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Working Hard or Hardly Working? Comparing Relationship Self-Regulation Levels of
Cohabiting, Married, and Remarried Individuals

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

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Abstract

The concept of relationship self-regulation (RSR) has been shown to be related to relationship satisfaction, yet the differences in RSR ability based on couple type have yet to be examined. This study compared first married, remarried, and cohabiting individuals on their self-reported ability to implement RSR in their relationship, along with their report of satisfaction, positive communication, and negative communication in their relationships. Data was derived from 6,591 participants who were part of the RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE) questionnaire data set. Multiple Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) statistics were used, and results showed that while mean differences in RSR were small across couple types, remarrieds reported significantly lower RSR levels than any other group, while first marrieds reported significantly higher RSR levels than any other group. Implications for relationship education programs and couple therapy are discussed with particular emphasis placed on ensuring that RSR related programs are being delivered to remarried individuals and couples.

Keywords: relationship self-regulation, remarriage, cohabitation, relationship education

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Introduction

The concept of relationship self-regulation (RSR) was first introduced by Halford, Sanders, and Behrens (1994) and is the process by which couples are able to monitor and sustain their relationship. These researchers explain that RSR is implemented when partners look inward and regulate their own behavior for relationship improvement rather than blame their partner's behavior for relationship distress. RSR "focuses on how partners successfully change their own behavior within the relationship rather than on the occurrence of specific relationship behaviors" (Halford, Lizzio, Wilson, & Occhipinti, 2007, p. 187).

Two distinct constructs make up the RSR concept – relationship strategies and relationship effort (Halford et. al., 2007). The relationship strategies dimension demonstrates one's ability "to use a range of behaviors to enhance relationship satisfaction," and is comprised of four general skills: appraisal, goal setting, change implementation, and self evaluation (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001). These principles have become the foundation for the Couple Commitment and Relationship Enhancement (CoupleCARE) program (Halford, Wilson, Moore, Dyer, & Farrugia, 2006) aimed at enriching and improving intimate relationships.

In addition to the relationship strategies dimension, the relationship effort construct is also a distinct element of RSR that refers to one's "*persistence* in attempting to enhance the relationship" (Halford, et. al, 2007, emphasis added). Taken together, relationship strategies and relationship effort combine to create a construct that measures one's ability to put work into the relationship. Research has shown that as couples improve their RSR ability, their relationship satisfaction also increases (Halford, Moore, Wilson, Farrugia, & Dyer, 2004; Halford et. al., 2007; Wilson, Charker, Lizzio, Halford, & Kimlin, 2005; Wilson & Halford, 2008).

No studies to date have compared relationship self-regulation among different relationship types. Using relationship self-regulation as a measurable construct for relationship work, the researcher examined how married, remarried, and cohabiting couples compare in terms of their ability to use strategies and effort to monitor their behavior in their relationship in order to maintain relationship satisfaction. Researchers and clinicians who work with couples will be able to use the results from this study to ensure that they are offering and tailoring their programs to meet the needs of the couple types who most need them.

Review of Literature

Relationship Self-Regulation

In order to study how individuals work to enhance their relationship, it is first necessary to understand the concept of relationship self regulation (RSR: Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 1994). RSR was first introduced as a relational concept by Halford, Sanders, and Behrens (1994), although individual self-regulation has been researched for over three decades. While various definitions exist for individual self-regulation, Vohs and Baumeister (2004) sum it up as “the exercise of control over oneself, especially with bringing the self into line with preferred (thus, regular) standards...[A]ny efforts by the human self to alter any of its own inner states or responses...[such as] thoughts, emotions, impulses or appetites, and task performances” (p. 2).

The development of self-regulation begins as early as infancy and continues to mature through adulthood (McCabe, Cunnington, & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). Both individual and environmental factors are thought to play a large role in the development of these skills. Important individual factors that affect the development of self-regulation include gender, temperament, and the presence of clinical conditions. On the other hand, environmental factors that influence self-regulation development include secure attachment to primary caregivers,

quality of parenting, quality of home life, quality of non-parental care settings, peer group, neighborhoods, and culture. Thus, the development of self-regulation is a complex process based both on internal and external factors (Calkins, 2004; Eisenberg, Smith, Sadovsky, & Spinrad, 2004; McCabe et al., 2004).

The ability to control and regulate one's behavior has been shown to produce positive outcomes. Children high in self-regulation tend to have lower levels of negative emotions, high compliance, high social competence, high levels of levels of conscience and prosocial behaviors, high academic success, and low levels of delinquency or criminality (Eisenberg et al., 2004). On the other hand, children with poor self-regulation skills are more at risk for social, moral, academic, emotional, and psychological problems (Eisenberg et al.).

While self-regulation is thought of as an individual process, researchers have documented that there is indeed an interpersonal dimension (Leary, 2004; Vohs & Ciarocco, 2004). In order to display social competence and create healthy relationships, it is imperative to have good self-regulation skills (Eisenberg et al., 2004; Leary, 2004; Vohs & Ciarocco, 2004). Halford, Sanders, and Behrens (1994) expand this line of thought to suggest how self-regulation applies specifically to couple relationships. These researchers suggested that relationship self-regulation is the notion that rather than blaming the partner for relationship distress, each partner looks inward and assesses how changes in their own behavior might improve the relationship. RSR "focuses on how partners successfully change their own behavior within the relationship rather than on the occurrence of specific relationship behaviors" (Halford, Lizzio, Wilson, & Occhipinti, 2007, p. 187). RSR is used here as a way to conceptualize relationship work as it looks at the use of both relationship strategies and relationship effort put into the relationship. Strategies emphasize the individual's ability to try new ways of doing things in the relationship

and effort highlights the individual's ability to continually make these changes and focus their energy on enhancing the relationship (Halford et al., 2007; Wilson et al., 2005).

The recent development of reliable relationship self-regulation self-report measures has made it possible for researchers to assess the extent to which couples are able to implement RSR, or put work, into their relationship. The Behavioral Self-Regulation for Effective Relationships Scale (BSRERS), developed by Wilson, Charker, Lizzio, Halford, & Kimlin (2005), has shown to be a reliable and valid measure for assessing the two factors of RSR--relationship strategies (self-change behaviors) and relationship effort (persistence in change attempts).

Researchers have documented the positive association between RSR and relationship satisfaction. In their cross-sectional study assessing two newlywed samples and one long-term married sample, Wilson et al. (2005) discovered that across all three samples, RSR accounted for a quarter to a third of the variation in relationship satisfaction. In addition, while each partner's report of RSR was significantly related to relationship satisfaction in the newlywed samples, relationship satisfaction was more strongly correlated with one's own RSR report than with their partner's own RSR report. This suggests that one's own effort to improve the relationship improves one's own satisfaction, regardless of the effort made by one's partner. While the results for the long-term married sample also showed an association between RSR and marital satisfaction, it was only the husband's (and not the wife's) self-regulation that was associated with relationship satisfaction for both men and women.

Researchers have also studied RSR and its association with relationship satisfaction over time. In their longitudinal study assessing couples in their first four years of marriage, Halford, Lizzio, Wilson and Occhipinti (2007) found that while satisfaction declined slightly over time, RSR levels were positively associated with relationship satisfaction prospectively and over time.

The extent of the decline in newlywed's relationship satisfaction was positively moderated by RSR levels.

With the association between RSR implementation and relationship satisfaction documented, it now becomes imperative that researchers seek to understand the obstacles and challenges that inhibit one's ability to enact RSR in their relationship. In their justification for developing an RSR measure, Wilson et al. (2005) suggest that there are likely distinct challenges couples face when trying to implement RSR in their relationship. Further, there are likely distinct challenges that uniquely impact couples based on the context and type of their relationship. Because of the added challenges that may exist for couples in second or higher-order relationships (i.e., remarriage, cohabiting after a divorce), it is imperative to study RSR in this context. Being aware of these challenges – such as dealing with former spouses and stepchildren -- may help clinicians better develop interventions that will help couples of all types deal with obstacles to RSR and help them maximize their RSR ability.

The construct of RSR is promising for clinicians because it appears that couples can effectively learn RSR principles. The Couple CARE program seeks to mobilize self-directed change in each partner as a way for enhancing relationships (Halford, Wilson, Moore, Dyer, & Farrugia, 2006; Wilson & Halford, 2008). Each unit consists of couples making a self-change goal, creating a plan for that goal, implementing it, and evaluating it. There is evidence to suggest that these skills learned in the program are retained for at least six months following the completion of the program (Wilson & Halford, 2008). Tailoring these programs to target specific obstacles and challenges for couples in more complex couple types could provide a great resource for enhancing these relationships and increasing a couple's chances for relationship satisfaction and stability.

Unique Challenges by Couple Types

Remarriage. Remarriage is a unique experience with its own dynamics, challenges and rewards. Much research has been dedicated to looking at the stepfamily household while fewer studies have looked at the actual remarriage couple relationship itself (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Those studies that have looked closely at this relationship have focused mostly on relationship stability and quality (Coleman et al., 2000). In this section I give a brief context for understanding the unique stressors of remarriage that may be related to RSR, then lay out the research on remarital stability and quality and how RSR may be related to these remarriage outcomes. It is imperative that we continue to study the relationship dynamics and unique couple processes – like RSR - that greatly influence stability and quality in these relationships.

Context. In order to organize the many important factors that exist and influence remarried couples, I use Bulbolz and Sontag's (1993) ecosystemic theory as employed by Larson and Holman (1994) in their assessment of premarital predictors of later marital quality. Ecosystemic theory suggests that the couple relationship is a developing system that interacts with and develops at various levels – the individual, the couple, and the broader context. Each level is important to assess as it is the interaction of these various levels that creates the most accurate picture of relationship functioning and thereby, RSR ability and implementation. The three levels utilized by Falke and Larson (2007) in their review of premarital predictors of remarital quality include background and contextual factors, individual traits and behaviors, and interactional processes that are unique to the remarital couple.

Background and Contextual Factors. Remarriages look much different than first marriages largely because many unique premarital contextual factors exist that greatly influence the relationship (Falke & Larson, 2007). For example, while family of origin experiences are

known to impact relationship satisfaction and RSR implementation ability in first marriages (Brown, 2010), remarried couples not only have a family of origin, but a “marriage of origin” as well. This marriage of origin is also likely to negatively impact satisfaction and RSR ability for remarried couples as it may be that the previous marriage ended partially because of a failure to use RSR skills.

The contextual factors that influence the remarital relationship include the presence of stepchildren, family complexity, serial marriage influences, unique economic demands, and lack of social support from family and friends (Falke & Larson, 2007). Each of these factors adds stress to the relationship and likely makes maintaining and working on the relationship much more difficult.

Individual Factors. Certain individual traits and behaviors that develop out of the remarriage context may influence the remarital relationship. These include attitudes about the previous relationship and expectations for the new relationship (Falke & Larson, 2007; Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008). Falke & Larson found evidence that negative attitudes toward a partner’s ex-spouse as well as an emotional attachment to one’s own ex-spouse have a negative impact on the new remarriage relationship. Divorce may result in an insecure attachment style in the individual. This insecure attachment style may hinder relationship success in the new marriage. In addition, former spouse issues may make it difficult for the individual to focus his/her energy on the current relationship and implementing RSR.

In addition to former spouse issues, remarried individuals may also subscribe to unrealistic beliefs and expectations for their new marriage (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008). Many remarried individuals have unrealistic standards that their remarriage should conform to the norms of first marriages and that adjustment to this new arrangement should be

smooth and quick. Norms for remarriages and stepfamilies are missing from our society (Booth & Edwards, 1992). With no clear map for successful stepfamily living and unrealistic expectations, couples place great strain on their relationship. Helping couples develop realistic attitudes and expectations for their remarriage must be a focus of any good remarital intervention program.

Couple Factors. Adding to contextual and individual factors are couple processes that directly impact the relationship. Falke and Larson (2007) point to the degree of couple consensus and role ambiguity and strain as influencers of relationship satisfaction. They suggest that greater consensus among remarital partners and better role clarity lead to greater remarital satisfaction. Determining how couples are able to use various strategies to build this consensus and role clarity is of utmost importance.

While studying couple conflict processes in remarriage, Hanzal and Segrin (2008) found that spouses in remarriages were able to enact conflict handling strategies just as well as spouses in first marriages. These findings suggest that marital strategies among remarried couples may not be as low and dysfunctional as some have suggested. Therefore, despite having one or two negative traits or circumstances, many remarried individuals are able to find ways to counteract these traits in such a way that they are able to successfully deal with them and develop a healthy, satisfying relationship (Booth & Edwards, 1992). In this study, I seek to discover if RSR implementation is one possible way in which remarried couples are able to overcome the obstacles associated with their complex family arrangement. I also look at positive communication, negative communication, and conflict as these are couple processes that may be correlated with RSR.

Stability. Remarriage appears to be less stable than first marriages as divorce rates are higher for this population (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Because of this, it is imperative that research focuses on uncovering the reasons behind higher divorce rates for this group. Booth and Edwards (1989, 1992) offer one such explanation. These researchers developed a “poor marriage material” hypothesis suggesting that people in second or higher-order marriages possess qualities that make them unfit to maintain a marital relationship, and therefore are at greater risk for marital dissolution. Some of these qualities include poor relationship building skills, immature behavior, drug or alcohol abuse, and being in trouble with the law. Booth and Edwards (1992) found evidence to support the “poor marriage material” hypothesis, but they also documented that lower stability rates may also be attributed to couples being poorly integrated with parents and in-laws, being more willing to leave the marriage, having a lower socioeconomic status, and being in an age heterogamous marriage.

While deficit perspectives have dominated the literature, evidence exists to suggest that remarriage relationships are not as inherently unstable as some have previously thought. Wu and Penning’s (1997) research with a Canadian sample demonstrates that older adults (over 40) who remarry may actually experience *more* stable relationships than those in first marriages. Because these individuals are older, they may be more mature and have more realistic attitudes about marriage in general. It may also be that these individuals learned something useful from their previous marriage that they can now apply to their new marriage.

In this study, I partially tested this poor marriage material hypothesis by discovering how remarried individuals compare to first married individuals on the dimension of relationship self-regulation. The poor marriage material hypothesis suggests that remarried individuals may demonstrate poorer relationship self regulation ability than first married individuals. However, a

counter-hypothesis based on an ecosystemic theory (Bulbolz & Sontag, 1993) may suggest that remarried individuals have similar levels of relationship self-regulation as first married individuals, but because of their complex environment (ex-spouses, financial stress, step-children, etc.) they see a smaller return on investment. In this study, I hypothesized that a combination of personality traits and contextual complexity make it more difficult for remarried individuals to enact relationship self-regulation in their relationship than first married individuals, thereby diminishing their satisfaction and stability. Even though I expect to find that remarried individuals fair more poorly on RSR measures, this actually provides a much needed explanation as to why remarried relationships are less stable than first marriages. This is also a promising explanation for clinicians and educators working with the remarried population as we know that RSR ability can be taught (Halford et. al., 2006; Wilson & Halford, 2008).

Quality. Research on remarital quality compared to first marital quality is not conclusive (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine; 2000). Booth and Edwards found no difference in relationship quality between first marrieds and remarrieds, though others have found that remarrieds actually report lower relationship quality than first marrieds (Coleman et al., 2000). The added stress of the remarriage situation likely is responsible for any lower marital quality that may exist; this is supported by the notion that remarriages in which both spouses have children report lower marital quality than those remarriages in which only one spouse has children (Coleman et al., 2000). Greater family complexity likely results in greater stress which in turn hinders one's ability to effectively use strategies and effort to maintain and strengthen the couple relationship.

Cohabitation. Like remarriage, cohabitation is a unique experience with its own dynamics and challenges. This living arrangement continues to be a popular form of coupling

in the United States, not just as a precursor to marriage, but as an alternative living arrangement as well (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; Manning & Smock, 2005; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). Cohabitation is also increasing among middle-aged and older adults (Brown & Kawamura, 2010). With so many couples in cohabitating relationships, it is crucial for relationship educators to better understand these relationships to best serve this population (Rhoades et. al, 2009).

Context. While it was originally thought that couples actively choose to cohabit as a way to test out their relationship, researchers have discovered that cohabiters often report that they more ‘slid into’ the relationship (Manning & Smock, 2005; Rhoades et. al., 2009). In addition, cohabiters do not seem to possess the same dedication (e.g., internal motivation and desire to keep their relationship into the future) as those who marry (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Dedication levels are likely directly related to relationship self-regulation and because cohabiters report lower levels of dedication than married individuals, they may also report lower levels of RSR. In this study, I explored how cohabiters’ RSR levels compare to RSR levels of married individuals.

Similar to the research suggesting that remarrieds are poor marriage material (Booth & Edwards, 1989, 1992), there is also research suggesting that there is a selection effect for cohabitation in that those who choose to cohabit possess certain characteristics that have negative impacts on the relationship (Rhoades et al., 2009). For example, Woods and Emery (2002) found that after controlling for ethnicity, religiousness, and delinquency history, there was no significant association between premarital cohabitation and divorce. Likewise, the increased divorce rates for the remarried population may be explained by the personal characteristics of the remarried population rather than an inherent difficulty with the remarriage

experience. Because RSR has links to relationship satisfaction, it is important to determine cohabiters' levels of reported RSR to determine if they are working as hard as married couples and just are not seeing the benefits, or if they actually report a decreased ability to implement RSR in their relationship.

Not only is cohabitation a common living arrangement for the young, it is also increasing among the middle aged and older adults and appears to be an alternative to marriage for these couples (Brown & Kawamura, 2010). Most of these older cohabiters have been married before. Because of this growing trend and the long duration of cohabiting relationships among older adults, it is appropriate to compare these individuals who choose to cohabit post-divorce with those who choose to remarry after a divorce. Brown and Kawamura found that while these older cohabiters were less likely than their remarried counterparts to report that their relationship was 'very happy,' they did not differ on dimensions of emotional satisfaction, pleasure, openness, time spent together, criticism, and demands. In this study, I explored one additional dimension in which these groups may differ – that of relationship self-regulation.

Quality. When compared to their married counterparts, cohabiting couples report poorer relationship quality (Brown & Booth, 1996). In addition, Brown (2004) followed a group of cohabiters and found that those who eventually married reported better relationship quality than those who continued to cohabit. However, it was also found that cohabiters who had plans to marry reported levels of relationship quality similar to those who actually did marry (Brown, 2004; Brown et. al., 1996). This research lends support to the notion that relationship quality in cohabiting relationships is related to the level of commitment among partners. Because of this increased relationship distress, some researchers have suggested that cohabiting couples are a high-risk population that is under-served by traditional 'marriage education initiatives' (Lichter

& Qian, 2008). Education programs need to be offered to this population regardless of their intention to eventually marry or not.

Purposes and Hypotheses

In summary, I sought to answer two general research questions through this study. The first is to discover who puts more effort and work into their relationships – individuals in first-order relationships (first married, cohabiting with no prior divorce) or individuals in second or higher order relationships (remarriage, cohabiting after a divorce)? The second question is to discover who puts more effort and work into their relationships – individuals in married relationships (first married, remarried) or those in cohabiting relationships? To answer these two questions, I compared various couple types on the dimensions of relationship self-regulation as well as on communication – self-reports of positive communication and negative communication – that are related to satisfaction and may be related to RSR (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001). More specific hypotheses were as follows:

Comparing marriage and remarriage

1. Individuals in first-order relationships (i.e., first marriage, cohabitation with no prior divorce) will report higher relationship self-regulation levels than those in second or higher order relationships (i.e., remarried, cohabitation after divorce).
2. Individuals in first-order relationships will report higher relationship satisfaction than those in second or higher order relationships.
3. Individuals in first-order relationships will report more positive communication than those in second-order or higher relationships.
4. Individuals in first-order relationships will report less negative communication than those in second-order or higher relationships.

Comparing cohabitation and marriage

5. Individuals who are in a marital relationship will report higher relationship self-regulation than those in a cohabiting relationship.
6. Individuals who are in a marital relationship will report higher relationship satisfaction than those in a cohabiting relationship.
7. Individuals in marital relationships will report more positive communication than those in cohabiting relationships.
8. Individuals who are in a marital relationship will report less negative communication than those in a cohabiting relationship.

Control Variables

In addition to the variables above, I controlled for the effects of two demographic variables that may affect the dependent variables in this study. They are length of relationship and education. Length of relationship has been shown to be related to relationship satisfaction and RSR levels (Halford et al., 2007). Education is also related to variables in the study such as selection into cohabitation (Rhoades et al., 2009) and therefore, it was included as a control variable.

Method

Sample

I included respondents who took the RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE) questionnaire online between January, 2003 and March, 2010 who indicated they were currently in either a marriage or cohabiting relationship and those who answered all the questions in the study. The total sample used in this study was 6, 591 respondents and the demographics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics

	Female 61% (n=4028)	Male 39% (n=2563)
Couple Type		
First Married	29.80%	33.90%
Remarried	29.10%	30.90%
Cohabiting w/no prior divorce	24.50%	20.60%
Cohabiting post divorce	16.60%	14.60%
Age		
Mean	30.7	34.01
SD	9.4	10.7
Range	17-72	18-77
Education		
High school diploma or less	5.70%	6%
Some college	34.90%	31.30%
Associate's degree	9.10%	8.30%
Bachelor's degree	23%	23.70%
Graduate or professional degree, not completed	9.80%	7.60%
Graduate or professional degree, completed	17.60%	23.10%
Income		
Under \$20,000	40.90%	18.70%
\$20,000 – 39,999	22.00%	19.20%
\$40,000 – 59,999	15.60%	17.20%
\$60,000 – 79,999	9.30%	12.40%
\$80,000 – 99,999	5.10%	9.00%
\$100,000 +	7.10%	23.50%
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	81.90%	83.80%
African	4.40%	4.50%
Asian	4.60%	3.80%
Latino	4.60%	4.70%
Other	4.50%	3.20%
Religious Affiliation		
Latter-day Saint (Mormon)	30.70%	32.60%
Protestant	25.10%	24.30%
Catholic	16.40%	15.70%
Jewish	2.40%	2.90%
None	20.70%	20.40%
Other	4.70%	4.10%

Procedure

I derived the data for these analyses from the RELATIONSHIP Evaluation (RELATE: Holman, Busby, Doxey, Klein, & Loyer-Carlson, 1997) questionnaire data set. RELATE is a 271-item questionnaire designed to provide a comprehensive measurement of romantic relationships by assessing multiple variables that have been shown to be predictive of relationship satisfaction as theorized by ecosystemic theory (Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001). I used select scales from the RELATE to measure the variables in this study. The RELATE has been used in a variety of settings, including classroom and counseling settings, to help couples, couple educators, and therapists better understand the factors that contribute to relationship satisfaction. Participants were asked to answer most items on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=never/strongly disagree, 5=very often/strongly agree) as well as to answer basic demographic questions. The scales of RELATE demonstrate high internal consistency and reliability (alphas between .70 and .90), and have been shown to be both valid and reliable (alpha test and test-retest) (Busby et al., 2001). In the next section, I outline the specific scales I used in my analysis.

Measures

The independent variables in this study were couple type and gender.

Couple Type. I determined four mutually exclusive couple types based on respondents' answers to questions about their relationship status and previous number of divorces. Individuals were each coded as belonging to one of the following relationship status categories: 1) first marriage (n=2069) 2) cohabiting and no prior divorce (n=1515) 3) remarried (n=1942) 4) cohabiting with prior divorce(s) (n=1039).

The dependent variables in this study were marital satisfaction, relationship self-regulation, positive communication, and negative communication.

Relationship Satisfaction. I measured relationship satisfaction with a seven-item scale in which respondents indicate how satisfied they are with various aspects of their current relationship (physical intimacy, love experienced, conflict resolution, amount of relationship equality, amount of time spent together, quality of communication, and overall relationship satisfaction). Cronbach alpha for the scale was 0.91. Scores for each item were summed and divided by the number of items answered to obtain a mean item score. Scores can range from one to five. Higher values on this scale indicate greater relationship satisfaction.

The following dependent variables were measured by taking a summed score of the respondent's self-report and their report of their partner. One of the advantages of the RELATE questionnaire is that it asks for both the individual's self report on each of the dimensions as well as their perception of their partner on the same scales. Previous research has documented that ratings of self and ratings of partner are highly correlated, and therefore, they can be appropriately combined into one general measure of the relationship. Combining the scores appears to be a better predictor of couple outcomes than using self and partner as separate scales (Busby & Gardner, 2008; Busby, Holman, & Niehuis, 2009). Cronbach alpha coefficients are reported for each scale.

Relationship Self-Regulation. I measured relationship self-regulation with a 16-item scale in which respondents indicate their own ability as well as the perception of their partner's ability to use relationship strategies and effort to enhance the relationship. The specific items can be found in the appendix. Cronbach alpha for the scale was 0.869. Scores from each item were summed and divided by the number of items answered to obtain a mean item score. Scores

can range from one to five. Higher values on this scale indicate higher levels of perceived relationship self-regulation.

Positive Communication. I measured positive communication with a 16-item scale assessing the respondent's perception of their own as well as their partner's empathic communication and clear sending of information. The specific items can be found in the appendix. Cronbach alpha for the scale was 0.931. Scores from each item were summed and divided by the number of items answered to obtain a mean item score. Scores can range from one to five. Higher values on this scale indicate higher levels of positive communication.

Negative Communication. I measured positive communication with a 14-item scale assessing the respondent's perception of their own as well as their partner's criticism and defensiveness in the relationship. The specific items can be found in the appendix. Cronbach alpha for the scale was 0.912. Scores from each item were summed and divided by the number of items answered to obtain a mean item score. Scores can range from one to five. Higher values on this scale indicate higher levels of negative communication.

The control variables in this study were length of the relationship and education.

Length of the Relationship. Respondents indicated the length of their relationship by answering the following questions on RELATE: "How long has it been since you first started dating your partner? (If married, how long did you date your partner before marriage?)" and "How long have you and your partner been married?" Responses were coded as follows: 0 to 3 months (1), 4 to 6 months (2), 7 to 12 months (3), 13 months to 2 years (4), 3-5 years (5), 6-10 years (6), 11-15 years (7), 16-20 years (8), 21 – 30 years (9), 31 – 40 years, and more than 40 years (11). Responses from both items were summed to give a total length of the relationship

value. Values on this scale range from 1 to 22 with higher values indicating more time in the relationship.

Education. Respondents indicated their educational attainment by answering the following question on RELATE: “How much education have you completed?” Responses were coded as follows: less than high school (1), high school equivalency (GED) (2), high school diploma (3), some college not currently enrolled (4), some college currently enrolled (5), associate’s degree (6), bachelor’s degree (7), graduate or professional degree not completed (8), graduate or professional degree completed (9). Values on this scale range from 1 to 9 with higher scores indicating greater educational attainment.

Analytic Strategy

First, I calculated mean scores and standard deviations for all the variables in the study. I ran a multiple regression with the control variables entered first to determine their effects on the dependent variables. While the R-squared values were relatively small for both length of relationship and education (.051 and .012 respectively), the regression models indicated that these control variables were both significantly related to the dependent variables in this study. Because of this, I chose to include them as control variables.

In general, across all couple types, participants reported that they were fairly satisfied in their relationships. Participants also generally reported that they felt both they and their partners were between somewhat and usually able to use strategies and effort to improve their relationship. Participants across all couple types generally reported that they used positive communication somewhere between sometimes and often in their relationship. Negative communication was reported as being generally used somewhere between rarely and sometimes in their relationship.

In general, first marrieds scored significantly better than all other groups on all measures. On the other hand, remarried individuals generally scored significantly worse than all other groups. There were no significant differences between the two cohabiting groups. To understand the nuances of the difference between couple types, I turn to my analytic strategy for my specific hypotheses.

Because the dependent variables were correlated with each other (strengths of the correlation coefficients ranging between .51 and .82), I determined that a Multiple Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was an appropriate statistical approach for answering my research questions.

In order to compare couple types and gender on mean scores for relationship self-regulation, marital satisfaction, positive communication, and negative communication, I ran a two-way Multiple Analyses of Covariance (MANCOVA). A MANCOVA was appropriate for this study because I was looking at a categorical independent variable with multiple dependent variables and control variables, and I was interested in identifying how the means of the dependent variables differ across the different groups of the independent variables (Bray & Maxwell, 1985; Haase & Ellis, 1987). Length of the relationship and education served as covariate variables in the MANCOVA, and marital satisfaction, relationship self-regulation, positive communication, negative communication, and conflict were the dependent variables.

The results from the MANCOVA indicated that Couple Type had significant effects on the mean values of the dependent variables when holding length of relationship and education constant. The multivariate F -test for Couple Type was significant, Wilk's $\Lambda = .961$, $F(12, 17404) = 22.208$, $p < .001$. Gender also had significant effects on the mean values of the dependent variables. The multivariate F -test for Couple Type was significant, Wilk's $\Lambda = .996$,

$F(4, 6578) = 7.092, p < .001$. The covariates of Relationship Length and Education were both significantly related to the dependent variables at $p < .001$.

Because the multivariate tests were significant, it was appropriate to look at the univariate results. To evaluate the effect sizes of Couple Type on the dependent variables the partial η^2 statistic was used. The univariate F -test associated with Couple Type was significant for each dependent variable: relationship self regulation $F(3, 6581) = 35.98, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 .016$; relationship satisfaction $F(3, 6581) = 77.27, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 .034$; positive communication $F(3, 6581) = 43.54, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 .019$; and negative communication $F(3, 6581) = 27.23, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 .012$.

To evaluate the effect sizes of gender on the dependent variables the partial η^2 statistic was used. The univariate F -test associated with gender was significant for each dependent variable: relationship self regulation $F(1, 6581) = 23.53, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 .004$; relationship satisfaction $F(1, 6581) = 19.10, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 .003$; positive communication $F(1, 6581) = 10.48, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 .002$; and negative communication $F(1, 6581) = 7.09, p < .010, \text{partial } \eta^2 .001$. The interaction between gender and couple type was not significant.

Next, because both the multivariate and univariate F -tests were significant, it was appropriate to look at the specific differences between each couple type on the dependent variables through step-down F -tests, using the Bonferroni method to control for multiple comparisons. The estimated means and standard errors for the four couple types by gender on the four dependent variables, while controlling for education and length of relationship, are presented in Table 2.

The first hypothesis I tested was if couple types in first order relationships report better relationship self-regulation than those in second-order or higher relationships. There was some

Table 2

Estimated Means and Standard Errors (in parentheses) for Females and Males in the four Couple Type Groups on Satisfaction, Relationship Self-Regulation, Positive Communication, and Negative Communication while controlling for Relationship Length and Education

Dep. Variable	a. First Married		b. Remarried		c. Cohabiting w/ no prior divorce		d. Cohabiting w/ prior divorce	
	Females (N= 1201)	Males (N=868)	Females (N= 1171)	Males (N=793)	Females (N=986)	Males (N=529)	Females (N= 670)	Males (N=373)
Satisfaction	3.72 (.03) ^{b*}	3.87 (.03) ^b	3.37 (.03) ^{acd}	3.36 (.03) ^{acd}	3.62 (.03) ^{b*}	3.76 (.04) ^b	3.59 (.04) ^{b*}	3.72 (.05) ^b
RSR	3.42 (.02) ^{bcd*}	3.49 (.02) ^b	3.23 (.02) ^{ad}	3.28 (.02) ^{acd}	3.31 (.02) ^{a*}	3.41 (.02) ^b	3.33 (.02) ^{ab}	3.39 (.03) ^b
Pos. Comm.	3.80 (.02) ^{bc}	3.87 (.02) ^b	3.59 (.02) ^{ad}	3.60 (.02) ^{acd}	3.68 (.02) ^a	3.78 (.03) ^b	3.75 (.03) ^b	3.79 (.03) ^b
Neg. Comm.	2.41 (.02) ^{bcd}	2.36 (.03) ^b	2.61 (.02) ^a	2.62 (.03) ^{acd}	2.53 (.03) ^a	2.45 (.03) ^b	2.58 (.03) ^a	2.49 (.04) ^b

Note: Scores on all scales can range from 1-5.

^{abcd} significantly different than other corresponding couple types of the same gender

* significantly different than the males in the group

support for this hypothesis in that first marrieds reported the highest RSR levels and remarrieds reported the lowest. However, the first-order cohabiters and second-order cohabiters were not significantly different from one another. More specifically, for females, first married individuals reported significantly higher RSR levels than all other groups. However, remarrieds reported significantly lower RSR than first marrieds and the cohabiting post-divorce group, but not significantly different than the cohabiting with no prior divorce. The two cohabiting groups were not significantly different from one another. For males, remarrieds reported significantly lower RSR levels than all other groups. No other groups were different from each other. The way in which order of relationship seemed to matter was with gender differences. Within the first-order couple types (i.e., first married and cohabiting with no prior divorce), females reported significantly lower RSR levels than the male respondents.

The second hypothesis I tested was if couple types in first order relationships report higher relationship satisfaction than those in second-order or higher relationships. There was some support for this hypothesis in that remarrieds reported the lowest satisfaction; however, the cohabiting groups were not significantly different from one another. More specifically, for both males and females, remarrieds reported the lowest satisfaction and this was significantly different from all other groups. No other groups were significantly different from one another. The remarried group was the only group where males and females were not significantly different from one another. Within all other couple types, females reported significantly lower satisfaction than the male respondents.

The third hypothesis I tested was if couple types in first order relationships report more positive communication than those in second-order or higher relationships. There was some support for this hypothesis in that remarrieds reported the lowest positive communication levels;

however, there was no difference between the cohabiting groups and first marrieds. More specifically, for females, first marrieds reported significantly higher positive communication than remarrieds and those who cohabit with no prior divorce. Remarrieds reported significantly lower positive communication levels than first marrieds and those who cohabit with a prior divorce. For males, remarrieds reported significantly lower positive communication levels than all other groups. No other groups were significantly different from one another. There were no significant differences by gender within all couple types.

The fourth hypothesis I tested was if couples in first order relationships reported less negative communication than those in second-order or higher relationships. There was some support for this hypothesis in that first marrieds reported the lowest negative communication levels and remarrieds reported the highest levels; however there was no significant difference between cohabiting groups. More specifically, for females, first married individuals reported significantly less negative communication than all other groups. There were no other significant differences across groups. For males, remarried individuals reported significantly more negative communication than any other group. There were no other significant differences across groups. There were no significant differences by gender within all couple types.

The fifth hypothesis I tested was if couple types who are in a marital relationship report higher relationship self-regulation than couple types who are cohabiting. This hypothesis was not supported as first marrieds reported the highest RSR levels, but remarrieds reported the lowest.

The sixth hypothesis I tested was if couple types who are in a marital relationship report higher relationship satisfaction than those couple types who are cohabiting. This was not

supported as remarried individuals reported the lowest relationship satisfaction, and this difference was significant for both genders.

The seventh hypothesis I tested was if couple types who are in a marital relationship report more positive communication than those couple types who are cohabiting. This hypothesis was not supported as remarried individuals tended to report significantly less positive communication than the other groups.

The final hypothesis I tested was if couple types who are in a marital relationship report less negative communication than those couple types who are cohabiting. This hypothesis was not supported as first married females reported significantly less negative communication than all other couple types, but remarried males reported significantly more negative communication than all other couple types.

Discussion

One of the main findings of this study was that first marrieds generally fair significantly better than all other couple types on the dimensions of communication, satisfaction, and relationship self-regulation. This fits with previous research demonstrating that those in first marriages tend to report higher satisfaction compared to those in remarriages (Coleman et al., 2000), and those married report higher satisfaction compared to those who cohabit (Brown & Booth, 1996). The findings that first marrieds reported better communication and better relationship self-regulation may help explain this relationship between couple type and relationship quality. This research brings the important relationship self-regulation construct into the picture and answers the question of who reports that they work hardest at their relationships – it appears that first marrieds do. While the differences in reported RSR levels are small across couple types, they are statistically significant. They are also clinically significant in that

increasing the remarried sample's RSR reported levels by one standard deviation would put them in the range of the first married sample (Jacobson & Truax, 1991). The next step of this research is to determine why first marrieds may report putting in more effort and work into their relationships than all other couple types, as well as determine if this is a selection effect of those who remain in first marriages or if there is something unique about the first marriage experience compared to the other relationship types.

The findings of relationship self-regulation level by couple type and gender are similar to the reports on the other relational dynamics of satisfaction, positive communication, and negative communication. First marrieds demonstrated the highest RSR reports, while remarrieds demonstrate the lowest reports. Cohabitors were in the middle with no real difference between those who cohabit with no prior divorce and those who cohabit after a prior divorce. Remarried individuals report that they put the least amount of work and effort into their relationship, even less than cohabiters who have also experienced a previous divorce. With the research documenting the disparities between cohabiting and married individuals (Brown, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996); Lichter & Qian, 2008), this finding is alarming. Because those who cohabit after a divorce reported small, but significantly higher levels of RSR than remarrieds, there was no apparent support for the notion that remarrieds fair worse simply because their situations are more complex (Falke & Larson, 2007). Assuming that RSR levels are related to dedication in relationships, it does not appear that cohabiters are less dedicated to making efforts in the relationship than all married people – remarried people in particular (Stanley et al., 2004). The differences in RSR levels between those who cohabit after a divorce and those who remarry after a divorce may possibly be explained by individuals' views of their present relationship in relation to their past relationship (Falke & Larson, 2007; Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008).

There is something unique to being in a remarriage that hinders one's ability to implement RSR into the relationship. Cohabitors in a second-order relationship may view their cohabiting relationship as entirely different from any previous marriages so they still remain hopeful about their ability to enact strategies and effort to improve the relationship. On the other hand, remarried individuals, after a period of time, may view their second- or higher-order marriage as more similar to their past unsuccessful marriage, and therefore, they may be less hopeful about how their efforts can positively affect the relationship. Those in remarriages may have developed a fatalistic attitude toward relationships and marriages in particular, holding the belief that all relationships are bound to end and therefore, any relational efforts are ultimately futile. Exploring the attitudes of remarried individuals and how these attitudes influence their current relationship is a crucial next step to this research.

In addition to attitudes about past relationships and expectations for current relationships, personality and demographic characteristics may help explain some of the differences in RSR levels across couple types. There may be a selection effect at play similar to the selection effect of cohabitation documented in the literature (Rhoades et al., 2009) in that certain personality and demographic characteristics influence someone's decision to either cohabit or remarry after a divorce. Future research is needed to explore these selection effects for those in this specific circumstance.

Another interesting RSR finding is that gender differences exist only for those in first order relationships. First married females and cohabiting with no prior divorce females reported lower RSR than male respondents in the same groups. Since females are generally less satisfied and tend to report the relationship more negatively than males, it is most surprising that this does not hold for those in second order relationships. It may be that second order relationships are

equally hard for both males and females. Further investigating why gender differences exist in first order relationships but not in second order relationships could add further insight to this research.

Not only did remarrieds report the lowest levels of RSR, they also tended to report the poorest relationship dynamics of all couple types surveyed. These findings do not support Hanzal and Segrin's (2008) research that remarrieds enact conflict handling strategies just as well as first marrieds; rather, the finding that remarried individuals report poorer RSR and communication than both cohabiters and first marrieds offers more support for the poor marriage material hypothesis proposed by Booth et al. (1989, 1992). While this picture of remarriage may seem grim, research provides some hope in that RSR is a skill that can be taught, and thereby, may have the potential to improve remarried relationships (Halford, 2004; Halford et. al., 2001; Wilson & Halford, 2008).

Limitations

The main limitation of this research is the sample is not likely generalizable to the national population. Many of the participants were recruited in the University setting so students and highly educated people are oversampled. A disproportionate percentage of the sample was female. In addition, the sample contained a high percentage of Caucasian individuals and about one-third of the sample was affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). However, research has shown that there are not many differences between LDS and non-LDS families in terms of couple dynamics (Heaton, Goodman, & Holman, 2001).

Another limitation is that the number of marriages and number of previous cohabiters were not taken into account. Research suggests that it may be important to determine how those in a first or second cohabitation union compare to those in a third, fourth or higher cohabitation

union (Lichter & Qian, 2008). Likewise, it may be important to determine how those in a second marriage compare to those in a third, fourth, or even fifth or higher marriage. Those who remarry and/or cohabit multiple times may differ from those who have only married for the second time. Combining these relationships with those who remarry only once or twice may not capture these nuances. Further research that looks at serial remarriers and cohabiters is important in order to better understand this population.

In addition, another limitation of this study is that those in higher-order relationships were assumed to be in complex relationships. This may not be the case as those in remarriages and those who are cohabiting with a prior divorce may not have the typical complex situations associated with stepfamilies such as stepchildren, child support, alimony, and ex-spouse stress (Falke & Larson, 2007). Also, this study did not take into account those who remarry after a death which is likely a different experience than those who remarry after a divorce. More research is needed to study the different kinds of second and higher-order relationships and how they compare with one another.

One additional limitation is that some of the couples in the study may be in a relationship with one another.

Implications for Clinicians and Couple Educators

This research emphasized the importance of the relationship self-regulation construct, and further suggests that this relational dimension deserves further attention (Wilson et al., 2005). Relationship education programs based on RSR principles are promising (Halford et al. 2004; Halford et al., 2001), and they ought to be developed and studied further to maximize their effectiveness for all couple types.

While most couple types may benefit from relationship education (Halford et al., 2001), programs need to be geared towards those who are most at-risk for relationship distress (Halford, 2004). The findings in this study further demonstrate the need for programs targeted specifically for remarried couples as they tend to fair worse in terms of stress, communication problems, RSR, etc. than their married and cohabiting counterparts (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Doss and colleagues (2009) have found that remarrieds are less likely than their first married counterparts to participate in premarital education programs prior to their marriage, and if we are to make premarital education most effective, we need to ensure that those who are remarrying are participating. Couple educators are starting to develop programs and educational materials specifically for remarried couples, and this appears to be a good use of marriage initiative resources (Deal & Olson, 2010; Higginbotham & Skogrand, in press). Specifically, relationship education programs based on RSR principles may be promising for the remarried population. Educators administering programs like CoupleCARE (Halford et al., 2006) may maximize their effectiveness if they work to get the program to the remarried population and if they include a special unit for remarrieds. Further research is needed to determine if first marrieds and remarrieds (as well as those in first-order relationships and second- or higher-order relationships) learn relationship self-regulation in different ways.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to compare relationship self-regulation levels among cohabiting, first married, and remarried individuals. First marrieds reported significantly higher RSR levels than all other groups while remarrieds reported significantly lower RSR levels than all other groups. This finding sheds light on the growing need for programs tailored specifically for helping remarried individuals develop RSR skills that are shown to impact relationship

stability and quality (Wilson et al., 2005). Relationship educators need to target couples who are both most likely to benefit from and most in need of their programs (Halford, 2004), and remarried individuals appear to fit both of these categories. More efforts need to be made to ensure they have the opportunity to receive quality couple relationship education that is tailored to their specific needs. In addition, programs and therapy that are based on relationship self-regulation principles (e.g., CoupleCARE: Halford et al., 2006) may be especially appropriate for remarried individuals, and emphasis should be made on getting these programs delivered to the remarried population. While there is evidence to suggest remarried individuals will benefit from couple education programs (Adler-Baeder, & Higginbotham, 2004; Deal & Olson, 2010; Gelatt, Adler-Baeder, & Seeley, 2010), further research is needed to document the benefits of relationship education for this specific population.

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Appendix

Relationship Satisfaction

1 = Very Dissatisfied 2 = Dissatisfied 3 = Neutral 4 = Satisfied 5 = Very satisfied

In your relationship, how satisfied are you with the following?

179. The physical intimacy you experience.
180. The love you experience.
181. How conflicts are resolved.
182. The amount of relationship equality you experience.
183. The amount of time you have together.
184. The quality of your communication.
185. Your overall relationship with your partner.

Relationship Self-Regulation

1=Not at all True 2 3=Somewhat true 4 5=Very True

Self-Regulation Items – for self

- 501 I try to apply ideas about effective relationships to improve our relationship
- 502 If things go wrong in the relationship I tend to feel powerless
- 503 I tend to fall back on what is comfortable for me in relationships, rather than trying new ways of relating
- 504 I actually put my intentions or plans for personal change into practice
- 505 Even when I know what I could do differently to improve things in the relationship, I cannot seem to change my behavior.
- 506 If my partner doesn't appreciate the change efforts I am making, I tend to give up
- 507 I give my partner helpful feedback on the ways she/he can help me achieve my goals

508 If the way I'm approaching change doesn't work, I can usually think of something different to try.

Self-Regulation Items-for partner

509 My partner tries to apply ideas about effective relationships to improve our relationship.

510 If things go wrong in the relationship my partner tends to feel powerless.

511 My partner tends to fall back on what is comfortable for him/her in relationships, rather than trying new ways of relating.

512 My partner actually puts his/her intentions or plans for personal change into practice.

513 Even when my partner knows what s/he should do differently to improve things in the relationship, s/he cannot seem to change her/his behavior.

514 If I don't appreciate the change efforts my partner is making, s/he tends to give up.

515 My partner gives me helpful feedback on the ways I can help him/her achieve his/her goals.

516 If the way my partner is approaching change doesn't work, s/he can usually think of something different to try.

Positive Communication

1=Never	2=Rarely	3=Sometimes	4 = Often	5=Very Often
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Positive Communication - for self

197. In most matters, I understand what my partner is trying to say.

189. I understand my partner's feelings.

192. I am able to listen to my partner in an understanding way.

188. When I talk to my partner I can say what I want in a clear manner.

191. I struggle to find words to express myself to my partner.

194. I sit down with my partner and just talk things over.

196. I talk over pleasant things that happen during the day when I am with my partner.

186. I discuss my personal problems with my partner.

Positive Communication – for partner

226. In most matters, my partner understands what I am trying to say.

218. My partner understands my feelings.

221. My partner is able to listen to me in an understanding way.

217. My partner can say what he/she wants to say in a clear manner.

220. My partner struggles to find words to express him/herself to me.

223. My partner sits down with me just to talk things over.

225. My partner talks over pleasant things that happen during the day with me.

215. My partner discusses his/her personal problems with me.

Negative Communication

1=Never	2=Rarely	3=Sometimes	4 = Often	5=Very Often
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Negative Communication – for self

198. I don't censor my complaints at all. I really let my partner have it full force.

203. I use a tactless choice of words when I complain.

208. There's no stopping me once I get started complaining.

199. I have no respect for my partner when we are discussing an issue.

204. When I get upset I can see glaring faults in my partner's personality.

209. When my partner complains I feel that I have to "ward off" these attacks.

213. I feel unfairly attacked when my partner is being negative.

Negative Communication – for partner

227. My partner doesn't censor his or her complaints at all. She or he really lets me have it full force.

232. My partner uses a tactless choice of words when she or he complains.

237. There's no stopping my partner once he/she gets started complaining.

228. My partner shows no respect for me when we are discussing an issue.
233. When my partner gets upset, my partner acts like there are glaring faults in my personality.
238. When I complain, my partner acts like he or she has to “ward off” my attacks.
242. My partner acts like he/she is being unfairly attacked when I am being negative.