I was  
4 umm... working as a personal trainer and massage therapist and I  
5 remember having the conversation the next day with one of my clients (.)  
6 about how (.) you know (.) Charles had come up with this great (.) idea  
7 that we should (.) you know he's gonna move here and we're going to  
8 move in together or whatever and then (.) you know (.) was joking about it  
9 that (.) you know (.) it was (.) you know like I had already said (.) of  
10 course that was (.) what was going to happen. How... what else did he  
11 think was going to happen (.) kind of thing.

In this extract, Layla took up my request for her to speak, which was delivered in the form of a question (lines 1-2), and responded by talking about her reaction to Charles' decision (lines 3-11).

As I described in my analysis of activation, when a request was made for a participant to speak during our interview, either by their partner or by myself, they tended to respond with a relatively long contribution to the story. This pattern of responding could have something to do with the research context, in which participants are expected to respond to a researcher's questions as best they can (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). The relationship between partners may also have served as an important environmental consideration, as partners may not have wanted to displease one another by ignoring or rejecting an invitation to speak (Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006).

*Finishing one another's responses.* Participating couples also demonstrated collaboration when they finished one another's responses. In the following extract, Bobby and Dana spoke in an overlapping fashion as they described how their relationship compared to their friends' relationships:

Extract 31: Completing sentences

- 1 Marnie: Yeah (.) is that something you've experienced like (.) seeing more people
- 2 or knowing more people who are [...cohabitating or?]
- 3 Bobby: [No...like] most of our friends who have
- 4 like (.) been in a relationship (.) you know they're (.) you know...married
- 5 or (.) getting married [or (.) whatever.]
- 6 Dana: [Mmhmm.]
- 7 Bobby: Um (.) yeah it's [like]
- 8 Dana: [We're-] we're the odd ones.
- 9 Bobby: We're kinda (.) yeah.
- 10 Dana: It was like we watch friends who like (.) were single for years and
- 11 Bobby: [get together]
- 12 Dana: [then date] for tiny amounts- well in our eyes tiny amounts of time and
- 13 Bobby: [And then get married. Yeah]
- 14 Dana: [then get married. So they] all think we're weird.
- 15 Bobby: Yeah (.) yeah
- 16 Dana: But we don't.
- 17 [((All laughing))]
- 18 Bobby: Yeah. I don't know. [I don't know.]
- 19 Dana: [It works for us.]

At several points during this passage, Dana and Bobby offered similar responses simultaneously, thus acting to complete one another's sentences (e.g., lines 11-12, 12-14). As there were few pauses during this exchange, Dana and Bobby were probably not completing one another's responses because their partner was struggling to finish, as was the case with Bob and Abbie in the previous example (Goldberg, 1990). As such, their overlapping talk could suggest that Dana and Bobby were enthusiastic about and interested in the story that was being told.

Tannen (2005) described the conversational style demonstrated by Bobby and Dana in this example as a *high-involvement style*, which is characterized by frequent interruptions, short turns, and rapid turn-changes. While she stated that this style is most often taken up when women are speaking to one another, its use in conversation tends to indicate interest and rapport between speakers (Tannen, 2005). Several participants also talked about anticipating their partners' responses while they were completing the story-writing activity, which they described as influencing how they wrote up their version of the relationship story.

Completing one another's responses can also be understood as a conversational performance of "we-ness." If understanding is viewed as conversational coordination, being able to anticipate one another's storytelling and provide similar responses can serve as an indication that some understanding has been developed between participants (Strong, 2005). While in this example, finishing one another's sentences seemed to act as a form of collaboration, this act could also be examined through the lens of narrative control as a bid to take over the speaking floor (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Thus,

completing one another's responses serves as one example of how collaboration and control can look quite similar in terms of how they are enacted within a conversation.

*Encouraging continued storytelling.* Collaboration can also be performed by encouraging other speakers in their storytelling; doing so involves giving up one's own opportunities to talk and allowing another person to speak at length (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Gubrium and Holstein (2009) contend that verbal and nonverbal prompts, such as nodding, saying "Mmhhh," or asking a speaker to "Tell me more," do more than just facilitate conversation, they influence the very course of that conversation.

When a storyteller receives confirmation that others are agreeing with what they have been saying, they are more likely to continue in that vein than if they had encountered expressions of disagreement from their conversational partners (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). If others do not seem to agree with or understand what the speaker has been talking about, speakers will often attempt to resolve these misunderstandings or disagreements (Strong, 2005). This resolution work would likely take the conversation in a different direction, however, than if the speaker continued with the agreement of their conversational partners (Strong, 2005).

In my role as interviewer, I made use of many encouraging statements during my conversations with participating couples, as I wanted the partners to speak at length (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). Often, this encouragement included making basic statements such as "Mmhhh," "Right," or "Yeah," which have also been referred to as *acknowledgement tokens* or *continuers* (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Schegloff, 2010). I also asked questions based upon the stories that participants had been constructing, or asked them to elaborate on something that they had been saying. The following extract, in

which I asked Abbie to continue speaking after she had begun a story about compatibility, serves as an example:

Extract 32: Asking a participant to extend their response

- 1 Abbie: And yeah (.) we both agreed that it's important to live with someone  
2 before you actually...get married.  
3 Bob: [Yeah.]  
4 Marnie: [Mmhmm]  
5 Abbie: For us (.) anyways. To make sure that you are actually compatible  
6 and...that you can be with each other day in and day out before you...take  
7 it to that next...step.  
8 Marnie: Mmhmm mmhmm okay. Um could you just tell me a little bit more about  
9 that?  
10 Abbie: About how it's [important?]  
11 Marnie: [Yeah your-] mmhmm. For you (.) yeah.  
12 Abbie: Um...Well it's important...I think you learn (.) you see a person  
13 differently when you live with them.  
14 Bob: Yeah well (.) being able to (.) still love that person when they're  
15 completely...comfortable around you in every way and every situation.

In my first turn (line 4), I attempted to promote Abbie's continued storytelling by using an "Mmhmm" statement, which suggested that I was attending to and interested in her story (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). This statement also indicated that I was turning down a potential opportunity to talk (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). Abbie's partner Bob also demonstrated his agreement with the emerging story by saying "Yeah" (line 3). When Abbie ceased speaking, though, I made an overt request for her to continue on with the story (lines 8-9). Abbie sought clarification on what I would like her to speak more about before she carried on with her response (line 10). Abbie and Bob then went on to speak for several lines about the importance of compatibility in cohabitation and marriage (lines 12-15), a conversational direction which might not have developed further if I had not asked Abbie to continue talking about it.

Bavelas et al. (2000) identified encouraging responses, such as the “Mmhmm” and “Yeah” seen in this example, as *generic responses*. Generic responses can be used to demonstrate that a listener is attending to a story, but do not include references to any specific information from that story, nor do they add anything further to it. *Specific responses*, in contrast, are targeted at something that a speaker has shared in their story (Bavelas et al., 2000). And while generic responses are appropriate at many different times and with many different stories, specific responses make sense only in regards to the particular moment for which they are used. For example, if a speaker describes an injury sustained during a fight, a listener might wince and exclaim “Ouch!” If a speaker talks about a loving moment shared with their partner, a listener might respond by saying “Awww, that’s sweet!” If the latter response was used in the former circumstance, it would not make sense, and would likely be understood as offensive.

When Bobby and Dana finished one another’s responses in Extract 31, they provided specific responses that anticipated and contributed to their partners’ acts of storytelling (Bavelas et al., 2000). I also used a specific response in my conversation with Tyler and Amanda, after Tyler began talking about Facebook and its role in their decision to become a couple. Before I provide an extract of this text though, I want to offer some background information. Facebook is a social networking site that people can use to send messages and share photos with one another. Users can choose to display their relationship status, and the person with whom they are in a relationship, to friends, family members, and acquaintances who also use the website. In popular discourse, making a relationship “Facebook official” refers to the moment when a couple changes their status on Facebook to reflect that they are in a romantic relationship. This status change is

generally recognized as a couples' acknowledgement that their relationship is serious enough to display to their online community of friends and family.

As we were discussing Tyler and Amanda's transition into being a couple, Tyler referenced the role that Facebook played in their relationship discussions:

Extract 33: Specific responses

- 1 Tyler: It was more a question of hey (.) should we update our Facebook status?  
2 [(All laughing)]  
3 Marnie: Yeah the official...[discussion] around Facebook.  
4 Amanda: [Yeah.]  
5 Tyler: Yeah should we make this Facebook official? ((Laughing))  
6 Marnie: So did you have a discussion to kind of make that decision or was it  
7 understood?

After Tyler introduced the topic of Facebook (line 1), I provided a specific response by also referencing Facebook and by bringing in language that is commonly used to discuss how it can be understood to make relationships "official" (line 3). Amanda agreed with my response by saying "Yeah" (line 4), and Tyler incorporated my language into his next turn, in which he posed a question that he might have asked at the time this decision occurred, "Should we make this Facebook official?" (line 5). Thus, in using a specific response, I contributed to this story about how their relationship began in that Tyler incorporated my "official" language into his next turn at talk.

It is interesting to note that the topic of Facebook came up numerous times in my interviews with cohabiting couples, either in terms of how it encouraged them to negotiate their status as a couple, or served as a means for them to meet and interact with one another prior to becoming a couple.

In my last turn in Extract 33, I asked Tyler and Amanda another question about their decision to become a couple (lines 6-7). This question was not planned prior to our

interview, as some of my questions were, but was constructed in response to the story that Tyler, Amanda, and I had been developing at the time. As such, this question could be understood as another form of specific response, which Bavelas et al. (2000) argued are acts of “*co-telling*” and “make the listener an *actor* in the story” (p. 944, italics in original). Inviting Amanda and Tyler to respond to this question would likely shape the unfolding nature of our story even further (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

*Inviting and responding to conversational topics.* Collaboration also serves to shape the content of stories, which relates to Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) considerations of linkage and composition. In my analysis of activation, I demonstrated how I had introduced topics of mutuality and “we-ness” through my recruitment materials, the story-writing activity, and my semi-structured interview questions. Co-constructing stories about these topics required more than my introduction of them, however; it required that participants take these subjects up and include them in their storytelling as well.

After participants and I explored how they had become a couple, and when they had begun to consider moving in together, I provided them with a prepared description of my understanding of “we-ness.” I introduced this extract in my section on linkage and composition, and reproduce it here for ease of reference:

Extract 20: Introducing “we-ness”

1 Marnie: So (.) in sort of the recruitment stuff or earlier you might have heard me  
2 talking about “*we-ness*.” So when I talk about that I mean sort of the sense  
3 of being a couple (.) of being connected to one another in some special  
4 way (.) being close and sharing something between you so (.) um (.) when  
5 you first saw this word “*we-ness*” or when I talk about it (.) what does it  
6 mean for you or what does it bring up for you?

My intention in introducing my understanding of “we-ness” during the interviews was to facilitate conversations on this topic. I did not expect that participants would have talked much about “we-ness” in their day-to-day interactions, and thus wondered whether we might have difficulty initiating such stories. I have added italics in this extract to emphasize how I used the word “we-ness” in my conversations with participants.

After narrating my understanding of “we-ness,” I asked participants to discuss what this word meant for them. I noticed that all of the couples took up my language of “we-ness” and used it when putting together their responses, as Tommy and Sally did in the following extract.

Extract 34: Taking up my language of “we-ness”

- 1 Tommy: Whatever struggles we have going on it’s just considering them as how  
2 we are going to do it...as a unit and having that be...the natural reaction I  
3 guess. Not having to force it or secondary...considerations or anything  
4 like that it (.) just is how...we are in the *sense of “we-ness”* I guess.  
5 Sally: Yeah I mean (.) I definitely agree with that. I also think (.) for me...“we-  
6 *ness”* (.) getting to the stage in a relationship where you care...about the  
7 other person as much as you care about yourself which is...like has never  
8 happened for me before.

Again, I have used italics in this extract to demonstrate how Tommy and Sally made use of the words “we-ness” and “sense of “we-ness” in their storytelling. Bavelas et al.

(2000) argued that when a person incorporates another speaker’s language into their own storytelling, this indicates they have been paying attention to what the other speaker has been saying. I also think that our research context, in which participants are usually expected to talk about topics initiated by the researcher, might have influenced the couples’ tendency to adopt my language of “we-ness” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

Further, “we-ness” is a very abstract phenomenon, and difficult to put into words; as

such, participants might have been willing to make use of my term rather than trying to find another word that could more fully capture this sense of relational togetherness (Strong, 2006).

In addition to talking about “we-ness,” many of my questions included language about “moments,” such as “Tell me about a moment that has occurred since you moved in together that has seemed to increase your sense of closeness.” By inviting stories about moments, I was providing participants with a particular structure for talking about and understanding their experiences (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). This is an example of how story activation can influence story composition, or the ways in which stories are put together. The following example demonstrates how Dana and Bobby made use of my “we” moment structure in their storytelling (lines 6 and 7):

Extract 35: “We” moments

- 1 Dana: ...but then the photographer the race photographer took a photo of like at
- 2 the perfect time and it’s like this awesome photo...of us running together.
- 3 Bobby: Yeah.
- 4 Dana: And like holding hands across the finish line or whatever. But (.) those have
- 5 been very... like (.) uh...
- 6 Bobby: [“We” moments.]
- 7 Dana: [Strengthening “we”] moments for me too.
- 8 Bobby: Yeah.

In using particular kinds of language and asking questions about certain kinds of experiences, I was inviting participants into storytelling and influencing the ways in which we told those stories together (Tomm, 1987). Thus, these last two extracts demonstrate how words and meanings used by a researcher such as myself often get incorporated into participants’ responses, and thus shape the information that we co-construct with one another during the research process (McNamee, 1995). These extracts

can also be examined through the lens of control, as through asking particular kinds of questions, I am also exercising control over how participants might respond (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

When I began this research, I was not expecting that participants would have had previous discussions about “we-ness.” As I mentioned above, it is an experience that seems to be difficult to put into words. Participants confirmed this expectation by indicating that we were participating in novel kinds of conversations together:

Extract 36: New conversations about “we-ness”

- 1 Marnie: And do you think talking about “we-ness” or discussing it affects that
- 2 sense of “we-ness” in some way?
- 3 Abbie: Yeah I think it does actually...Do you agree?
- 4 Bob: Um well yeah. It definitely affects it but...yeah I guess. It just (.) it was
- 5 always there we just (.) never really...dissected it before.
- 6 Marnie: Yeah.
- 7 Abbie: Yeah. So to kind of label it as...
- 8 Bob: We have a title for it now.
- 9 Marnie ((Laughing)) [An arbitrary one that I’ve given to it.]
- 10 Bob: [We always knew it was there]
- 11 Abbie: [Yeah.]
- 12 Bob: Exactly.

As such, it is possible that these couples would not have engaged in talk about “we-ness” if they had not been invited into doing so for the purposes of my research. Some of the participants even indicated that they intended to continue talking about “we-ness” beyond our interview. Again, that the participants acknowledged my role in introducing them to this sort of conversation points to the collaborative role that I played in the storytelling.

*Section summary.* Through my analysis of collaboration, I demonstrated some of the ways through which participants and I conversationally worked together to shape our developing storylines, which included taking turns speaking, completing one another’s

responses, encouraging continued storytelling, and inviting and responding to conversational topics. I also made the point that, in introducing a language of “we-ness,” I was inviting participants into new conversations, which they had not previously explored with one another. Further, I noted several times that the same acts can function in a collaborative as well as a controlling manner, as the different ways in which people talk and respond to one another will often work to both extend and shape this storyline as it develops. I will now take a closer look at control as it featured in our co-narration of “we-ness” stories.

**Control.** In examining how cohabitating couples and I acted to control and co-edit our developing stories, I observed that we were interrupting, correcting and clarifying, disagreeing, withholding assent, and differentiating our “own” opinions from the opinions of others. I also analyzed how I was acting to maintain control over the role of interviewer, which became more obvious to me when a participant attempted to reposition me as a respondent. I explore each of these performances of control in more detail below, providing supportive extracts from my conversations with participating couples.

*Overlapping and interrupting.* A key aspect of narrative control involves controlling the speaking floor, often by maintaining the primary speaking role within a conversation (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). As control is an interactive process, holding onto this role involves speaking while at the same time preventing others from speaking (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). While participants and I usually provided one another with adequate opportunities to talk, there were many instances in which two people would

overlap in their attempts to speak, or when one person would interrupt another in order to gain a turn at talk.

Traditionally, interruptions have been understood as acts of conversational dominance or control (Goldberg, 1990). Many analysts now recognize, however, that interruptions can serve as acts of dominance and/or rapport-building, which Tannen (2007) has talked about as the “ambiguity and polysemy of power and solidarity” (p. 29). While interruptions can enable a listener to take control of the conversational floor, they can also contribute to rapport when they indicate that a listener is enthusiastic about something a speaker is saying (Goldberg, 1990; Tannen, 2005). In my section on collaboration, I examined an example of overlapping talk which allowed speakers to finish one another’s responses, and seemed to indicate conversational enthusiasm (see Extract 31). Here, I will investigate how overlapping and interrupting talk can sometimes serve as a means of narrative control.

I begin by exploring an example. In the conversation that took place leading up to this extract, Bobby took several long turns at talk describing how his relationship with Dana had developed from a friendship. After I asked about the significance of this transition, Dana and Bobby began competing for the speaking floor, as indicated by their overlapping talk and attempts to interject into the conversation:

Extract 37: Attempts to gain the speaking floor

- 1 Marnie: But was it significant for you that you (.) um sort of had this friendship
- 2 before transitioning into a different type of relationship?
- 3 Bobby: For me it was.
- 4 Dana: I think so.
- 5 Bobby: Yeah I think- I think that’s part of the reason like (.) I don’t know like (.)
- 6 a lot of people (.) a lot of our friends and stuff say like we’re probably
- 7 like the most (.) down to earth (.) couple that [they know.]

8 Dana: [Yeah. We get that a lot.]  
9 Bobby: That we're the most easy-going. [That we're] kind of the role model of  
10 Dana: [And also-]  
11 Bobby: what they would like or (.) [what they would have.]  
12 Dana: [((Laughs)) Which is weird to me]  
13 Marnie: ((Laughs))  
14 Bobby: [But I think-]  
15 Dana: [But]  
16 Bobby: Sorry.  
17 Dana: Sorry can I interrupt?  
18 Bobby: Yup.  
19 Dana: So umm. Oh now I forgot what I was going to say... Oh yeah that we're  
20 the same people like (.) if you're hanging out with both of us we're the  
21 same people than if you're hanging out with just one of us. Like we  
22 don't change based on... [that we're together.]  
23 Bobby: [Who we're with. Yeah]  
24 Dana: You know what I mean? [Like if...]  
25 Marnie [Mmhmm.]  
26 Dana: Together or separate. Anyway go ahead  
27 Bobby: Yeah. But I think yeah- I think that's the reason why (.) because it's like  
28 (.) we had developed a kind of close friendship... first I- I don't know to  
29 me (.) like (.) that was (.) I guess (.) a good... base of the relationship.

In lines 3 and 4, Bobby and Dana each took a brief turn responding to my question about moving from a friendship to a romantic relationship. Bobby then began constructing a longer response (lines 5-7), during which Dana interjected with a comment demonstrating her agreement: “Yeah. We get that a lot” (line 8). While Dana’s overlapping talk could be interpreted as an act of control, she interrupted with a comment that acted as a form of agreement, rather than one that served to disagree with or to change the direction of the story. As I explored in my section on collaboration, agreement can be collaborative when it encourages speakers to continue with their storytelling (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009), and establishes connections between speakers and listeners (Tannen, 2007).

Dana then made a more explicit attempt to gain speakership in line 10 (“And also-”), after Bobby took a brief pause from speaking. He began talking again at the same

time as Dana did, however (line 9). Conversational guidelines suggest that, in order for conversations to proceed in an orderly manner, only one person should generally be speaking at a time (Sacks et al., 1974). According to Schegloff (2010), “the most obvious practice for stopping talk by more than one at a time is to stop talking” (p. 4). In this instance, Dana stopped talking (line 10), her attempt to enter the conversation unsuccessful, and Bobby continued to maintain control over the speaking floor (lines 9 and 11). Dana’s previous interruptions seemed to mirror or confirm Bobby’s responses. Her use of “And also-” (line 10) here, and the fact that she stopped when she and Bobby overlapped, indicate that she might have been trying to say something different than Bobby this time.

When Bobby and Dana began speaking simultaneously again in lines 14 and 15, they both stopped this time. Bobby apologized (line 16), acknowledging that an error had occurred in their turn-taking. Dana apologized in return, and made an explicit request to take over the storytelling role from Bobby: “Sorry can I interrupt?” (line 17). Bobby responded with “Yup” (line 18), which acted as approval for Dana’s request to interrupt, and remained silent for a short period of time while she continued with the story (lines 19-22). He then attempted to finish her response again in line 23.

While finishing a partner’s response could serve as a demonstration of solidarity (Goldberg, 1990; Tannen, 2007), as I explored in my section on collaboration, Dana soon gives Bobby permission to speak again: “Anyway (.) go ahead” (line 26), which suggests that Bobby’s interjection was treated as a bid to regain the speaking floor. Bobby is then able to resume the primary speaking role, without competition, through the remainder of this extract (lines 27-29).

There were also times when I would interrupt or overlap with a participant while they were speaking, as demonstrated in the following example with Victoria:

Extract 38: Ceding the floor to a participant

- 1 Marnie: Mmhmm. [So after that-]
- 2 Victoria: [Yeah-]
- 3 Marnie: Sorry go ahead.
- 4 Victoria: Oh and then I don't know like...umm...we just like were- it was funny
- 5 (. ) because we were like at the party and hanging out with everybody
- 6 and then (. ) um (. ) like I just kept looking over to see like when my next
- 7 chance was to chat with him and (. ) and I think he was doing the same
- 8 thing cause I like (. ) managed to chat with him quite a bit. ((Laughs))
- 9 And then he asked me for my number.

At the beginning of this extract, Victoria and I began speaking at the same time (lines 1 and 2). I started to ask a question (line 1), but because Victoria seemed to be continuing her response to my previous question (which is not included in this text), I immediately gave her permission to resume speaking ("Sorry go ahead," line 3) after we both stopped in lines 1 and 2. I then remained silent while Victoria took a fairly long turn at talk (lines 4-9). This instance of overlapping talk was quickly resolved, as after we both paused, I ceded the speaking floor to Victoria and she continued speaking.

This example demonstrates one of the ways through which my positioning as a researcher influenced how my conversations with participants were composed (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). As the production of research data requires that participants respond to interview questions, and lengthier responses produce greater volumes of research data, I wanted participants to hold the speaking floor for as long as they were willing to do so. According to Goldberg (1990), there is an expectation that research interviewers will allow interviewees to provide extended responses to questions, an expectation which I

followed in this extract by giving the floor back to Victoria instead of continuing to ask another question.

*Disagreeing.* Partners also disagreed with one another while we were storytelling, usually in attempts to control or alter the content of our developing stories (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Such disagreements might suggest that one partner was speaking beyond what was considered to be acceptably familiar to the other partner, and thus further negotiation was required (Lock & Strong, 2010). In the following exchange, a disagreement occurred between Abbie and Bob as we were discussing “we-ness”:

Extract 39: Expressing disagreement

- 1 Marnie: And how does their noticing (.) or getting some of those comments or  
2 different things (.) add to your sense of we-ness?  
3 Abbie: Well it makes me feel good about this relationship.  
4 Bob: Mmhmm. I don't know if it adds to our sense of “we-ness” any but it does  
5 just...  
6 Abbie: Yeah.  
7 Bob: Yeah?  
8 Abbie: I would maybe argue against that though. Because if (.) you know (.)  
9 family (.) mostly family (.) if family didn't see (.) you know (.) how we  
10 are a couple and we're not just Abbie and Bob (.) that we're a couple  
11 together (.) I think that would be difficult if they didn't see that.  
12 Bob: Yeah. I guess you're right.  
13 Abbie: So I think it just...I think it makes this easier and it helps to (.) I think (.) it  
14 just adds to a stronger sense of “we” that people also see us as being a  
15 couple (.) just the way that we see.  
16 Bob: Yeah (.) refer to us as a couple rather than... individuals that are living in  
17 the same house.  
18 Abbie: Mmhmm.

I asked Abbie and Bob whether other people noticing “we-ness” in their relationship contributed to their sense of relational identity (lines 1-2). After Bob responded by saying that it did not (lines 4-5), Abbie contradicted his response by saying “Yeah” (line 6). Bob replied to Abbie's contradiction with a questioning “Yeah?” (line 7), which invited an

explanation from Abbie regarding her reasons for disagreeing (Antaki, 1995). Abbie went on to provide what Antaki (1995) would call a *making it plain* explanation, in which she outlined why such noticing added to “we-ness” in their relationship (lines 8-11).

After Abbie offered this explanation, Bob demonstrated that he agreed with her account by saying, “Yeah. I guess you’re right” (line 12). Once she had gained Bob’s agreement, Abbie further developed this story of noticing and “we-ness” (lines 13-15), which Bob later contributed to as well (lines 16-17). At the end of this example, Abbie confirmed that she approved of Bob’s contribution, and the direction that their story had taken, by saying, “Mmhm” (line 18). This extract help to demonstrate how disagreements or misunderstandings can change the course of a conversation, as Bob might have continued talking about how cohabitation had not contributed to their sense of “we-ness” if Abbie had not expressed disagreement.

In this example, Abbie was able to convince Bob to agree with her understanding of the links between noticing and “we-ness,” which provides an example of how differences can be negotiated in conversation. Disagreements that were created in my conversations with partners were not always resolved in such a way, however. Often, participants would make explicit their different understandings, positioning their opinions as separate from their partner’s, and then move on to talking about something else. I will explore these instances further in my section on “differentiating one’s ‘own’ opinion from the opinion of others.”

*Correcting and clarifying.* The participants and I also acted to correct or clarify information that was provided within the stories, thus attempting to ensure that the version we were collaboratively developing was one that we could all agree to. Acts of

correction were most often offered in response to talk about important dates in the couples' relationships. For instance, such a correction occurred when Tommy was telling a story about how he and Sally had become a couple:

Extract 40: Correcting a date

- 1 Tommy: Uh we continued to date long distance till ((clears throat)) February um  
2 (. ) that would have been 2010. [Umm...]  
3 Sally: [No.]  
4 Tommy: Or not 2010 (. ) 2000 and something.  
5 Sally: [Four?]  
6 Tommy: [Four?] I guess. Um...yeah (. ) when we...when I may have broken up  
7 with her. ((Laughs)) Um (. ) so that still remains in (. ) doubt. No I broke  
8 up with her [for (. ) certain reasons.]

After Tommy provided a date for when they had initially ended their long-distance relationship, before reconnecting years later (lines 1-2), Sally interrupted to demonstrate that she disagreed (line 3). Sally initially allowed Tommy to maintain the conversational floor, and to correct this date himself, rather than performing the correction for him (line 4). Lerner (1996) noted that in conversations, people tend to prefer acts of self-correction, which allow a speaker to maintain face. But while Tommy's response indicated that he did not agree with the initial date either ("Or not 2010 (. ) 2000 and something," line 4), he seemed unable to complete the correction by identifying another year. Sally and Tommy then overlapped (lines 5 and 6) as they worked to come up with a more fitting date. So while Sally's call for correction can be hearable as an act of control, she and Tommy collaborated to come up with a date that they could both move forward with.

Layla also acted to clarify a contribution that Charles made to our story, perhaps anticipating that his response could be interpreted in a number of ways. In talking about

how they had become a couple, Charles spoke about their “first fight” as a significant moment in establishing their relationship:

Extract 41: Clarifying a partners’ contribution

- 1 Marnie: Mmhmm. And so was there a particular moment that helped establish  
2 your being a couple?  
3 Charles: [[[Laughs]])  
4 Layla: [[[Laughs]])  
5 Charles: Um...I think it was before...our first fight. We...  
6 Layla: Kick-boxing [fight]  
7 Charles: [K- kick-boxing fight.] Yeah kick-boxing fight!  
8 [[[All laughing]])  
9 Charles: Um we (.) were spending time together and then (.) came to the fight  
10 together and (.) Layla had spent the night at my house and so...when we  
11 got there...it’s like everyone just knew.  
12 Layla: Mmhmm.

When Charles mentioned “our first fight” (line 5), I assumed that he was talking about an argument that had occurred between them. Layla acknowledged that a misunderstanding might be expected to occur within our conversation by offering information that reshaped the story into one about the first time that Layla and Charles had participated in a kick-boxing competition together. Her emphasis on the word “kick-boxing” (line 6) marks it as important to this story (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Charles quickly responded to the new information by repeating it (line 7), thus agreeing with the shift that Layla had introduced into the narrative. We all laughed in response (line 8), perhaps acknowledging that an amusing misunderstanding might have occurred between us regarding what kind of fight we were talking about

This exchange served as an example of narrative control, as Layla interjected while Charles was storytelling to exercise control over the content of the story (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). In some instances, though, correcting and clarifying could function

collaboratively, as these acts enable people to work together when storytelling, and to negotiate storylines that they can all agree with (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

*Withholding assent.* Another way through which participants exercised control over developing storylines was by withholding their assent to the contributions of others, which left open the possibility that while they were not openly disagreeing with an emerging account, they were not agreeing with it either. The importance of assent can be seen in the consequences that occurred when assent was withheld in our interviews; namely, that developing storylines were disrupted and attempts were made by participants to justify and solicit their partners' agreement. Below, I will explore two examples to justify these claims.

As I described in the section on collaboration, speakers tend to carry on more readily when listeners indicate that they are in agreement with what they have been saying (Bavelas et al., 2000; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Consider the following extract:

Extract 42: Continuing with assent

- 1 Rita: It used to be we'd arrange like dates and things like that but now we just  
2 spend a lot of time doing normal things. And (.) that seems to be  
3 working really well so I think we just make really good partners...  
4 Marnie: Mmhmm.  
5 Rita: ...or roommates.  
6 Rooney: Yeah (.) I agree. Um (.) just ah...yeah (.) it (.) at first I felt like that. Like  
7 (.) man I suck (.) I'm not taking her on dates anymore but at the same  
8 time we're eating all our meals together now and spending a lot more  
9 time together which is different and so it's like a different stage of the  
10 relationship (.) which I like.  
11 Marnie: Right. And so for you (.) what did you mean by the normal things (.)  
12 doing the normal things together?  
13 Rita: Uh...like grocery shopping (.) um...chores (.) studying. Like not  
14 necessarily needing to be doing something together but just being in the  
15 same place.

Rita began this extract by talking about how she and Rooney spend time together as a couple, and how this had contributed to their relationship (lines 1-3). When Rooney joined the exchange, he indicated that he approved of Rita's contribution by saying "Yeah (.) I agree" (line 6). He then proceeded with the storyline that Rita had initiated, also talking about how they used to go on dates but now spend time together doing other things (lines 6-10). After I asked a follow-up question requesting further information on "the normal things" they do together (lines 11-12), Rita resumed talking about how they spend time together (lines 13-15). Thus, because there had been agreement between partners, the story that Rita initiated continued with contributions from her, Rooney, and me.

When participants withheld assent, however, their partners often responded as though a disagreement had occurred, and made attempts to convince their partner to agree with the developing story. In this example, Amanda began telling a story about how she and Tyler became a couple, which Tyler said he could not remember:

Extract 43: Attempting to gain assent

- 1 Marnie: So did you have a discussion to kind of make that decision or was it
- 2 understood?
- 3 Amanda: Yeah. I was actually just about to go out. I remember this (.) do you
- 4 remember this?
- 5 Tyler: Not at all.
- 6 Amanda: Yeah (.) and then you were like (.) you're like (.) hey Amanda I was just
- 7 wondering if maybe you wanted to be like my girlfriend and I'm like (.)
- 8 Okay.
- 9 Tyler: I don't even remember asking that.
- 10 Amanda: Aw (.) yeah.
- 11 Tyler: Oh.
- 12 Amanda: You did.
- 13 Tyler: Once again (.) I can't remember anything.

As soon as Amanda began telling this story, she asked Tyler whether he recalled the event (lines 3-4). When Tyler stated that he did not remember (line 5), Amanda continued to argue that this conversation took place, saying “Yeah” (line 6) and elaborating on her description of what had occurred. Amanda spoke directly to Tyler, as indicated by her use of the pronoun “you” in line 6, rather than to me as the interviewer. In their next several turns at talk, Tyler continued to state that he could not remember this conversation (lines 9 and 13), while Amanda continued to argue that it did take place (lines 10 and 12).

That Amanda persisted in seeking Tyler’s approval indicates that she might have been hearing his lack of assent as a disagreement. And as she attempted to convince him of her account, the story of how Amanda and Tyler became a couple was arrested, as indicated by the lack of development that occurred through a number of lines of talk (lines 9-13). Thus, while Rooney’s demonstration of agreement allowed that conversation to continue in the direction introduced by his partner Rita, Tyler’s withholding of assent invited his partner Amanda to re-orient her storytelling to convincing him into agreement. If Amanda, Tyler, and I were making efforts to co-construct a story that we could all agree to, Tyler’s withholding of assent might suggest that we had not managed to do so.

*Differentiating one’s “own” opinion from the opinion of others.* As we were developing our stories, participants also acted to separate their “own” opinion from their partner’s opinion. I use quotation marks around the word “own” to acknowledge that, as stories and meanings are co-constructed through collaborative action, they never really belong to any one person (Shotter, 1993). Differentiating opinions served as a means of narrative control, as participants were able to demonstrate that they did not agree with some aspect of a developing story, and thus separated themselves from it (Gubrium &

Holstein, 2009). As I indicated in the subsection on disagreeing, the differentiation of opinions often occurred when partners encountered or anticipated disagreements between themselves. In the following example, a differentiation of opinions occurred while Rooney, Rita, and I were discussing their early experiences of living together:

Extract 44: Differing opinions

- 1 Rooney: She was living there for the first two weeks of January so it was almost  
2 like supervised living together or like we were kind of like intruding their  
3 space.  
4 Rita: Well (.) that's how he felt (.) but I had lived with them for like four  
5 months already so.  
6 Rooney: Yeah that's what I felt. So (.) there was a couple of weeks like that and  
7 then um our roommate and her boyfriend went travelling for a month so  
8 we had the place to ourself for a month and so that was kind of fun cause  
9 then it was like (.) wow (.) we're actually on our own (.) doing our own  
10 thing.  
11 Rita: And everything happened to go wrong.

After Rooney described feeling like an intruder (lines 1-3), Rita indicated that she did not agree with this depiction (lines 4-5). When she said, “Well (.) that's how he felt (.) but I...” (line 4), she positioned her understanding as separate from and different than Rooney's, and established that she was speaking from a position of “I” rather than “we.” Rooney's claim could serve as a challenge to Rita's face as a cohabitating partner, as it would likely not be considered positive to be implicated in a situation where your partner felt like an intruder.

Rooney confirmed the differentiation of opinions introduced by Rita in line 6 (“Yeah that's what I felt”), and continued to talk about how fun it was when he and Rita were finally able to live on their own (lines 6-10). Rita picked up on this new line of talk (i.e., living on their own rather than with a roommate), but introduced a story about the mishaps that they encountered at that time, thus problematizing this phase in their

cohabitation as well (line 11). With this difference in opinion established, the couple then went on to construct a humorous story about when their pipes burst, which they later reference as a moment of “we-ness.”

Bamberg (2011) argued that, when negotiating identities, narrators often encounter challenges in terms of how they choose to position “the self” in relation to “the other.” In this research, I must consider a further distinction in terms of how partners are positioning themselves in relation to both individual and relational identities. In initiating conversations of “we-ness,” I was inviting participants to talk from an affiliative or relational position. When participants acted to differentiate their opinion from their partner’s opinion, however, they were creating a boundary between the two of them, and moving into a position of “I” rather than one of “we.” Further, their partner seemed to be positioned as an “other” rather than part of the “self” (Bamberg, 2011).

*Maintaining the role of interviewer.* During my analysis of control, I found it difficult to identify times when I was overtly exercising control over the developing stories. I was not often competing with participants for speaking opportunities, nor was I disagreeing with their accounts. During our conversations, I positioned myself as the question-asker, and the participants as responders (though I was also active in responding to participants’ responses, leaving space for participants to talk, and adding to emerging narratives). Participants assented to and enacted these roles during the majority of our interviews, by providing responses to my questions and not asking questions in return. As the roles of interviewer and interviewee are well-established in society, the control that interviewers have over interview situations is often taken for granted, making it difficult for me to observe this control at first glance (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

It was only when our roles of interviewer and interviewee were disrupted that I had to acknowledge their influence on our interactions. For example, at one point in our conversation, Jarome acted to reverse our respective roles by asking me a series of questions about my experiences of watching football with my partner:

Extract 45: Re-positioning roles

- 1 Jarome: Oh (.) okay. So (.) do you like football now?
- 2 Marnie: Mhmm.
- 3 Jarome: You do?
- 4 Marnie: Yeah.
- 5 Jarome: Do you have a favourite team?
- 6 Marnie: No.
- 7 Jarome: No (.) you just go with the flow?
- 8 Marnie: There's different ones I like but-
- 9 Jarome: And how has watching football improved your relationship?
- 10 Marnie: Sort of turning the tables now (.) huh?
- 11 Jarome: I want to take some notes here. ((Laughs))
- 12 Marnie: Alright.
- 13 Jarome: I'm just kidding.
- 14 Marnie: I'm going to go back to my notes then.
- 15 Jarome: Alright.
- 16 Marnie: Okay. So overall how do you think living together has affected your
- 17 sense of being a couple?

Prior to this extract, Jarome had been talking about how he and his partner Victoria spent time together watching sports. He then began to ask me questions about my relationship, and whether my partner and I watched sports together. Asking questions was an act that had previously been reserved for me as the interviewer (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

In adopting the role of question-asker, Jarome was attempting to re-position me as the responder, as a question invites a response from another speaker (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). I provided very brief answers to his questions, including “Mhmm” (line 2), “Yeah” (line 4), and “No” (line 6), attempting to resist our new positions. Jarome performed this exchange in a humorous manner (as indicated by his laughter in line 11),

and mirrored my previous interview questions by asking about how watching football contributed to “we-ness” (line 9).

I overtly acknowledged Jarome’s attempts to re-position us by saying, “Sort of turning the tables now (.) huh?” (line 10). He continued with this reversal, though, saying that he was going to adopt another stereotypical aspect of the interviewer role, note-taking (line 11). When Jarome acknowledged that he was kidding (line 13), I tried to humorously re-establish our roles as interviewer and interviewee by referencing the conventions that Jarome had been mocking: “I’m going to go back to my notes then” (line 14). When the roles and habits of conversations, including research conversations, are well-established, they often operate unnoticed (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). It is only when disruptions are created, as when Jarome attempted to take control of the interviewer role, that these positions become more evident.

*Section summary.* To summarize my analysis of control, I observed how participants and I were each having an influence over developing storylines through acts such as overlapping and interrupting, disagreeing, correcting and clarifying, withholding assent, differentiating between our “own” opinions and the opinions of others, and maintaining the role of interviewer. Through the examples that I provided, I demonstrated how participants and I were co-editing our stories about mutuality and “we-ness” as we were developing them. Engaging in this process of co-editing enabled us to negotiate across differences in storylines, and to mutually shape the emerging narratives into something that we could all agree to move forward with.

## **Performance**

The analysis of narrative performance, from the perspective of Gubrium and Holstein (2009), involves investigating how storytellers act out or express stories as they are telling them. Aspects of performance include the roles and characters storytellers take on, the tone of voice they use while narrating, and how they emphasize certain words or experiences within their stories. Gubrium and Holstein contend that how a story is performed has a significant impact on the meaning that is created from it. For example, a tale of an injury told in a tragic manner will likely invite different responses from listeners than one that is performed humorously. As such, speakers will often take into account the narrative environment (including the purposes and audiences of stories) to tell stories in a manner that is likely to invite particular kinds of responses within that context. Listeners also act performatively, responding in an emotional manner to speakers or taking up particular roles in terms of how they listen to a story (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

In analyzing how stories were performed in my interactions with cohabitating couples, I consider the purposes of our storytelling, our enacted roles and audiences, and the modes of expression and emphases that we employed while speaking. I also examine the reflexive relationship between our surrounding circumstances, including those circumstances associated with the research context, and these acts of storytelling.

**Purposes of storytelling.** To set the stage, so to speak, for examining how participants and I collaboratively performed acts of storytelling, I want to explore some of the purposes for which we were engaging in these storytelling conversations in the first place. The potential purposes of a story are an important component of the narrative

environment, as stories are co-constructed in ways that are intended to accomplish such purposes (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

When I invited couples to join me in co-narrating stories of “we-ness” in cohabitation, I was doing so for the purposes of conducting a research study, as required for the completion of my Master’s thesis. This purpose seemed to have a significant impact on the roles that participants and I took up in our interactions, namely those of interviewer and interviewees. And though I will explore these roles in more detail in my section on roles, I wanted to mention them here to argue that it was in part because of this research purpose that participants and I were invited to step into these roles.

In conducting my research, my more specific intentions were to investigate cohabitation, joint storytelling, my reflexive role within the storytelling process, and couples’ experiences of mutuality and “we-ness.” One of the most obvious ways in which these purposes shaped our interactions was through the questions that I asked (see Appendix B for interview questions), which were designed to invite conversations about “we-ness” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

At the beginning of our interviews, I also asked participants to articulate what had made them interested in participating in my study; in other words, why they had decided to take up my invitation to storytelling. Participants offered a variety of reasons, including that: the study had looked fun and interesting, they wanted to help a fellow student by acting as research participants, they were interested in facilitating research on cohabitation, or they thought participating would have a positive impact on their relationship. The following quote from my interview with Charles and Layla serves as a useful example here, as Charles spoke to several of these purposes:

Extract 46: The stakes of participation

- 1 Marnie: So I'll just start by asking you (.) um what made you interested in  
2 participating in the study?  
3 Charles: Uh for me I saw the e-mail and so (.) I just figured that we fit the criteria  
4 fairly well (.) um and being a student as well as being in that  
5 relationship I thought we were (.) a good fit and so it was about helping  
6 (.) you out.  
7 Marnie: Mmhmm.  
8 Charles: Although I didn't know you (.) and then I did think it would be kind of  
9 (.) a neat thing for us (.) to do (.) I guess (.) as a couple as well. To  
10 increase our sense of "we."  
11 Layla: [[[Laughs]]]  
12 Marnie: [[[Laughs]]] That was something you (.) thought would be a good thing  
13 to do together to...  
14 Layla: [[[Laughs]]]  
15 Charles: [Yeah I did actually.] I thought it would be fun (.) it would be neat.

Charles began his response by talking about how he wanted to assist a fellow student (lines 4-6), and went on to say that he thought it would be "neat" to take part (lines 9 and 15). Charles then articulated an expectation that participating in my study with Layla would contribute to their sense of "we" (lines 8-10). Several other participants expressed a similar expectation that our conversations would influence their relationships. For me, these articulations speak to the stakes that were involved in our conversations (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Not only were we negotiating stories about closeness and togetherness, we were also negotiating the partners' very sense of who they were, and who they could be, as a couple (Bamberg, 2004b).

Participants are typically depicted as passive figures in interview situations, with little interest in the research process beyond that of providing information (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). That participants such as Charles were able to articulate their relational interests in my study suggests that there was more at stake for them than just the transfer of knowledge. As such, throughout my analysis, I have attended closely to how

participants and I were negotiating relational stakes within our conversations, and what the consequences of those negotiations might have been. These stakes included participants' interests in developing a story that captured their sense of relationship, and understanding of where that relationship was going, while at the same time avoiding contributions that did not fit for them or their partner.

**Roles and audiences.** As people are telling stories, they often perform different roles in terms of how they position themselves relative to others (Bamberg, 1997). Depending on the roles that a storyteller takes up, stories may be narrated quite differently (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). I will now explore some of these roles, beginning with interviewer and interviewees, in more detail.

*Interviewer and interviewees.* I argued above that the purposes of a story can influence how that story is performed (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). As we were engaging in research interviews, participants and I took on the roles of interviewees and interviewer, respectively. As I have previously discussed, the activity of research interviewing is associated with culturally-shared norms regarding how an interviewer and an interviewee should behave (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). For example, interviewers are expected to introduce topics of conversation, ask questions, allow interviewees to respond, and moderate conversations (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). Interviewees, in turn, are usually expected to take the primary speaking role, follow the interviewer's instructions, and respond to the interviewer's questions with as much information as possible (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998).

Through my analyses of activation, collaboration, and control, I have demonstrated some of the ways through which I influenced storytelling by positioning

myself as interviewer and participants as interviewees. For example, I outlined how I used my position as interviewer to invite stories about “we-ness.” I also explored how participants took up the role of interviewees by responding to my questions, contributing to the conversations that I invited, and for the most part, refraining from asking me personal questions in return (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

At the end of our interviews, I asked participants about what it had been like discussing “we-ness” with me. Many of them made reference to my role in the conversation, and how it had impacted the process of storytelling. For example, Tommy talked about me as being a “third party,” who could be understood as separate from their relationship:

Extract 47: My role as a third party

- 1 Tommy: And I think having the third party. It can be difficult to tell the other  
2 person directly.  
3 Sally: Yeah.  
4 Tommy: Somehow those things. But even though (.) you know (.) you can sit here  
5 and I can be looking at Sally and I know that’s who I’m actually talking  
6 to but in my head I’m talking to you.  
7 Sally: Yeah.  
8 Tommy: And so it makes it kind of come out a lot easier. I don’t know (.) I mean  
9 (.) it reminds (.) just from my own background. If you’re sitting in court  
10 that’s what you’re always telling (.) you’re not telling the other person if  
11 you’re talking to your witness (.) you’re talking to the judge. It’s easy (.)  
12 they don’t know anything (.) they’re a third party.

Tommy claimed that talking to a “third party” (lines 1 and 12) made it easier for him to talk about his relationship with Sally than talking to her directly (lines 1-2, 4-6, and 8-12). Talking to a third party might serve as a means of maintaining face in a relationship (Goffman, 1967), as it can seem less risky than talking to one’s partner directly. Thus, based on this feedback from Tommy, which Sally agreed to (lines 3 and 7), my presence

and participation in the conversation seemed to have facilitated their talk about “we-ness.”

In contrast, Jarome spoke about the strangeness of discussing “we-ness” with me:

Extract 48: My role as a stranger

- 1 Marnie: Okay. And what has it been like for you (.) talking about this “we-ness”
- 2 with me?
- 3 Jarome: With you?
- 4 Marnie: Mmhmm.
- 5 Jarome: I’m kind of freaked out a bit (.) actually.
- 6 Marnie: By what?
- 7 Jarome: Well (.) we just met...

So while Tommy claimed that my distance from their relationship made it easier to talk about “we-ness,” Jarome described himself as “kind of freaked out a bit (.) actually” (line 5) because of the fact that “we just met” (line 7). Thus, our understandings of one another’s roles, and the effects that these roles had on our storytelling, cannot be assumed to be the same for all participants.

*Negotiating the “we” and the “I.”* Interviewer and interviewees were not the only roles that participants and I performed in storytelling. In talking about relational identity, participants and I were also negotiating a tension between their positions as individuals and as members of a couple. While we talked primarily about “we-ness” because this was the subject of my research, many participants argued that they were able to remain an individual at the same time as they engaged in “we-ness” with their partner. The tension that was often created between “we” and “I” can be demonstrated through this example from my interview with Sally and Tommy:

Extract 49: Separate but intertwined

- 1 Marnie: Um and overall how do you think living together has affected your sense  
2 of being a couple?  
3 Sally: I- hugely I mean...I- it's not that I don't have my own...life. I go out with  
4 my girlfriends I...go to school I have a job I do all that stuff (.) on my  
5 own (.) quite happily and um (.) you know Tommy has his own stuff too  
6 but...  
7 Tommy: Mine mostly revolves around Xbox but that's a totally other thing.  
8 Marnie: ((Laughs))  
9 Sally: Um (.) having (.) living with someone else is just (.) your lives are  
10 completely and utterly intertwined. Like- if it- if it works right. Tommy is  
11 noth- Tommy is not my roommate Tommy is...like an inextractable kind  
12 of (.) part of every day of living. Like I can't...I think about where he is if  
13 he's not ho- you know I worry that he's in a car accident if he's late and  
14 I'm not expecting him to be late like...I ju- I...weird (.) completely and  
15 utterly really intermeshed. I can't really picture...going back to living (.)  
16 separately (.) ever working because we (.) just it's all tied together.

After I asked a question inviting Sally and Tommy to talk about cohabitation and “we-ness” (lines 1-2), Sally responded by positioning herself as an “I” who has a life that is separate from her partner Tommy: “I- it's not that I don't have my own...life” (line 3).

Tommy then contributed to this storyline by describing how he spends his time alone playing video games (line 7). In her next turn, however, Sally went on to talk about how their “lives are completely and utterly intertwined” (lines 9-10) and “completely and utterly really intermeshed” (lines 14-15). Thus, Sally moved quickly from negotiating her identity as a separate “I” to that of an intertwined “we.”

But how should we understand this shift in positioning? If the “self” is conceptualized as a fixed, internalized entity, Sally's shift would likely be viewed as a problematic contradiction (Bamberg, 2004b). But when the “self” is viewed as dynamic and negotiated, her positioning between “we” and “I” points to the work that goes into managing multiple identities in our relationships with others (Bamberg, 2004b).

Participants often managed the tension between “we” and “I” by depicting these identities as mutually supportive of one another. In enjoying their individual friends and interests, participants argued that they related better to their partners when they were together. In the following extract, Dana and Bobby talked about the influence that “we” can have on “I”:

Extract 50: The “we” strengthens the “I”

- 1 Dana: Um. But I find and I think you find too (.) the longer we’re together (.) and  
2 the stronger we are as a couple (.) also the stronger we are as individuals.  
3 Bobby: Yeah.  
4 Dana: Like for me (.) like (.) three hundred and seventy million percent true. Like  
5 (.) the stronger (.) I feel with Bobby like the more independent I feel (.)  
6 which seems maybe backwards (.) I don’t know. Or opposite but (.) yeah. I  
7 totally do.

In her initial turn at talk, Dana made the claim that developing “we-ness” in her relationship with Bobby had also strengthened their sense of independence as individuals (lines 1-2). She made this claim relevant to both her and Bobby by saying, “But I find and I think you find too” (line 1). Bobby demonstrated agreement in line 3 (“Yeah”), and Dana continued to talk about the impact that “we-ness” had on independence (lines 4-7). Her vocal emphasis signified the magnitude of this impact: “Three hundred and seventy million percent true” (line 4).

*Managing the public “we.”* In addition to positioning the “we” in relation to the “I,” participating couples and I were also negotiating the character of their relationship relative to others. As I am not directly involved in their relationship, I can be considered a member of this audience of others. Many of the participants talked about their relationship, and their sense of “we-ness,” as something that other people in their lives looked up to or even envied. In positioning themselves as good and strong couples,

participants were accounting for the significance of their relationship as a cohabitating union. The following extract from Charles serves as an example of positive image work in action:

Extract 51: A relationship to be envied

1 Charles: As far as us (.) there's no married couple that I see that's like (.) wow (.)  
2 They're strong- stronger couple than we are at all. Married couples or not  
3 do (.) like (.) Layla alluded to (.) envy where we're at and (.) and our  
4 relationship (.) so.

Charles began by talking about the married couples he knows, claiming that he does not see them as having a stronger relationship than the one he shares with Layla (lines 1-2). He then continued to state that other couples, including married couples, viewed their relationship as one to be envied (lines 2-4). He connected this statement to his partner by saying that “Layla alluded to” (line 3) the same point earlier, suggesting that there was solidarity between them.

During our interviews, couples often talked about having their relationships challenged by others because they were not married. From the work of Goffman (1967), this could be understood as a challenge to cohabitating couples' face, or their public value as a couple. In the previous passage, Charles can be seen as managing the relational stakes of cohabitation, and thus others' image of him and Layla as a couple, by comparing their relationship to married relationships. In concluding that, while he does not envy married relationships, other couples envy his relationship with Layla, Charles is positioning their union as being as strong as, or stronger than, married unions. This sort of positioning, in terms of talking about how others admired their relationship, was common when participants spoke about cohabitation in relation to marriage.

When I invited participants to talk about how others had noticed “we-ness” in their relationships, they often responded by saying that friends and family members invited them into a position of “we” (Drewery, 2005). Others made these invitations by talking about the participants as members of a couple even when they were interacting with only one of the partners at the time. Consider the following extract:

Extract 52: Others recognizing “we”

1 Rooney: It’s (.) I don’t know when it occurred but when people stopped asking me  
2 “What are you doing tonight (.) what are-” now they’re asking “What are  
3 you and Rita doing tonight?” Like it’s (.) when people refer to (.) usually  
4 me it’s what are we doing tonight. So that’s (.) I kind of knew (.) and  
5 that’s what I think of like (.) “we-ness.” When other people recognize that  
6 (.) we’re usually together doing stuff.

Rooney referred to a shift that had occurred in the way other people treated him. While they used to position him as an individual, or an “I” (“What are you doing tonight?” line 2), they now positioned him as a member of a couple, (“What are you and Rita doing tonight?” lines 2-3). Rooney claimed that having others invite him into this position signified “we-ness” for him: “So that’s (.) I kind of knew (.) and that’s what I think of like (.) ‘we-ness’” (lines 4-5).

This was a very common story told by participants, who often observed that even when they were alone, others tended to refer to them in relation to their partner. Telling this story serves the purpose of maintaining their positive public image in our interviews, as participating couples are positioning themselves as being connected in the eyes of others. Further, the “selves” that are worked out in our interactions with others often come to serve as our internal understandings of “self” (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, how others talk about a couple has stakes for the couple’s sense of relational identity. In

talking about “we-ness,” Rooney emphasized the word “we” (line 3). Such an emphasis was frequent in the performance of our stories, and served to highlight and direct attention toward discussions of “we-ness” and the use of “we” language.

*The passive to the active “we.”* I also examined how participants positioned themselves in relation to their sense of “we-ness,” and observed that this positioning changed over the course of our interviews. When we first began talking about “we-ness,” participants described it as something that was unknown and mysterious, and that arose within their relationship without them being aware of it. Sally and Tommy provided an example of this kind of talk:

Extract 53: The passive “we”

- 1 Sally: Yeah. I- I don’t know. That’s the- the weird thing about it is it’s (.) not  
2 like (.) one day you don’t have it and then you wake up the next morning  
3 and all of a sudden it’s there. Like it creeps up on you and you’re totally  
4 not conscious of it until it (.) completely and utterly present and- and you  
5 just sort of notice oh (.) my life is utterly intertwined into yours.  
6 My...days are...tied up in what your day is like and my (.) fun is tied up  
7 in what your fun is like. And I- I don’t even like the word tied up because  
8 it has this sort of negative connotation but (.) e- enhanced. My day is  
9 enhanced by what your day is. My activities are enhanced by what your  
10 activities are gonna be. And it just sort of (.) that moment just slides in.  
11 Tommy: Yeah it’s much more of a realization after the fact. You’re like I know (.)  
12 y- you realize one day that you are and have been a couple. You are and  
13 have been living that way for a while.

Prior to this response, I had asked Sally and Tommy about when they had first started to experience “we-ness” in their relationship. Sally responded by describing “we-ness” as something that “creeps up on you” (line 3), or that “just slides in” (line 10). She also noted that “you’re totally not conscious of it” (lines 3-4), and that eventually “you just sort of notice” (lines 4-5) that “we-ness” has developed. Tommy continued this story in a similar manner, claiming that “we-ness” is “much more of a realization after the fact”

(line 11) than something that you are aware of when it is developing. Bamberg (2011) argued that an important aspect of narrative identity is agency, or how narrators position themselves in relation to events that occur in their stories. In this example, Sally and Tommy positioned themselves as passive and uninvolved in the development of “we-ness,” as “we-ness” is something that developed in the background, without their knowledge.

I can now see how I might have invited such a position, as I asked participants when they first began to *experience* “we-ness.” “Experiencing” something is a more passive form of action than “creating” or “causing” something. Perhaps if I had asked a question with a more active connotation (e.g., How did you first start to *create* “we-ness” in your relationship?), participants would have responded in a more active manner. Asking this kind of question would also have made it possible for me to explore with participants how they could maintain and extend this sense of “we” through similar means (Madigan, 2011).

As our interviews continued on, I began to ask questions that invited a more active relationship with “we-ness.” After Tommy and Sally completed their response to my question about their first experiences of relational identity, I made a follow-up inquiry about something that Tommy had mentioned in his response:

Extract 54: Inviting a more active “we”

1 Marnie: You mentioned holidays a couple of times. What’s the significance of  
2 holidays in terms of building your sense of “we” in your relationship?

When I composed this question, I employed a more active kind of language by using the word “building” (line 2) rather than “experiencing.”

When they responded, Sally and Tommy began to develop a storyline about the holidays as an important opportunity to spend time together (not included in the following extract). I then joined in with the following comment:

Extract 55: Means to developing closeness

- 1 Sally: It makes you particularly appreciative of getting to have that time together  
2 (. ) right.  
3 Marnie: It sounds like for your relationship time together is a big part of building  
4 closeness and...  
5 Tommy: Absolutely.

In this extract, I again used the language of “building closeness” (lines 3-4) to invite an understanding of time together as a way to develop “we-ness” (Drewery, 2005).

In conducting my analysis, I noticed that, as our interviews continued on, and I continued to ask questions that invited stories about how participants had developed “we-ness,” many of the couples began to position themselves as being more active in its development:

Extract 56: Responding in a more active manner

- 1 Sally: Yeah I know and it’s- everyone has a different way that they sort of build  
2 their relationship it’s just (. ) for us it’s...I think a huge part of it is time  
3 together.  
4 Tommy: And even if it is limited. You know just being able to (. ) to count on it (. )  
5 I guess. Spend that time (. ) [and make the most of it]  
6 Sally: [And know when it’s coming (. ) right.]  
7 Like...  
8 Tommy: Some predictability. That’s true.

In this example, Sally argued that “everyone has a different way that they sort of build their relationship” (lines 1-2). The word “build” denotes a sense of activity, that couples are active in developing “we-ness.” Sally then continues to say that how she and Tommy build their relationship is through spending time together: “For us it’s...I think a huge

part of it is time together” (lines 2-3). Thus, not only has Sally positioned herself and Tommy as builders of “we-ness,” but she has also specified how they go about doing this building. Tommy demonstrated agreement with what Sally said by going on to elaborate the importance of time in developing “we-ness” (lines 4-5) Thus, I observed that over the performance of our stories, participants tended to shift from a passive to a more active role in regards to developing “we-ness.”

*Men and women.* Participants and I also enacted gender roles within our storytelling conversations, which involved positioning ourselves in relation to others on the basis of gender. From a social constructionist perspective, gendered ways of talking and behaving do not represent essential differences between men and women (Tannen, 1994). Rather, gender is something that people perform by taking up and speaking from particular kinds of discourses (Tannen, 1994). While men and women may be more likely to adopt certain discourses over others in their social interactions, they are not bound to them.

The topic that most often invoked gender positioning in my interviews was that of marriage. For example, participants, both men and women, often positioned men as being less interested in marriage than women, a pattern which was also observed by Tannen (1994) in her studies on gender and discourse. The following extract demonstrates some of the ways through which these positions were created:

Extract 57: Gendered responses to cohabitation

- 1 Bobby: I think it’s probably worse for you (.) because I [think that’s (.) more]
- 2 Dana: [It is. There’s more]
- 3 pressure on girls.
- 4 Bobby: Yeah (.) it’s more...yeah it’s more girls who- At least that’s what I find.
- 5 Dana: Guys think it’s awesome.

- 6 Bobby: Oh yeah.  
 7 Dana: They're like (.) ((Mimicking a deep voice)) whoa buddy (.) you're so  
 8 lucky (.) that's awesome and girls are like (.) ((speaking in a soft voice))  
 9 "You poor thing."  
 10 Bobby: Yeah. It's interesting.

In this extract, Bobby made the claim that Dana received more pressure regarding marriage than he did (line 1), and after Dana responded in agreement, she went on to explain that this was because "there's more pressure on girls" (lines 2-3). Bobby and Dana also stated that men and women tend to respond to their long-term relationship in different ways, with men reacting positively to Bobby's unmarried state (lines 5, 7-8) and women expressing sympathy to Dana: "'You poor thing'" (line 9). In positioning women as more interested in marriage, Dana and Bobby also depict them as less positive about long-term cohabitation.

Participating women typically responded to these gender positions by either agreeing with them or by arguing that while women in general tended to care more about marriage, they were different. In the following example, Dana talked about how cultural expectations regarding women and marriage have influenced her views on marriage in the past:

Extract 58: Gendered discourses on women and marriage

- 1 Dana: And it's like the longer we're together the less...interested we are. Cause I  
 2 think I kinda thought...kinda wanted to get married.  
 3 Bobby: Yeah (.) you did.  
 4 Dana: Like maybe about five years ago.  
 5 Bobby: [Well it's-]  
 6 Dana: [Because-]  
 7 Bobby: Yeah.  
 8 Dana: Not like super- like I was saying it. I was kind of like testing it out like  
 9 saying (.) Oh: you know what if this. But I think it's honestly (.) like look-  
 10 Honestly (.) it's because I thought that was what I was supposed to do.  
 11 Bobby: Yeah.

12 Dana: And it didn't feel right but I was like ahhh this is what you do. You know  
13 what I mean?  
14 Bobby: Yeah.  
15 Dana: So I'm glad we didn't do that.

In Dana's first turn, she argued that she and Bobby were not interested in marriage, and have become less so over time (line 1). To illustrate this change, she talked about how she did want to get married in the past (lines 1-2). Dana's manner as she described this desire was tentative, as indicated by the way in which she repeated and emphasized the word "kinda" (line 2). Bobby responded with a more resolute "Yeah (.) you did" (line 3), which served to align Dana more closely with a position of desiring to get married.

Dana then responded by setting her interest in marriage in the past ("Like maybe about five years ago," line 4), describing it as "not like super," and saying that "I was kind of testing it out" (line 8). These statements served to qualify Dana's interest, making it seem only minor. Dana then argued that she wanted to get married "because I thought that was what I was supposed to do" (line 10). She emphasized the word "honestly" several times (lines 9 and 10), which can be heard as a request to be considered believable. She then placed her own preferences in direct contrast with what she thought she was supposed to do: "And it didn't feel right but I was like ahhh this is what you do" (line 12). The way that Dana expressed herself in this turn (e.g., through her utterance of "Ahhh") suggested an expression of frustration with these expectations. At this point in the story, Dana asked, "You know what I mean?" (lines 12-13), which elicited a response of agreement from her partner Bobby (line 14). She then ended this passage by saying that she was glad that she and Bobby did not get married (line 15), thus returning to her original position of being uninterested in marriage.

As Dana and Bobby confirmed many times in their interview that they did not place great value on marriage, this negotiation of Dana's position was likely a delicate one. In order to maintain their identity as a connected couple who share the same ideas for their future together, Dana might have had an interest in standing against this gendered discourse about women and marriage. Interestingly, those couples who did not take up gendered discourses on marriage were also those who expressed the strongest intentions to marry in the future.

**Modes of expression.** In terms of the expressive styles or emotional tones that participants and I used to perform our stories, the most common modes of expression that I observed were humour and optimism. Humour in particular dominated the performance of our stories. In my interview with Jarome and Victoria, for example, Jarome shared a story about "we-ness" and possession of the television remote control:

Extract 59: Narrating with humour

- 1 Jarome: I realized we were more of a couple when I had to (.) share the TV with  
2 her.  
3 Marnie ((Laughs))  
4 Jarome: Because I normally don't have to do that with people. And then I'm like  
5 (.) ugh (.) I gotta share it with someone I like. Cause normally if it's  
6 someone I don't like (.) I hold the remote control.  
7 Marnie: [((Laughing))]  
8 Victoria: [((Laughing))]  
9 But (.) if it's someone I like (.) then I let them hold the remote control too  
10 (.) you know  
11 Marnie: [((Laughing))]  
12 Victoria: [((Laughing))]  
13 Jarome: I mean that (.) just (.) reality hit.  
14 Marnie: So what did that mean for you (.) to share your remote control with her?  
15 ((Laughs))

While Jarome did the majority of talking in this extract, Victoria and I were also active in positioning his expression as humorous through our use of laughter. According to

Robinson and Smith-Lovin (2001), “humour is a social phenomenon, since it requires both a producer and an audience” (p. 123). As such, when examining instances of humour, analysts often examine how audiences respond to a speaker. Audiences responding in an amused manner serves as an important acknowledgment that what a speaker has said was considered to be humorous (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). Thus, in responding to the story that Jarome was performing with laughter (lines 3, 7, 8, 11, 12, and 15), Victoria and I acted to give a humorous meaning to this exchange.

Several of the couples also performed their stories in an optimistic manner, particularly when talking about the connection between “we-ness” and their future as a couple.

#### Extract 60: Narrating with optimism

- 1 Amanda: You know I feel like a lot of couples especially in their first couple of  
2 months are just kind of really confused ((Laughs))  
3 Marnie: Mmhmm.  
4 Tyler: They’re not really sure what they want. We know what we want.  
5 Amanda: For sure. (((Laughs)))  
6 Tyler: (((Laughs)))  
7 Marnie: And so it sounds like (.) that sort of shared sense of where you’re going  
8 really contributes to your (.) relationship in the present.  
9 Tyler: Yeah (.) it keeps us centered.  
10 Amanda: Mmhmm.  
11 Tyler: Cause like (.) all right. And it also it li- le- let’s us accept different stupid  
12 things if like her parents are being like crazy or something.  
13 Amanda: (((Laughs)))  
14 Tyler: [Depending] on like- whatever the situation is we can always get like-  
15 just shrug it off. We’re like yeah (.) we have each other (.) we’ll have  
16 each other tomorrow (.) we’ll have each other the day after tomorrow.  
17 We’ll just- keep going.  
18 Amanda: Yup.  
19 Tyler: Doesn’t matter where we are (.) who we’re living with (.) we’ll just keep  
20 moving.  
21 Marnie: It’s almost like a sense of your relationship that you can use (.) to get you  
22 through difficult times  
23 Tyler: [Yeah.]

24 Amanda: [Yeah] for sure.  
25 Tyler: And it's not even like get me through difficult times it's to get us through  
26 difficult times.

At the beginning of this extract, Amanda and Tyler position themselves as being different from other couples (“They’re not really sure what they want,” line 4), as they have a strong sense of where they are going as a couple (“We know what we want,” line 4). This position contributes to their relational identity, and positive public image, as a secure and stable couple. I then commented on the possible positive effects that this future-orientation might have on their relationship (lines 7-8), a storyline which Tyler agreed to (line 9) and carried on by describing how their sense of future helped in dealing with difficult situations (line 11-12).

Tyler then went on to narrate how this sense of “we” projected into the future: “We’re like yeah (.) we have each other (.) we’ll have each other tomorrow (.) we’ll have each other the day after tomorrow. We’ll just- keep going” (lines 15-17). The way that he expressed this temporal path, which progresses day by day, conveyed a sense of momentum and continuance. As Tyler narrated, Amanda displayed agreement and encouragement (lines 5, 10, 18, and 24). Tyler then used vocal emphasis to contrast the words “me and “us” (line 25), arguing that this sense of optimism was not a resource for him alone, but for the two of them together.

**Section summary.** In this section, I analyzed how participants and I performed stories of mutuality and “we-ness.” I examined the purposes of storytelling, noting how our research purposes in particular seemed to shape our acts of storytelling. I also considered participants’ purposes for taking part in my study, which involved an expectation that talking about closeness and “we-ness” with me would contribute in a

positive manner to their relationships. When I analyzed the roles that participants and I took up in our storytelling, I explored how we acted as interviewer and interviewee, and invoked common cultural discourses when talking about gender and marriage. Finally, I observed how participants and I performed these stories with humour and optimism, which portrayed a sense of positive future-direction for the couples' relationships.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I analyzed my conversations with participating couples according to Gubrium and Holstein's (2009) considerations of activation, linkage and composition, collaboration, control, and performance. I noted how I invited and shaped stories about "we-ness" as a research interviewer, and how participants and I collaborated to co-construct stories about "we-ness" and cohabitation. I also analyzed how the couples and I co-edited one another's contributions to these stories, and considered the stakes that were involved in creating a storyline that we could all agree to. Further, I observed that participants and I told stories about "we-ness" with humour, optimism, and a sense of future, and that couples talked about their cohabitating relationships as serious and committed. Finally, couples noted that talking with me had increased the ongoing sense of "we-ness" that we had been discussing. In the following chapter, I will discuss these results, and present implications for researchers and counsellors.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

When I began this research, I was interested in learning about how cohabitating couples talked and told stories about mutuality and “we-ness.” I also wanted to examine how I, as a research interviewer and active participant in these conversations, shaped this storied sense of relational identity. I approached my research from a social constructionist perspective, with the view that meanings, identities, and stories are co-created through social interactions, including interactions that take place within a research setting (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003; McNamee, 1995). Further, I made use of Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) approach to analyzing narrative reality, which enabled me to examine the process of storytelling and the ways through which participants and I co-narrated and co-edited developing relationship plotlines.

In my analysis of our joint storytelling, I examined how I invited cohabitating couples into conversations about “we-ness,” such as through my use of interview questions. I also examined how participants responded to these invitations, taking up my language of “we-ness” and collaborating with me to co-narrate stories about relational identity. Further, I demonstrated how participants and I interacted with one another to co-edit narrative plotlines as they were emerging in the back-and-forth flow of our conversations. This process of co-editing enabled us to mutually shape delicate storylines of “we-ness” as they were developing, and to negotiate plotlines that we could all agree to in that moment.

As I analyzed our stories about cohabitation, I also observed how participants and I were taking up popular discourses in our conversations, portraying cohabitation as a step taken in preparation for marriage or as an alternative to marriage. Participants and I

also co-developed stories about their cohabitating relationships as committed and future-oriented unions. Further, our conversations served to co-construct understandings of “we-ness” as a sense of identity that connects partners to one another, both in their views and in the views of others. We also talked about “we-ness” as an ongoing project, which participants can actively co-construct between them by spending time together, co-creating physical space, dealing with trouble as a team, and talking about “we-ness” with one another.

In my analyses, I also examined how the purposes of storytelling (e.g., my research purposes), and the roles and positions that participants and I took up during our conversations (e.g., interviewer and interviewee, men and women), influenced how we composed our relationship stories. I analyzed how stories of “we-ness” were performed with humour and optimism, and noted that they conveyed a strong sense of future direction. Further, I observed how participants managed tensions between the “I” and the “we,” or their individual and relational identities, by claiming that these identities supported and strengthened one another.

Finally, as I understand “we-ness” to be an emerging, interactionally-constructed identity, I examined how our conversations contributed to participants’ ongoing sense of relational identity. Participants claimed that engaging in conversations about “we-ness” with me had contributed to feelings of mutuality and “we-ness” between them, and thus had strengthened the sense of relational identity that served as the focus of our storytelling interactions.

## **Implications for Research**

The results of my research point to the need for researchers to reflexively attend to their role in the research process. By using examples from my conversations with participants, I demonstrated how I invited couples to take part in novel conversations about “we-ness” and shaped the storytelling process through my use of language, interview questions, and ways of responding to participants. I also showed in my analysis how aspects of the research environment, including cultural expectations about what it means to act as interviewer and interviewees, shaped our acts of storytelling. Importantly, participants spoke to the effects that my role as an audience member had on how they told stories, and they shared that engaging in conversations about “we-ness” with me had reflexively shaped this sense of relational identity. Thus, I was able to demonstrate how I played an active role in my research, as well as how our interview conversations had important consequences for participants.

Gubrium and Holstein (2003) similarly suggested that researchers attend to the influence they have over the co-construction of research findings, rather than regarding themselves as neutral persons who have no stake in interview conversations. Further, ten Have (2004) has claimed that “interviews are often deeply *moral* events with important implications and consequences for the interviewee” (p. 57). As I described in my research, there were significant stakes involved for couples as they talked with me about mutuality and togetherness, including their emerging relational identity and public image both as individuals and as a couple. As such, ten Have (2004) recommended that researchers take into account the potential implications that their research might have for

participants, and consider how these implications might influence their participation in turn.

The results of my research also provide a case for interviewing multiple participants at one time, particularly when conducting research with couples, families, or other social groups. While this form of interviewing has been referred to as dyadic (Gale, n.d.), I have taken the view that these interactions are triadic in that two participants and myself as the interviewer were all actively involved. Through my analysis of collaboration and control, I have demonstrated how storytelling is not only a process of co-narrating, but one of co-editing, such that all those who have a stake in a story act to shape and influence that story as it is developing (Strong & Knight, in press). The collaborative actions that contribute to meaning-making are often overlooked when a single participant is interviewed. Interviewing multiple participants in interaction with one another can enable researchers to examine the dynamic and co-constructed nature of meaning and identity, particularly in the context of important relationships.

Finally, this research has implications for the existing literature on cohabitation. In our conversations, I found that participants were drawing upon several common cultural discourses when talking about their cohabitating relationships. More specifically, participants were speaking from discourses on “cohabitation as a step toward marriage” (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Rhoades et al., 2009b; Huang et al., 2011) and “cohabitation as an alternative to marriage” (Brown & Booth, 1996; Guzzo, 2009).

I first became interested in studying cohabitation when I noticed the diverging cohabitation discourses available within North American society, and wanted to understand how people made sense of cohabitation in their own relationships. This

question became particularly relevant to me when I made the decision to enter a cohabitating relationship myself and began to engage in such relational meaning-making with my own partner. In this research, I observed that different participants were taking up very different discourses on cohabitation, particularly in terms of its position relative to marriage. These results contribute to arguments made within the literature that there is no consensus on how to understand cohabitation in relationships (Manning et al., 2007; Nock, 1995). But as participants were taking up and speaking from identifiable discourses, there do seem to be some common ways of talking about cohabitation which may shape how people make sense of cohabitation in their own lives.

Whether marriage was or was not included in their projected plotline as a couple, the cohabitating couples who participated in my study tended to articulate a strong sense of commitment in their relationships, as well as a desire to stay together long-term. While some researchers have questioned the level of commitment that is typically at stake in cohabitation (e.g., Popenoe, 2009; Waite & Gallagher, 2000), my findings suggest that partners viewed cohabitation as an act of commitment, and did not approach their transition into living together without consideration for their future as a couple.

When I approached this research, I also wondered whether diverging cohabitation discourses would pose a challenge for partners as they attempted to develop shared understandings for their relationship. To put it another way, I wondered how partners would deal with differences that emerged in stories about where their cohabitating relationship was going. But through the use of expressive caution, which marked “we-ness” as a delicate object (Silverman, 2001), and close co-editing of developing stories, cohabitating partners and I were able to co-construct understandings that permitted us to

continue in conversation together (Strong, 2005). This enabled participants to position themselves, or to maintain “face” (in Goffman’s, 1967, sense), in the interview as devoted and committed partners. That being said, I cannot know what this positioning meant for couples beyond our interviews.

### **Implications for Counselling**

The results of my research also have significant implications for counsellors. Though I was not engaging in counselling with cohabitating couples, I was inviting them to talk and tell stories about their relationships. At the end of our interviews, participants indicated that our conversations about “we-ness” had a significant impact on their ongoing sense of relational identity, and served to increase feelings of mutuality and togetherness. While I was not able to follow up with couples on the long-term effects of our conversations, these results imply that stories about “we-ness” can be useful in counselling for the purposes of strengthening a couple’s sense of connectedness while they are occurring (Weiner-Davis, 1993). As partners often seek out counselling when they are feeling disconnected and disengaged from one another (Jordan, 2000), the importance of engaging in “we” stories in counselling should not be underestimated.

Like research, therapy can sometimes be seen as a process of collaborative meaning-making (McNamee & Gergen, 1992; Strong & Sutherland, 2007). As such, therapists should attend to the role they play in co-constructing client stories, meanings, and identities. In my analysis, I demonstrated how context (e.g., that of a research interview) can influence acts of storytelling, such as by shaping the roles that storytellers take up in relation to one another. The counselling environment can also have a similar influence on storytelling, particularly norms and expectations about how therapists and

clients should behave and what they should talk about when engaging in therapy (Parker, 1999). Thus, counsellors should also be willing to examine this environment and its potential effects on their conversations with clients.

As they examine their influence over meaning-making in counselling, counsellors should also consider what kinds of stories they are inviting in their interactions with clients. Tomm (1987) wrote that everything that a counsellor says or does when interacting with a client has the potential to impact that client. When conducting therapy, counsellors tend to focus on problems (White & Epston, 1990). For example, counselling sessions often begin with questions about the concerns that have led clients to seek counselling (Madigan, 2011). In asking such questions at the outset, counsellors can contribute to client expectations that therapeutic conversations should be focused on problems, and thus can invite them to engage in the telling of problem-focused stories (Madsen, 2007). Gubrium and Holstein (2009) propose that, through inviting particular kinds of stories, we are inevitably silencing other stories that could be told in their place. Thus, when counsellors invite clients to discuss relational problems such as disconnection and conflict, they are passing up stories that focus more on what is going well in a relationship (de Shazer, 1988; Weiner-Davis, 1993), such as stories of “we-ness.”

In my research, I intentionally invited participants to engage in conversations about mutuality and “we-ness” with me. The rich and detailed nature of the conversations that emerged suggests that these volunteering couples had the means to talk about “we-ness” when invited to do so. Further, participants acknowledged that they found it meaningful to discuss points of connection, rather than focusing exclusively on differences and disagreements. As such, I recommend that counsellors orient to moments

of “we-ness” in clients’ talk, and invite through their questions opportunities for discussing mutuality and positive relational identities.

Similar recommendations have been made in solution-focused therapy, narrative therapy, and appreciative inquiry approaches to counselling. When practicing from these perspectives, counsellors are encouraged to seek out *sparkling moments, unique outcomes, exceptions or solutions* in clients’ stories, which are situations that highlight clients’ skills, abilities, and agency (De Jong & Berg, 2012; White & Epston, 1990). Focusing on client strengths, preferences, and things that are going well in their lives helps clients reconnect with the resources they already have (and value) for dealing with problems (de Shazer, 1988; Parry & Doan, 1994). For example, stories about how couples have been able to develop “we-ness” in their relationships can be used to highlight the skills partners have for co-constructing closeness, which they can use to further develop their sense of relational identity (White & Epston, 1990).

It is important that counsellors do not assume that clients will volunteer stories about “we-ness,” or that they already have such stories waiting for an opportunity to be told. Rather, my research participants indicated that, prior to receiving my invitation to talk about “we-ness,” they had not engaged in such conversations as a couple. Again, these results point to the important role that counsellors can play in inviting new kinds of conversations in counselling (Parry & Doan, 1994).

I also recommend that counsellors recognize how they are involved in shaping clients’ stories of “we-ness” even when they are acting primarily as listeners. Bavelas et al. (2000) demonstrated experimentally how listeners can have a negative impact on storytelling when they do not adequately respond to developing stories. I also explored in

my analysis how participants and I encouraged one another, and demonstrated agreement with emerging plotlines, through our use of acknowledgement tokens or continuers (e.g., “Mmhmm,” “Yeah”). Such expressions of encouragement have typically been examined in counselling solely for how they can be used to indicate attention and affirmation (e.g., Presbury, Echterling, & McKee, 2001). Gubrium and Holstein (2009) made the point, however, that listeners not only encourage storytelling through these actions, but shape the direction (or storyline) of storytelling as well. Thus, counsellors should consider how their use of encouraging statements might be inviting participants to continue with particular kinds of storylines over others, as well as what we might be communicating when these encouragers are absent.

Finally, the results of my research speak to the important role that co-editing plays in the process of joint storytelling, a point which has also been made by Strong and Knight (in press) in regards to the practice of narrative therapy. The need for co-editing speaks to the delicate nature of relational stories, and the careful negotiation that is often required for conversational partners to develop new storylines while at the same time managing the individual and relational meanings that are at stake (Silverman, 2001; Strong, 2006).

It is important for counsellors to understand how such co-editing takes place in counselling practice, as when disagreements and differences arise in conversation, co-editing allows people to negotiate across such differences, and to work out understandings that they can mutually agree to (Strong, 2005). Co-narrating and co-editing also contributes to new understandings in therapeutic conversations, which open up novel possibilities for clients' lives (Strong, 2006). Finally, mutually-constructed

understandings encourage continued interaction, and serve as important resources for relationships, whether these are relationships between therapists and their clients, or between cohabitating partners (Strong, 2006).

### **Limitations of the Present Research**

Research that examines storytelling as an interactional and context-sensitive process has been criticized for producing conclusions that are highly local, and thus not particularly relevant beyond their immediate circumstances (Bamberg, 2012). Further, acknowledging the non-finalized nature of stories and relational identities invites questions about what can be gained from analyzing stories that are frequently changing. I argue, however, that examining storytelling in action can provide researchers and counsellors with an understanding of the processes of collaborative action, and the ways in which people interact with one another to co-develop meanings and stories (Gergen, 2009; Shotter, 1987). So, even if the particular understandings that people develop are closely linked to their context, the conversational means that they use to co-narrate and co-edit these understandings may be useful in a variety of circumstances.

Gubrium and Holstein's (2009) approach to analyzing narrative is also based in part on ideas from conversation analysis. Conversation analysis has been criticized for its inability to attend to conversational flow, which is the basis for collaborative action (Gergen, 2009), and the broader social context in which that flow is taking place (Sharrock & Anderson, 1987). If we attend too closely to participants' particular utterances, we can lose the sense of back-and-forth acting and responding that gives conversation, and therapeutic dialogue, its life and its meaning (J. Shotter, personal communication, July 13, 2012). While I included long extracts of our storytelling to

demonstrate how responses were occasioned in the broader flow of conversation, my analysis was often oriented to particular acts of speaking, rather than to overall accounts.

Finally, one of the major limitations of this study is that, because I only audio-recorded my interviews with participants, I was not able to analytically attend to possibly salient nonverbal cues and responses such as smiling, nodding, frowning, or eye contact – for the co-narrating and co-editing I have been describing. In hindsight, video-recordings of my interviews would have provided rich data on the ways through which participants and I responded to one another nonverbally. This limitation leads me to my recommendations for future research.

### **Directions for Future Research**

In future research, I recommend that researchers video-record storytelling interactions so they are able to examine nonverbal cues and responses in addition to verbal responses. Such nonverbal actions are important in face-to-face dialogue (Clark, 1996) and in the back-and-forth flow of collaborative action (Gergen, 2009). More specifically, researchers could examine how partners convey “we-ness,” or alternatively, disconnection, through verbal responses. Transcribing and analyzing video-taped interactions with clients can also help counsellors attend more closely to their responses and ways of talking with clients (Gale, 1995; Strong, 2003).

Another direction for future research would be to examine how couples tell stories about “we-ness” in counselling. While I have explored the potential implications of my research for counselling practice, my conclusions have not been examined in that context. Examples of potential research questions for such research might include: How do counsellors and couples co-construct stories of mutuality and “we-ness” in counselling?

How do counsellors and clients create space for such stories to be told? And what are the consequences of developing and elaborating “we” stories in counselling?

## **Conclusions**

In this research, I engaged in joint storytelling with cohabitating couples for the purposes of co-constructing stories of mutuality and “we-ness.” I focused my analysis on our process of storytelling, and demonstrated how participants and I were active in co-shaping these relational stories as they developed. I understood our storytelling process to be one of both co-narrating and co-editing, during which we were attending to the relational and individual identities that were at stake in these stories about “we-ness.”

I also found that, after inviting participants into novel conversations about “we-ness,” they were able to articulate rich and detailed narratives about moments of connectedness. Further, when I explored the consequences that these conversations had for participants, they indicated at the end of our interviews that talking about “we-ness” with me had served to increase their sense of relational identity. Thus, it is important that counsellors invite and responsively create space for conversations about “we-ness” to take place in counselling, as these conversations can highlight and strengthen experiences of mutuality between partners. Exploring “we-ness” in a narrative form can also provide this relational identity with a sense of history and future direction. To illustrate the importance of “we-ness” in relationships, I conclude with a passage from my interview with Amanda and Tyler, in which we talked about “we-ness” as a relational resource:

- 1 Tyler: [Depending] on like- whatever the situation is we can always get like-
- 2 just shrug it off. We’re like yeah (.) we have each other (.) we’ll have
- 3 each other tomorrow (.) we’ll have each other the day after tomorrow.
- 4 We’ll just- keep going.
- 5 Amanda: Yup.

6 Tyler: Doesn't matter where we are (.) who we're living with (.) we'll just keep  
7 moving.  
8 Marnie: It's almost like a sense of your relationship that you can use (.) to get you  
9 through difficult times  
10 Tyler: [Yeah.]  
11 Amanda: [Yeah] for sure.  
12 Tyler: And it's not even like get me through difficult times it's to get us through  
13 difficult times.

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## Appendices

## **Appendix A: Story-writing Activity Instructions**

For this activity, you are invited to write a one-page story about the history of your relationship. In this story, please include information on:

- How you and your partner became a couple
- When you began to consider moving in together as a good option for your relationship
- A moment or experience you have had while living together that seemed to strengthen your sense of being a couple

It is very important that you write this story on your own and **do not share it with your partner**. Please return this story to me, by email, at least one day before your interview appointment. If you include your name or your partner's name in the story, I will replace those names with pseudonyms. Any other personally identifying information will be removed or disguised. The received email will also be deleted so that your name is not associated with your story. If you have any questions or concerns, or to submit your completed story, please email me at [marnierogers01@gmail.com](mailto:marnierogers01@gmail.com).

Thank you for your participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Marnie Rogers

Student, Master of Science in Counselling Psychology program, University of Calgary

## **Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Questions**

### **Introduction**

Today I am going to be asking you about some things that you might not have talked a lot about in the past. I will be asking questions about your relationship and your experiences of living together, and I am hoping to get a better understanding of how you may have come to create a sense of “we,” or a sense of being a couple, in your relationship. I am going to ask questions about some of things that I asked you to write about in your individual stories, such as how you first became a couple. I would like to see if our ways of talking bring up shared versions of these stories, though this may not always be possible.

### **Questions**

1. What made you interested in participating in this study?
2. Tell me about how you first got together as a couple.
3. When did you first start to consider living together as a good option for your relationship?
4. Since you began cohabitating, have you had any moments or experiences that seemed to strengthen your sense of being a couple?
5. How would you explain your decision to move in together?
6. Overall, how do you think living together has affected your sense of being a couple?
7. When I ask about a sense of “we-ness” or a sense of being a couple, what does this mean for you?

8. (To be asked if this information has not yet been provided) When did you first start to experience this sense of “we” in your relationship?
9. Have any other important events occurred in your relationship that have affected this “we-ness?”
10. Are other people in your life starting to notice this “we-ness”?
11. What is it that they might be noticing?
12. What has it been like talking about this with me today?

## Appendix C: Recruitment Poster



# **Are you currently living with your girlfriend, boyfriend, or romantic partner?**

Would you and your partner be interested in participating in a research study?

The purpose of this study is to examine how couples who live together, but are not married, create shared stories when talking about their relationship. I will also be examining how couples build a sense of “we,” or a sense of closeness in their relationship, through telling these shared stories.

If you were to participate in this study, you would be asked to:

- Write a one-page story about your relationship
- Take part in a one-hour interview with your partner
- Provide feedback on the typed script from your interview

Selected participants will be at least 18 years of age, currently participating in a heterosexual relationship, have never been married, and not have any children.

**Participants will be entered to win a \$100 gift card to the restaurant of their choice.**

This study will be conducted by Marnie Rogers, a student in the Master of Science in Counselling Psychology program at the University of Calgary. If you are interested in finding out more about this study, please contact Marnie at [marnierogers01@gmail.com](mailto:marnierogers01@gmail.com)

## **Appendix D: Main Text from Article Featured in Student Newspaper**

### **Media's influence on 'shacking up'**

by: Pauline Anunciacion

Gauntlet News

Deciding when to move in together is a major life decision for young couples.

Psychology graduate student Marnie Rogers's research "How to Shack Up, Share Space, and Keep it Sexy" discusses how the prevalent societal messages of cohabitation are reflected in popular magazines such as Reader's Digest, Cosmopolitan and Men's Health.

"The nature of these magazines is informative. They provide checklists, questions and advice on cohabitation," explained Rogers.

"How to Shack Up" was a two-month pilot project Rogers initiated as a stepping stone for her master's thesis. Through numerous interviews, her thesis examines how couples create closeness and a sense of 'we' in the relationship. She will be exploring how unmarried couples are taking media messages into account in their decision to live together.

This cohabitation research highlights the common ideas of cohabitation that might be circulating in the university and in the working world. Rogers hopes her research will evoke thought and reflection, especially among young couples, on how cohabitation will impact their lives.

"I am interested in working with couples and families. Cohabitation is one of the biggest shifts that has occurred in recent years in terms of how couples and families interact together," said Rogers.

The research will provide Rogers with more experience and understanding when dealing with issues that may arise in relationship counselling. She concluded that sharing and having conversations are essential for the functionality of a cohabitating couple.

Twenty-four-year-old Roman Baruiz and 23-year-old Jajurie are a couple that have been living together for over a year.

Baruiz, who manages instrumentation for Spartan Controls, said, "a couple is ready to move in together when both are ready to see what's beyond the book. You can't move in just because you feel like moving in. You have to be financially and emotionally prepared. You have to be comfortable with the idea of less privacy too."

Rogers's research shows that media portrays cohabitation in different ways.

"In Cosmopolitan, women worry about when a man will propose. If you move in together, he might delay his proposal because he will be satisfied with where the

relationship is. In Men's Health, the main concern promoted is, 'Will our relationship change negatively? Will the passion and heat in the relationship change?' said Rogers. "There is the thought of whether you will get more tired of each other."

Baruiz agrees media give a lot of attention to the worries associated with cohabitation. However, he and Jajurie had different issues moving in together.

"The media doesn't affect our lifestyle. For me, one of the issues would be the behavioural changes of both parties. When you move in together, you will show who you are and your partner will also. You might realize, 'I never thought she or he was like that,'" said Baruiz.

Tina Ashiofu, a second year student at St. Mary's University College, said, "[Cohabitation] may bring a couple together but it can also tear them apart. You have to consider both extremes. I haven't thought of living with my boyfriend at all. My parents' house suits me fine."

However, there are many benefits for couples living together.

"There are the practical benefits. Couples may save money sharing a place instead of paying for two separate places. From the couples I have been talking to, they like that they have more time to spend together and share lives to a greater degree," said Rogers. "There is an increased sense of 'we' and increased feelings of intimacy in the relationship."

Baruiz said that he and Jajurie are better off than when they weren't living together. Both currently have more emotional support and knowledge of their partner.

"I learn to control myself with my consciousness of my habits. Additionally, we learn to compromise and give in to one another. We share knowledge too. She's helping me out with things I don't normally do. She taught me how to fold clothes. I taught her how to handle money and other financial aspects."

Section: News

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## **Appendix E: Screening Interview Questions**

1. Are you currently living with your boyfriend, girlfriend, or partner?
2. Are you 18 years of age or older? Is your partner?
3. Have you ever been married? Has your partner ever been married?
4. Do either you or your partner have a child?
5. Are you in a same-gender relationship?

## Appendix F: Consent Form



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**Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Marnie Rogers, B.A. (Hons.), Student - Master of Science in Counselling Psychology, Educational Studies in Psychology, Faculty of Education, 403-460-9219, marnierogers01@gmail.com

**Supervisor:**

Tom Strong, Ph.D., Professor, Counselling Psychology, Educational Studies in Psychology, Faculty of Education, 403-220-3586, strongt@ucalgary.ca

**Title of Project:**

Constructing "We:" Cohabiting Couples' Relationship Narratives

**Sponsor:**

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)

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This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

**Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this study is to examine how couples who live together, but are not married, create shared stories when talking about their relationships. The researcher will be examining how couples build a sense of "we," or a sense of solidarity in their relationship, through telling these shared stories. You have been selected as a potential participant because you are currently living with your partner, are in a heterosexual relationship, are at least 18 years old, have never been married, do not have any children, and both you and your partner are willing to participate in a research study together.

**What Will I Be Asked To Do?**

You will be asked to take part in a story-writing activity and an audio-recorded interview. For the story-writing activity, you will be invited to write a one-page story about your relationship. It is asked that this story include information on how your relationship began, when you began to consider living together, and a description of a moment or event that has occurred during your time living together when you felt a sense of increased closeness with your partner. You will be asked to write this story on your own, and **not** to share it with your partner before you participate in the interview. **This is very important.** You will have one week to write your story and submit it to the researcher by email. This activity is expected to take around 60 minutes to complete.

You will then be asked to take part in an audio-recorded interview **with your partner**. In this interview, you will be asked about the history of your relationship, as well as about how you may have constructed a sense of "we," or feelings of being a couple, in your relationship. This interview should take approximately 60 minutes to complete.

Within a month of the interview, you will be provided with a typed script, called a transcript, based on the interview recordings. You will be asked to provide feedback on whether the information in this transcript fits with your understanding of what was said during the interview. You will be asked to respond to the researcher within two weeks of receiving this transcript. If you do not respond within this time frame, this will be understood as approval of the data.

Throughout the study, you will not be required or pressured to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary. This means that you may refuse to participate altogether or you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your participation will end immediately, and any data that has been collected from you will be destroyed. If your partner withdraws from the study, the information gathered in your joint interview will be destroyed as well. Information from your individual written story will be maintained, however, unless you also indicate that you would like to withdraw from the study. If you would like to withdraw as well, your individual data will also be destroyed. Be sure that you are only participating in this study because you want to, not just because your partner wants to take part.

### **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide your age, marital status, and the sexual orientation of your present relationship. Though this information will not be linked with any of your data, your full name will also be included on this consent form. This information will only be available to the primary researcher and the research supervisor and will be kept in a secure locked cabinet.

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some or none of them. Please put a check mark on the corresponding line(s) that grants me your permission to:

I wish my name and personal information to remain confidential: Yes: \_\_\_ No: \_\_\_

I wish my name and personal information to remain confidential, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym: Yes: \_\_\_ No: \_\_\_

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

There may be benefits associated with participating in this study. Through talking about closeness and unity with your partner, you may experience an enhanced sense of closeness for a period of time, though this is not guaranteed. Participants will also be entered into a draw to win a \$100 gift certificate for a restaurant of their choice. If you participate in this study, you will also be compensated for any parking fees that you have to pay while attending your interview.

There may also be risks if you participate. During the story-writing activity and the interview, you will be asked about your relationship, how you met your partner, your decision to move in together, your experiences while living together, and your sense of feeling close to your partner. If you have any negative feelings associated with these topics, the questions could potentially be upsetting for you. It is important to remember that during the study, you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. Also, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason. You will not be penalized for withdrawing from the study, as you and your partner will still be entered to win the restaurant gift card. Since you will be doing the interview with your partner, you could potentially feel uncomfortable or embarrassed if you are asked for information that you do not want to discuss in front of your partner. Again, you will not be required to provide any information that you do not wish to share during this interview. It should be noted that your partner will have access to your pseudonym, as this will be included in the interview transcript that you both receive. If any data from your individual story is included in the research report, your partner may be able to attribute this information to you based on this pseudonym. Even if your pseudonym is not used, your partner might be able to identify your contributions based on their knowledge of you and your shared relationship. So if there is any information that you do not wish your

partner to know, this information should be left out of your written story.

If you feel upset or distressed at any point during the study, please make the researcher aware of this so that support services can be provided. If you are interested in receiving individual or couples counselling services during or after your participation in the study, several local resources are listed below:

**University of Calgary Counselling Centre**

Room 370 MacEwan Student Centre  
2500 University Drive NW  
Calgary, Alberta, T2N 1N4  
403-210-WELL(9355)  
<http://www.ucalgary.ca/counselling>

- University of Calgary students can access individual, couples, and group counselling services, as well as educational workshops, related to a variety of personal, academic, and career concerns. These services are provided free-of-charge for University of Calgary students, though there are fees associated with no shows and late cancellations. Students can attend up to 10 sessions per degree program.

**Calgary Counselling Centre**

Suite 200, 940 6th Avenue S.W.  
Calgary, Alberta, T2P 3T1  
403-691-5991 – Intake Inquiry  
403-265-4980 – General Inquiry  
[www.calgarycounselling.com](http://www.calgarycounselling.com)

- There are fees associated with the counselling services provided at the Calgary Counselling Centre. These fees are determined on a sliding scale, which means that the amount you will be required to pay is determined by your family's annual income. Your fees will be established during an initial intake interview, or may be discussed with a counsellor from the Centre during an appointment.

\*\*\*If you are in crisis, please contact the Distress Centre's 24-hour support line at 403-266-HELP(4357). Calls to the Distress Centre are anonymous and free.

**Distress Centre**

Suite 300, 1010 8th Avenue S.W.  
Calgary, Alberta, T2P 1J2  
403-266-HELP(4357)

- You can also access free in-person counselling services at the Distress Centre.

**What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

The information collected in this study will be used for the primary researcher's Masters Thesis. Participation is completely voluntary and confidential. You are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study. If you do so, any personal information that you have provided will be destroyed. If your partner has withdrawn from the study, information from your individual written story will be maintained unless you also indicate that you would like to withdraw from the study.

No one except the researcher and the research supervisor will be allowed to see or hear your written stories, interview recordings, or interview transcripts, though parts of these stories and interviews may be included in a research report. There will be no names linked to the data, though your pseudonym may be used. The data will be kept in a locked cabinet or on a password-protected digital storage device, which will only be accessible to the researcher and the research supervisor. The data will be stored for up to two years after the study has been completed, at which point it will be shredded or permanently erased. As stated, your partner may come to know your pseudonym, as it will be included on the interview transcript which you will both get to read. So it will be important that both you and your partner respect the confidential nature of this information and not share it with others without permission.

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Your signature on this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to participate as a research subject.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Questions/Concerns**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Ms. Marnie Rogers  
Counselling Psychology, Educational Studies in Psychology  
marnierogers01@gmail.com  
And Tom Strong, Supervisor, Counselling Psychology, Educational Studies in Psychology  
[strongt@ucalgary.ca](mailto:strongt@ucalgary.ca), 403-220-3586

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Senior Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-3782; email [rburrows@ucalgary.ca](mailto:rburrows@ucalgary.ca).

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

## **Appendix G: Debriefing Form**

Though cohabitation is becoming a more common experience, research suggests that people approach, understand, and make sense of cohabitation in very different ways. Thus, individuals have access to a variety of understandings that they may draw upon as they figure out what cohabitation means for them. But what happens when individuals form couples and begin living together, and they are called upon to create a sense of shared meaning for their relationship? The purpose of this study was to investigate how cohabitating couples tell stories about their relationship in interaction with one another, and through these stories, create a sense of “we.” I was interested in what you and your partner said in your interview that allowed you to create a shared story about your relationship.

No one except the researcher and the research supervisor will be allowed to see or hear your written stories, interview tapes, or interview transcripts. There will be no names on the stories, tapes, or typed transcripts, though your pseudonym may be used. The data will be kept in a locked cabinet or on a password-protected digital storage device, which are only accessible to the researcher and research supervisor. The data will be stored for up to two years after the study has been completed, at which point it will be shredded or permanently erased. Your pseudonym may be known to your partner, as it will be included in your interview transcript, which you will both have the opportunity to review sometime in the next month. It is asked that you provide feedback on whether the information in the transcript fits with your understanding of what was said in the interview. If you do not respond within two weeks, this will be understood as approval of the transcript. It will be important that both you and your partner respect the confidential nature of the information gathered in this study, and do not share any information with others without your partner’s permission.

If you would like to access individual or couples counselling services, several resources are listed on the next page. Please feel free to ask for any additional information.

If you have any questions or concerns about your involvement in this study, please feel free to contact Marnie at [marnierogers01@gmail.com](mailto:marnierogers01@gmail.com). You may also contact the research supervisor, Tom, at [strongt@ucalgary.ca](mailto:strongt@ucalgary.ca) or 403-220-3586.

Your participation in this study was greatly appreciated!

### Counselling Resources

#### **University of Calgary Counselling Centre**

Room 370 MacEwan Student Centre

2500 University Drive NW

Calgary, Alberta, T2N 1N4

403-210-WELL(9355)

<http://www.ucalgary.ca/counselling>

- University of Calgary students can access individual, couples, and group counselling services, as well as educational workshops, related to a variety of personal, academic, and career concerns. These services are provided free-of-charge for University of Calgary students, though there are fees associated with no shows and late cancellations. Students can attend up to 10 sessions per degree program.

#### **Calgary Counselling Centre**

Suite 200, 940 6th Avenue S.W.

Calgary, Alberta, T2P 3T1

403-691-5991 – Intake Inquiry

403-265-4980 – General Inquiry

[www.calgarycounselling.com](http://www.calgarycounselling.com)

- There are fees associated with the counselling services provided at the Calgary Counselling Centre. These fees are determined on a sliding scale, which means that the amount you will be required to pay is determined by your family's annual income. Your fees will be established during an initial intake interview, or may be discussed with a counsellor from the Centre during an appointment.

\*\*\*If you are in crisis, please contact the Distress Centre's 24-hour support line at 403-266-HELP(4357). Calls to the Distress Centre are anonymous and free.

**Distress Centre**

Suite 300, 1010 8th Avenue S.W.

Calgary, Alberta, T2P 1J2

403-266-HELP(4357)

[www.distresscentre.com](http://www.distresscentre.com)

- You can also access free in-person counselling services at the Distress Centre

## Appendix H: Transcription Notation

[	Left brackets indicate the point at which two speakers begin to overlap in their talk.
]	Right brackets indicate the point at which the overlapping talk is complete.
(.)	Indicates a brief pause, usually less than one second in length.
...	Indicates a longer pause, usually several seconds in length.
<u>Under</u>	Underlining indicates words emphasized through pitch or amplitude.
::	Colons are used when a sound is prolonged. The more colons, the longer the sound is prolonged.
(( ))	Transcriber descriptions of other sounds (e.g., laughing) or modes of speaking are included in double parentheses
?	Indicates rising pitch.
!	Indicates animated pitch.
.	Indicates falling pitch.
XXXX	Used to obscure potentially identified information (e.g., geographical locations, organizations)

Adapted from Silverman (2008)