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Discursive Struggles of Tradition and Nontradition in the Retrospective Accounts of Married Couples Who Cohabited Before Engagement

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Abstract

Couples who cohabit and then become engaged often participate in nontraditional living arrangements and traditional marriage proposals. Because understandings of tradition and nontradition are constituted in discourse, we employed relational dialectics theory to examine the interplay of competing discourses in the talk of married participants who cohabited before engagement. Through retrospective interviews, we investigated the discursive struggles in participants' talk across three contexts: pre-engagement cohabitation, the marriage proposal ritual, and the (re)telling of the proposal story to friends and family. Analysis of participant interviews illustrated three discursive struggles: (a) pragmatism and risk in cohabitation, (b) romance and partnership in the proposal ritual, and (c) privacy and revelation in the proposal ritual and (re)telling. We discuss how tradition and nontradition interplayed to redefine the engagement tradition, create new discursive meaning, and constitute couples' shared identities.

Couples who cohabit before engagement inhabit a space fraught with complexities. These couples break traditional norms by living together before engagement or marriage; however, they often adopt tradition by participating in culturally prescribed marriage proposal rituals in the United States. For example, men often propose by surprising women with an engagement ring, aligning with traditional gender and family norms (Robnett & Leaper, 2012). In the present study, we define tradition as long-established beliefs and/or practices. We conceptualize tradition as broader cultural understandings of how rituals such as engagements have been—and continue to be—enacted. We consider these cultural understandings of tradition and nontradition as constituted in discourse; therefore, relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2011) framed our exploration of the negotiation of marriage proposal rituals among married couples who cohabited before engagement. We focused on the discursive interplay of three stages in participants' relationships: before, during, and after their marriage proposal. We considered both distal (or macro) and proximal (or micro) discourses in participants' talk about their conversations with family, friends, and their partners.

Cohabitation and Rituals

Premarital and Pre-Engagement Cohabitation

Heterosexual couples in the United States have been cohabiting more and marrying later, with the percentage of women cohabiting with their romantic partner rising from 3% in 1982 to 11% between 2006 and 2011 (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012). Reasons for premarital cohabitation include: spending more time together, convenience, financial circumstance, and evaluating compatibility before marriage (Huang, Smock, Manning, & Bergstrom-Lynch, 2011; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009a). Evaluating compatibility has become particularly salient because the cultural perceptions of cohabitation in the United States have shifted from deviance to acceptance and normalcy (Raley, 2001). According to the trial marriage theory, the experience of living together allows couples to make an informed decision about whether marriage—and a lifetime commitment—should occur in the future (Kline et al., 2004).

Researchers have conceptualized the “cohabitation effect” to explain the more negative marital outcomes of couples who cohabit before marriage as compared to couples who do not cohabit before marriage (Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Kline et al., 2004; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Compared to dating noncohabiting couples, cohabiting couples were likely to be less satisfied, engage in more negative communication, experience more physical aggression, but report themselves as more committed (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2012). Couples who cohabited before engagement had poorer marital outcomes and higher divorce potential than couples who cohabited after engagement (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009b). Jose, O’Leary, and Moyer’s (2010) meta-analysis found that premarital cohabitation had an overall negative effect on marriage stability and marriage quality, and this effect has remained consistent over time, regardless of the increase in premarital cohabitation. However, recent research suggests that this effect might be receding or overstated (Manning & Cohen, 2012).

Although cohabitation was once considered nontraditional, it is becoming more prevalent and more accepted in the United States, and therefore presents an interesting context for investigating the discursive struggle of tradition and nontradition. Because the present study investigated the discursive struggles of cohabitation and subsequent marriage proposals, we review rituals next to highlight how tradition may come into play in cohabiting couples’ marriage proposal rituals.

Interpersonal Rituals and Marriage Proposals

Multiple communication scholars have examined rituals in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Baxter & Braithwaite, 2002; Baxter et al., 2009; Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998; Bruess & Pearson, 1997) because rituals are specific, purposeful, and structured communicative events. Rituals carry with them cultural meanings, many of which are passed on through the experiences of generations, yet they also serve as a forum where distinct experiences are blended to create new meaning (Roberts, 1988). When performed successfully, rituals can be transformative, wherein the opposing meanings are co-constructed to form shared meaning, represented in the ritual (Baxter, 2011); for example, paradoxes of life/death and ideal/real can be merged to create new meaning (Roberts, 1988). Rituals, then, are one context in which traditions are constituted.

Despite the pervasiveness of ritual research, few interpersonal and family communication scholars have examined marriage proposal rituals despite their cultural importance to romantic and family relationships. Vannini (2004) asserted that the marriage proposal ritual represents an important step in intimate relationships, arguing that “Marriage proposals are social and symbolic rituals because such acts are staged and scripted in relation to greater social environments that influence the couple’s rapport, their connection with a larger community, their social identity, and their meaningful interaction” (p. 173). Thus, our current study provides a necessary understanding of the marriage proposal ritual among cohabiting couples lacking in the extant literature.

The marriage proposal ritual is influenced by a larger cultural context, including couples’ social networks (Schweingruber, Cast, & Anahita, 2008) and mass media (Vannini, 2004). Although traditional proposal scripts often portray engagement as a surprise to the female partner, in reality, many couples discuss the proposal prior to its occurrence (Schweingruber, Anahita, & Berns, 2004). Regardless, scholars have described college students’ preference for gender role traditions in the proposal ritual, including a preference for male-initiated proposals because of the expectation of romance (Robnett & Leaper, 2012; Schweingruber et al., 2008). The cultural significance of the marriage proposal ritual is not surprising as proposals are widely practiced cultural traditions. Historically, cohabitation followed engagement and marriage, whereas today many couples accept and practice pre-engagement cohabitation (Johnson et al., 2002). Our study therefore offers insight into how meaning is made through competing discourses during the current shift in cultural perceptions of pre-engagement cohabitation.

Relational Dialectics Theory

Despite the increase in pre-engagement cohabitation, many continue to participate in traditional, culturally prescribed proposal rituals. In the present study we sought to make sense of the discursive struggles present in the talk of married individuals who became engaged while cohabiting. Given that cohabitation and marriage proposal rituals are an amalgamation of cultural forces, we used relational dialectics theory (RDT) to guide our examination of discursive struggles surrounding marriage proposals of cohabiting couples. RDT assists researchers in locating and interpreting how competing discourses interpenetrate and separate from one another (Baxter, 2011). A discourse is “a cultural system of meaning that circulates among a group’s members and which makes our talk sensical” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 349). Discourses are not static systems; rather, discourses are characterized by “contingency, fluidity, and change” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998, p. 4). In RDT, discourses may be conceptualized as proximal or distal, spoken or not-yet-spoken, and these discourses interplay in utterances.

According to Baxter (2011), discourses interplay in multiple ways. During the process of *diachronic separation*, discourses separate rather than interpenetrate as they struggle for centripetal position in a zero-sum game. The centripetal discourse is viewed as normative and natural, and thus holds more power, whereas the centrifugal discourse is viewed as nonnormative and unnatural and is marginalized. In this discursive struggle, “competing discourses must out of necessity come into semantic contact with one another” (Baxter, 2011, p. 127), even if one discourse is completely centered in an utterance.

The discourses surrounding the couples' nontraditional decision to cohabit—yet take part in a traditional proposal ritual—are subject to the centripetal-centrifugal struggle. In contrast, during *synchronic interplay*, competing discourses sometimes share equal power, creating a hybrid construction or “mixing two or more distinct discourses to create a new meaning” (Baxter, 2011, p. 139). When discourses merge to create new meaning, the talk is considered dialogue. Given that discursive struggles are likely in interactions within relational dyads and between couples and their social networks, diachronic separation and hybrid construction are central to understanding meaning made in participants' retrospective accounts of cohabitation and engagement.

RDT provided a framework for identifying and interpreting the competing discourses that exist between nontradition—living together before engagement—and tradition—the marriage proposal. Researchers have already observed a blending of tradition and nontradition when marriage proposals are pre-negotiated but then performed in a “surprise” manner (Schweingruber et al., 2004; Vannini, 2004). To expand on these findings, we employed RDT in response to Vannini's (2004) suggestion that future researchers investigate the micro and macro practices of marriage proposals. To consider the discourses surrounding cohabitation and marriage proposals, we examined the reported interaction between participants and partners and social networks during cohabitation, the proposal ritual, and sharing the news of engagement. Thus, the following research questions guided the present study: What are the emergent discourses in participants' stories of cohabitation, the proposal ritual, and the (re)telling of the proposal? And what, if any, interplay exists between these discourses?

Method

Participants

To gain an understanding of proposal rituals from the perspective of the proposer and the proposed to, we interviewed 11 married heterosexual men and 16 married heterosexual women. Nine couples took part in separate interviews and nine participants took part in an interview without their spouses participating. Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 34 years with an average age of 27. Nine participants identified as Christian, six as Catholic, three as Jewish, one as Muslim, and eight as nonreligious. The average interview lasted 37 minutes and word-for-word transcription yielded 296 single-spaced pages of data. Eligible participants were: (a) over the age of 19; (b) married for less than five years to ensure their engagement resulted in marriage and that their proposal stories were easily recollected during the interviews; (c) cohabiting with their partner for at least two months before becoming engaged in order for us to draw out the discursive struggles between the traditional act of marriage and the nontraditional act of cohabitation; and, (d) never been married or engaged before because discourses may vary between first engagements and second engagements.

Data Collection

We employed two primary avenues to recruit interview participants. First, we contacted members of our social networks by posting a call for participants on our Facebook pages and sending

Facebook messages to individuals who we believed met the criteria for participation. Second, we posted a call for participants on our department's Communication Studies Research Website where undergraduate students enrolled in Communication Studies classes may earn extra credit for participating. We also used snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010) by asking each participant at the end of their interview to pass on our contact information to other potential participants.

We chose to collect data via interviews because they have the ability "to go deeply and broadly into subjective realities" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010, p. 172), allowing for discursive themes to emerge from retrospective data. Interviews also allowed participants to construct a holistic picture of their relationship over time, including the relational transitions of cohabitation and engagement. Relational transitions are dialogically fruitful and therefore suitable for identifying and analyzing discursive struggles (Baxter, 2011). Further, interviews provide a useful data collection method for understanding how discourses separate and compete during interactional moments (Baxter, 2011). We conducted two trial interviews with individuals who met our criteria and refined our interview guide based on the continuity of the interview and the trial participants' feedback.

We conducted one-on-one semistructured interviews (seven in-person, 20 via phone) designed to capture the "dialogic flux" between centripetal and centrifugal discourses, where "Dialogue is not a teleological enterprise with synthesis as its outcome; rather it is ongoing flux punctuated by important moments of wholeness" (Baxter, 2004, p. 18). In other words, centripetal and centrifugal discourses struggle for central position in the process of diachronic separation, and sometimes interpenetrate to form new meanings in the process of synchronic interplay.

In the present study, this flux or struggle occurred during three relational phases: (a) between partners and their social network before the proposal took place, (b) between partners during the marriage proposal, and (c) between partners and their social networks after the proposal took place. We asked participants questions such as, "How did you talk with other people (besides your partner) about the proposal prior to it happening?" to understand how proximal discourse constructed meaning between couples and their social networks. We also asked questions such as: "Describe your ideal marriage proposal—if the best of all possible worlds, what should happen?" and "How did you describe your proposal to your family?" to isolate distal and proximal discourses present during the proposal ritual and its (re)telling. The interview guide also included questions about demographics, how the couple met and began dating, and how the couple decided to live together before engagement in order to capture a comprehensive story of their relationship.

Data Analysis

To understand how competing discourses interplayed to create meaning for married couples who cohabited before engagement, we conducted a contrapuntal analysis, a form of discourses analysis that focuses on the interplay of competing discourses (Baxter, 2011). Contrapuntal analysis includes two analytic processes: identifying discourses and making senses of how the discourses interplay to create meaning. After conducting interviews, we followed Baxter's (2011) suggestion to use inductive thematic analysis to identify and analyze discursive patterns across these data. First, we identified the overarching discourses of tradition and nontradition using Owen's (1984) categories of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness.

Recurrence occurs when similar meanings emerge across interviews, repetition occurs when participants use the same key words or phrases, and forcefulness occurs when participants verbally stress certain utterances. Second, we noted that tradition and nontradition manifested in different discourses across participants' relational phases; therefore, we used Owen's criteria to identify six discourses related to cultural understandings of tradition and nontradition in the transcripts across the contexts of engagement, the proposal ritual, and (re)telling the engagement story. Third, in an iterative process of coding, categorizing, and naming discourses present in participants' talk, we returned to the transcripts to make sense of whether these discourses interplayed, and whether the interplay was diachronic separation or synchronic interplay, identifying instances of both. We noted that most of the interplay took the form of diachronic separation, where one discourse is centered and one is marginalized across time or context. We identified three overarching discursive struggles and then identified three themes within each to describe the multiple ways in which each discursive pair interplayed across the dataset.

To verify our results, we participated in an interactive data conference, a practice adopted in our research community (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Data conferencing is a type of peer debriefing (Baxter & Babbie, 2004) where researchers present findings to expert colleagues not part of the research team in order to establish validity of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). We presented an outline of our results categories with exemplars at this conference to four additional researchers trained in RDT and interpretive research. We received agreement on our results categories and critiques of our explanations (e.g., how each theme illustrated the overarching discursive struggle), ultimately leading us to clarify the writing of our results section.

Discourses of Tradition and Nontradition

To answer the first research question, "What are the emergent discourses in participants' stories of cohabitation, the proposal ritual, and the (re)telling of the proposal?" we identified the overarching discourses of tradition and nontradition in participants' talk. Discourses of tradition highlighted long-standing cultural practices and beliefs, while discourse of nontradition highlighted newer or changing ways of enacting romantic relationships. Tradition and nontradition contrasted especially in participants' retrospective stories about communicating with their parents about cohabitation and engagement. Tradition was often constructed in participants' accounts of their parents' talk, while nontradition was constructed in many participants' own talk.

However, many participants' talk also constructed discourses of tradition, illustrating the relationship between tradition and nontradition as more than simply generational. More important, many participants noted that the cultural understandings of tradition and nontradition are changing, and that pre-engagement cohabitation is no longer as nontraditional as it once was. Therefore, tradition and nontradition should not be viewed as discrete categories; rather, they constitute ends of a continuum. To gain a more nuanced understanding of tradition and nontradition, we identified specific traditional and nontraditional discourses during pre-engagement cohabitation, the proposal ritual, and the (re)telling of the engagement story to social and familial networks.

During pre-engagement cohabitation, we identified discourses of *pragmatism* and *risk*. The pragmatic or logical justifications for living together before engagement (e.g., finances, testing out the marriage) were constructed as more nontraditional. The concern from family members that pre-engagement cohabitation would put the relationship at risk positioned marriage as the more traditional option. Notably, discourses of risk did not constitute understandings of marriage; participants and their social networks did not see marriage as a risk to romantic relationships. This may be because marriage has traditionally been viewed as a lifelong commitment, so individuals who commit to marriage are not engaging in risk because their relationship is constructed as lasting forever once marriage is proposed.

During the proposal ritual, we identified discourses of *romance* and *partnership*. Romance was constructed as the more traditional way of doing marriage proposals while partnership was constructed as more nontraditional. Romance was constructed as “male-initiation of courtship processes ... [and] centrality of romantic love” (Baxter, 2011, p. 115). Partnership was nontraditional in that it was nonhierarchical and more gender-egalitarian, including women’s input into the proposal ritual and couples working collaboratively to enact the proposal they both envisioned.

During the (re)telling of the engagement story to family and friends, we identified discourses of *privacy* and *revealment*. Privacy was constructed as more nontraditional while revealment was constructed as more traditional. Participants identified the cultural expectation that they should have a good engagement story to (re)tell, indicating that the proposal story itself is an integral part of the traditional engagement ritual. However, many participants’ discourse highlighted their desire for keeping certain aspects of the engagement private in a more nontraditional way. In the analysis that follows, we offer examples of each of these discourses in participants’ talk and discuss their interplay.

Discursive Interplay across Contexts

To answer our second research question, “What, if any, interplay exists between these discourses?” we identified both diachronic separation and synchronic interplay in participants’ talk (Baxter, 2011). Most cases of interplay involved diachronic separation, where one discourse was centered while the other was marginalized. In one case of synchronic interplay, discourses merged to create a hybrid construction. Each theme presented under each discursive struggle represents a different way the competing discourses interplayed to create meaning for participants. Because each discursive struggle emerged relatively exclusively in either the context of cohabitation, the proposal ritual, or the (re)telling of the story, we present the results chronologically.

Discursive Struggle #1: Pragmatism and Risk in Cohabitation

Discourses of *pragmatism* and *risk* interplayed in participants’ talk about pre-engagement cohabitation. Three themes emerged from these data that capture the struggle of pragmatism and risk, including cohabitation as: (a) a trial marriage, (b) a co-occurrence with other life events, and (c) a new normal.

A Trial Marriage

In the theme of a trial marriage, participants' talk centered the discourse of pragmatism against the ever-present discourse of risk. The trial marriage theory has become a ubiquitous discourse of cohabitation, where cohabitation is viewed as a pragmatic step before decisions about marriage are made, thereby justifying testing out everything related to marriage except the legal contract (Kline et al., 2004). Miranda described the premise behind a trial marriage:

[When] you have your little fights or big fights or whatever you're going to have and you can decide, "Okay, well I'm not trapped in this relationship so I can walk away right now or I can stay together with this person because I love them and work it out." So it's kind of like a choice in your mind, like you don't feel like when something comes up that's uncomfortable, you're not trapped, you do have a choice to get out of it without having to have a big legal nightmare. (#3, 143-148)

The theme of trial marriage provided a means for participants to center the discourse of pragmatism and marginalize the discourse of risk because the trial marriage was articulated as a method for preventing risk associated with divorce. Therefore, the notion of a trial marriage implies the risk of costly divorce, which participants' talk marginalized by centering the pragmatism of their pre-engagement cohabitation. However, the discourse of pragmatism was in constant struggle with the discourse of risk, where participants' talk centered the discourse of risk from family and friends. Charles described the discourse of risk in his mother's talk:

I think the comments that my mom would make is that it's, you know, "It's not the same as being married," and that "You don't have the same level of commitment," and that "It's easier to leave the relationship," you know, without that commitment. (#11, 79-81)

Disapproving family members talk highlighted discourses of unnecessary risk while participants talk evoked discourses of pragmatism in order to avoid the potentially more serious risk of marrying and divorcing due to incompatible lifestyles. Considering that participants indicated that the discourse of risk was enacted primarily by their parents, our research suggests that the meaning of risk may be influenced by age or generation. Parents often saw pre-engagement cohabitation as a risk to their child's well-being, while participants articulated marriage without prior cohabitation to be more risky. Many participants, then, discussed pragmatism as more important than conforming to the traditional marriage trajectory of engagement, marriage, and finally cohabitation.

A Co-occurrence

Like the theme of the trial marriage, the theme of co-occurrence centered the discourse of pragmatism for the couple and risk for disapproving family members. Participants described how cohabitation co-occurred for them with other life events, ranging from a lease simply expiring to a complicated move across the country for graduate school. Megan described how "with the timing it kind of made sense. Uh, spring semester was ending. One of my roommates was graduating and getting ready to move away" (#7, 73-76), making room for her partner to move in.

The theme of co-occurrence centered the discourse of pragmatism both for the couple and for those who asked the couple why they decided to move in together. Nick described how he and his partner Judy decided to live together due to a co-occurring life event:

As we got our [graduate school] decisions in winter/spring time, we were trying to figure out where we wanted to go. ... she basically ended up choosing Berkeley and I ended up choosing Santa Cruz so we ended up deciding that we could sort of live half way in between. (#18, 71-77)

However, co-occurrence was not always accepted by family members, who sometimes marginalized the discourse of pragmatism to illustrate the discourse of risk. Tiffany's retrospective account of her mother's reaction to premarital cohabitation centered the discourse of risk, where moving in together before marriage was framed as too fast and therefore risky:

My mom was supportive of me living with Robert but she really wanted me to wait that one more year. You know, on the lease schedule we had six months until our leases were up and we had the opportunity to move in together ... I think for her [my mother] it was just fast. She couldn't be inside the relationship to [see] how far along we had come. And so from an outside perspective, moving in together after six months seemed like a very quick thing to do. It was sort of safer to wait a year and really be sure. (#24, 110-121)

Tiffany's mother considered cohabitation at six months to be risky; however, Tiffany framed living together as pragmatic because of their lease schedules. The theme of co-occurrence demonstrated how the decision to cohabit was not easily separated from other events. Couples who cohabit due to co-occurrence may have more reasons to draw on the discourse of pragmatism in order to justify their decision to live together (e.g., leases ending, finances, moving to a new city). However, co-occurrence also provided an avenue for risk to be centered in family members' talk where tradition could be reiterated against participants' centering of non-traditional pragmatism.

A New Normal

The final theme centered the discourse of pragmatism in participants' talk without the articulation of the discourse of risk from family members, thereby positioning cohabitation as logical and typical. Megan's friend and roommate "was very happy for me and thought it was totally a logical decision" (#7, 155-156), and Tyson described how in his family "There were never any type of questions of 'Are you sure you want to do this?' or anything like that. It was always very highly supportive" (#22, 75-77). Mary described her impression of her parents' thoughts about premarital cohabitation:

I think my parents would want me to live with someone before becoming engaged to them" (#9, 330-331). ... I think they would think that I was more aware of who I was getting married to and more prepared and think being married there wouldn't suddenly be any surprises or things that I didn't know about. (#9, 336-338)

Miranda also described how "I remember my grandma actually saying to my dad that maybe I should live with him [laughs] and figure out if I want to marry him before I marry and divorce him." According to Miranda, "both of my aunts on my dad's side too have been divorced a few times" (#3, 94-97), leading her grandmother to conclude that living together might be a new and nontraditional way of reducing the likelihood of divorce.

During interactions recounted by participants within this theme, the discourse of pragmatism was completely centered. Both Mary and Miranda's excerpts illustrated how the new normal theme draws on the previous theme of the trial marriage in order to center pragmatism. Most participants saw cohabitation as a logical and therefore pragmatic step on the path to engagement and marriage. The trial marriage was logical because it provided a valid reasoning

for pre-engagement cohabitation for reducing risk of future divorce and provided a rational step between dating and marriage. For example, according to Jessica, “it was just assumed, and we’re going to get married and all that” (#10, 110–111); similarly, prior to cohabitation, Ned recalled, “I knew I was going to ask her to marry me at some point in time and have kids and all that kind of stuff. You know. Someday” (#20, 162–163). For many participants, cohabitation became a conscious and integral precursor to their engagement tradition, thereby redefining the meaning of tradition to include living together.

Discursive Struggle #2: Romance and Partnership in the Proposal Ritual and (Re)telling

Participants’ talk illustrated the discourses of *romance* and *partnership* when discussing the proposal ritual and (re)telling. Three themes emerged from these data that highlight the interaction between romance and partnership, including: (a) a romantic surprise, (b) a shared plan, and (c) a unique faux pas.

A Romantic Surprise

In the first theme, the discourse of romance was centered in participants’ talk when they described their proposal as a “surprise” event, marginalizing the discourse of partnership. Sharon mentioned how she “did not know he [her fiancé] had also picked up the ring the Monday he got back into town” (#6, line 190). Craig recalled how he surprised Hannah when “one day I was like, ‘Hey pack your bag let’s go’ and we went on a trip (#13, 138–139). ... and that’s when I surprised her and told her I wanted to be with her [pause] and yeah that was it” (#13, 147–148). Anna described her thoughts about her surprise proposal when she said, “I didn’t know we were even getting engaged. I didn’t know it was even on his radar” (#26, 217–218). Greg articulated the following about the surprise element of his and his wife’s proposal:

The surprise was ideal just because I guess it’s like some romanticized thing, but having the surprise and having my wife feel special, that I had done all this planning, and had really wanted it. That seemed to me more special than like us going out and looking at rings together and going to a courthouse. (#25, 327–331)

During the interviews, participants’ talk centered the discourse of romance, thereby marginalizing the discourse of partnership while enacting a proposal that would be considered completely traditional, despite their nontraditional cohabitation. Although many participants participated in this traditional enactment of surprise, other participants were able to merge the discourses of romance and partnership.

A Shared Plan

The theme of a shared plan merged romance and partnership before and during the proposal ritual to create a hybrid construction, or an interpenetration of discourses to create new meaning (Baxter, 2011). Lorna described the discussions she had with her partner about becoming engaged:

So, I would just kind of briefly discuss it, you know, “Well, what are your plans? Is this something that you’re even thinking about?” And then we came to the determination that we were both kind of thinking the same thing, you know? We went and were doing research on rings and he wanted to know what I liked, [laughing] I wanted him to know what I liked. That’s what kind of led up to it. (#21, 180–184)

Karen articulated the way she and her partner had a shared proposal plan. According to Karen, “we looked at rings together. We had talked about it and knew that’s where we were headed. But I didn’t know if it would be six months or a year” (#14, 125–127). Jessica articulated this same theme of discussing the engagement plans thereby centering the discourse of partnership, yet simultaneously centering the discourse of romance for the actual proposal:

I remember e-mailing him and being like, “You don’t have to make this complicated, all I really want is a restaurant or a walk on the beach or something intimate with just the two of us. It doesn’t have to be a hot air balloon ride over Paris” (#10, 134–136). ... After I had sort of expected it, and then it had been a few months and it was sort of a strange—it was perfect, I mean, it was on the beach, it was perfect, but it was sort of like, “Oh this just feels natural,” you know, it wasn’t like, “Oh my gosh, I’m so surprised!” (#10, 89–92)

In Jessica’s case, meaning came not only from discourses of romance (e.g., surprise) or partnership (e.g., looking at rings together), but a combination of both that incorporated traditional and nontraditional elements, such as the man getting down on one knee and the couple’s discussions about the engagement prior to it taking place. This hybrid construction was particularly important to the couples for multiple reasons. First, the hybrid construction allowed female participants more equality in their proposal rituals, which are traditionally planned and executed exclusively by men (Robnett & Leaper, 2012; Schweingruber et al., 2008). Second, the merging of romance and partnership defied mainstream understandings of the proposal ritual as a romantic surprise, allowing participants to redefine tradition within their proposal to be both collaborative and romantic.

A Unique Faux Pas

In the final theme, the discourse of romance was initially centered in participants’ talk. However, many of the participants decentered the discourse of romance through talk about their proposal ritual faux pas, or proposals that would be considered nonnormative in broader cultural understandings of engagement. For example, Ned talked about how he abruptly proposed to Katherine without a ring while she was doing dishes:

Katherine was doing dishes and I just got down on one knee, I didn’t have a ring or anything. It was like, “Will you marry me?” and she was like, “Well sure.” And she thought it was a joke because I go off to work and she’s like, “Did you just propose to me?” (#20, 194–197)

Although the romance of the proposal was initially privileged in this interaction through Ned’s use of traditional proposal elements (e.g., getting down on one knee), Ned decentered romance and embraces the cultural faux pas experienced during their proposal by stating, “Sometimes I feel like I should have planned something but that’s how it worked out. And that setup is kind of ‘us’ anyways” (#20, 210–211). By stating that the proposal fits with the couple’s existing

identity, Ned was able to create meaning *as partners* rather than through existing cultural understandings of romance as traditional, where men carefully plan and initiate courtship processes.

In the interviews and in conversations with their social networks, participants centered the discourse of partnership over romance by describing their proposal as unique to them *as a couple*. Partnership in this context therefore reflects the shared experience of the couple rather than reflecting a discourse of romance in proposals. Sarah's proposal story illustrated this centralizing of partnership well as her partner proposed to her via Skype:

Once my husband proposed to me ... I changed this vision of my ideal proposal. ... I think that proposal was the most ideal. But it's just for me. Just because it's my personal story, and you know, it's about me and my husband. So I think that the proposal through Skype is not less, not any worse or less ideal than the one on the beach. (#23, 259–264)

Sarah's experience highlights the importance of the discourse, wherein Sarah anticipated discourses of (missing) romance when others would hear about her Skype proposal. Baxter (2011) explained that individuals create meaning through interactions and the anticipation of similarities and differences. Sarah created her own personal meaning of her engagement by decentering romance in her proposal story. Like Sarah, each participant whose proposal included a unique faux pas made sense of her or his engagement experience by decentering the importance of romance and highlighting the significance of creating her or his own ideal engagement, unique to the couple and nontraditional.

Discursive Struggle #3: Privacy and Revealment in the Proposal Ritual and (Re)telling

Participants' talk illustrated the third discursive struggle of *privacy* and *revealment* during the proposal ritual and (re)telling. Three themes illustrate the interplay of privacy and revealment: (a) a private proposal, (b) a public announcement, and (c) a story constructed to (re)tell.

A Private Proposal

When describing their proposal rituals during the interview, the discourse of privacy was often centered in participants' talk. Judy did not want a big proposal and preferred a more private moment, explaining how the proposal "should kind of be between you and, you know, your partner" (#17, 397–398). For Anna, keeping the proposal more private increased intimacy in the moment:

[The proposal should be] just something very low key and like casual. Like we're just laying here and we're just like together and it's not like super romantic. I mean it's romantic in that it's like intimate. But in the scene there's like no people around or nothing. I've been holding onto this ring for the perfect time. (#26, 474–478)

Lorna explained how making details about proposals too public could impact how people find out about the engagement:

I like the more personal small [proposal], that kind of thing. I have a lot of people that would like it to be broadcast, they would like that big, you know, in front of the world, see how amazing my partner is, kind of attention. I have a friend in particular that I know she's

anticipating her proposal and she doesn't know when he's coming so—but she's someone that would like the big proposal, you know, she wouldn't have to tell anyone because they'd know. (#21, 379–383)

Within this theme, participants ignored the traditional expectation that the details of the proposal should be shared freely, opting instead to keep the details private. Although these participants centered privacy when describing their marriage proposals during their interviews, many participants anticipated the public nature of announcing the engagement and describing the proposal ritual.

A Public Announcement

Many participants' talk centered the discourse of revealment when describing the expectation to disclose their engagement to close family and friends. For example, Jessica said, "I think that every single person that we were close with knew [we got engaged] within about three hours" (#10, line 290). Hannah could not wait until the next morning to tell her parents. She described how even though it was late where her parents lived, she still called them: "So it was like 3 AM in the morning at their place. ... I didn't want to go to bed without telling them. It seemed weird to call the next day" (#12, 332–333). When Katherine became engaged, she immediately thought, "I have to tell my sister because she is like my best friend. She was my maid of honor. So, I was like, I have to tell Gwen because I wanted her to be the first person to tell" (#19, 355–357). These participants felt an exigency to tell others the details of their engagement, reflecting how marriage proposals are not just about the proposal itself but also about the revealment of the news to family and social networks.

When revealing their newly engaged status, participants reported grappling with the method with which they chose to reveal the news. For Craig, avoiding social networking sites was important when revealing his engagement, and he "made it a point to talk to my close friends before it like became public or whatever you know. That was important to me to let them know without Facebook telling them" (#13, 307–309). When deciding how to reveal her engagement, Tiffany said, "I felt like, I am 26 years old, am I really going to put this on Facebook?" (#24, 403–404). Even though many participants did eventually use Facebook as a way to disseminate the news, it was important for them to use other more traditional methods such as face-to-face or phone conversations with closer members of their social network first. Talking about engagement on the phone or face-to-face provided more opportunity for people to properly construct all the details of their proposal story, whereas Facebook provided a more simplistic yet effective way of disseminating the news to a larger group of people.

A Story Constructed to (Re)tell

For some participants, the proposal itself was designed and executed in a way that facilitated telling a story to family and friends in the future that constructed discourses of romance. In these participants' talk, the discourse of revealment was centered while the discourse of privacy was marginalized. For example, Tyson described the importance of creating a proposal story before the proposal took place:

I would say it was important as far as going back to the planning and the caring and doing everything I could possibly that I know she'll care about later so she'd love the story even

more. So I wanted it to be the almost fairy-tale proposal for her. And that's pretty much it. I was trying to work kind of backwards so to speak. So what story is she going to have to be able to tell? And I was trying to make sure that was the best way possible. (#22, 422-424)

For Tyson, having a romantic story for his partner to reveal to others was a key goal of the proposal. Jessica further supported that stories are an inevitable outcome of proposals when she stated, "It's like if you don't have a story then it's like there's something missing" (#10, 229-230). Nick explained how the proposal became a story that reflected the relationship when he said, "I think we sort of developed not just sort of a shared memory for the event but also sort of a shared method of storytelling the event, which I think is also now sort of part of the relationship" (#18, 535-537). Therefore, the proposal story not only centered the discourses of romance and revelation for the social network, but also for the couple who co-construct and (re)tell the story to others.

Participants also described how at times their social network centered the discourse of revelation by asking for details about the proposal ritual. Following her proposal, Jessica said, "Everyone's like, 'How did he do it?' There's always this narrative of what did he do" (#10, 212-213). When asked how she talked about the proposal afterwards, Jasmine said, "I mean, everybody asks for the story, and for a while, we were just like making up lies and telling people different stories" (#4, 392-393). Jasmine was able to decenter the discourse of revelation and center the discourse of privacy through her playful retelling of fake proposal rituals to others.

Revelment and privacy further interplayed when participants constructed their proposal stories to omit certain private details. Participants clearly described withholding particular details of the proposal in order to keep the ritual a special moment between the couple. Jasmine talked about having different versions of the proposal based on whom she was talking to: "With our family it was the *nice* story. With our friends I threw him under the bus" (#4, 436-437). Since Jasmine's proposal ritual could be considered a unique faux pas because her husband kept missing opportunities to propose (e.g., in Europe), she kept the details of his missed opportunities private from her family but readily revealed the details to her friends.

A more private proposal gave Judy the power to conceal certain details: "I didn't tell my parents that I was feeling flustered necessarily. I basically gave them the good side of the story with kind of the bare minimum" (#17, 397-398). A private proposal gave couples more discursive power in how they retold the story of the proposal to others, allowing them to manage their privacy and identity as a couple.

In sum, the three discursive struggles that emerged from participant interviews interplayed in a variety of ways. All but one theme illustrated how the competing discourses engaged in diachronic separation to create meaning for participants. A *shared plan* was unique in that the discourses no longer engaged in a zero-sum game but rather merged to create a hybrid construction where discourses of romance and partnership combined tradition and tradition in a new way. The interplay of discourses had multiple implications for the couples in this study, drawn from an overarching discursive struggle between tradition and nontradition throughout couples' relationships.

Discussion

To understand proposal rituals of cohabiting couples, we employed a contrapuntal analysis to identify and analyze competing discourses during different stages of couples' relationships.

Although we categorized our data chronologically, and participant interviews revealed little overlap between competing discourses (e.g., risk did not interplay with romance), the results are tied together by a larger discursive struggle of tradition and nontradition that redefines the engagement process, merges competing discourses, and constitutes couples' shared identities.

First, the discursive struggle of tradition and nontradition interplayed throughout participants' relationships. Existing literature has alluded to the relative stability between cohabitation as nontraditional and marriage proposals as traditional (Robnett & Leaper, 2012) but in our analysis we demonstrate how tradition and nontradition compete, weave, and interpenetrate in complex ways across couples' relational trajectories. Our use of RDT shed light on our conclusion that for many, cohabitation was an integral precursor to engagement and marriage, or a step they were unwilling to forgo. Tradition and nontradition continue to be redefined to include cohabitation as part of the engagement process.

Second, discourses of tradition and nontradition merged in participants' talk, thereby constituting meaning within dialogic moments. This synthesis resulted in a hybrid construction of romance and partnership discussed in the theme of a *shared plan*. Examples of traditional elements included the man purchasing a ring, getting down on one knee, and proposing to the woman. Nontraditional elements included women giving input about their ring and proposal desires. Participants were able to modify cultural scripts of family tradition by incorporating nontraditional—or idiosyncratic elements (Wolin & Bennett, 1984)—into their relationships, marriage proposals, and (re)telling of the proposal event.

Third, the discursive interplay of tradition and nontradition illuminated multiple implications for couples' shared identities. In particular, culturally marginalized discourses of proposal rituals (e.g., *a unique faux pas*) constituted unique shared identity when couples were able to marginalize culturally centered discourses (e.g., romance). Shared couple identity was especially apparent in couples whose proposal took place at (a) their shared, private home, highlighting the importance of cohabitation for the couple's identity and engagement tradition, or (b) other locations couples identified as special places they could return to, such as a family cottage. This conclusion echoes Braithwaite and Baxter's (1995) study of renewal vows, where participants discussed the importance of uniqueness in their renewal ceremony for representing the couple's identity, including moving away from traditional aspects of weddings ceremonies (e.g., having the marriage ceremony at home instead of at a church). Participants in the present study also discussed cultural prototypes of marriage proposals that they wished to forgo (e.g., proposal via jumbotron at a sports stadium) in order to have a moment that represented their unique couple identity. Notably, cohabitation played little role in proposal stories and their (re)tellings. Except for the few couples who connected their shared home to their proposal story, these engagement stories might not be that different from those who marry before cohabiting. Regardless, tradition and nontradition informed participants' retrospective accounts in interesting and nuanced ways.

Ultimately, RDT allowed us to illustrate how identity and meaning are constituted through discursive interplay. Our study contributes to existing literature on RDT by considering the complexities of discursive interplay in an important relational transition, the proposal ritual. First, our research adds another context to RDT (Baxter, 2011) research, contributing to the literature on the newest version of the theory (for other examples, see Norwood & Baxter, 2011; Raval, 2012). Second, our research adds to existing literature by expanding the engagement tradition to include cohabitation, a pre-engagement step considered beneficial and/or necessary

by many dating couples in the United States today (Johnson et al., 2002). Third, our research allowed us to understand proposal rituals as in flux. As demonstrated in our analysis, proposal rituals are not simply discursively constructed differently by different individuals, but they are also discursively constructed differently by the same individual across contexts.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

One limitation of this research stemmed from recruiting participants who were already married, which may have created a positivity bias in our sample by excluding couples who cohabited and subsequently separated. Future researchers may employ contrapuntal analysis to understand how discursive struggles of tradition and nontradition are constructed in retrospective accounts of cohabitation without engagements in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the discursive struggles surrounding the choice to live together.

A second limitation of this research resulted from using interviews as a method. Baxter (2011) noted that RDT research has relied too heavily on retrospective accounts rather than longitudinal data of relationship progression. Diachronic separation cannot fully be understood without data over time. Future researchers should therefore use a variety of longitudinal texts in contrapuntal analysis, including letters, blog posts, or multiple interviews in order to understand how discourses of tradition and nontradition shift over time.

In conclusion, RDT provided a useful framework for understanding the interplay of discourses of tradition and nontradition in married couples' accounts of cohabitation and engagement trajectories. RDT was especially useful for investigating how discourses interplay to continuously constitute meanings and identities within and across individuals, relationships, and families. Couples do not simply reiterate cultural discourses when communicating about cohabitation and proposals; rather, they draw on discursive resources to support their individualities when making meaning. Continual investigation of how relational rituals are constituted in discourse is an important goal as tradition and nontradition continue to be redefined.

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