

Coping and Eating Together in Newly Cohabiting Couples

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Abstract

Research suggests that eating dinner with one's family is associated with positive health ratings and outcomes. However, less is known about this phenomenon in newly cohabiting couples, as well as how relationship dynamics may contribute to eating behaviors in this population. This study examined the relationship between dyadic coping and the frequency in which couples eat together during breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacking. Participants included 100 heterosexual couples in the first 6 months of living together. Results indicated that dyadic coping was positively associated with eating together ($b = .16$, $t(84) = 2.44$, $p = .02$) after adjusting for relationship satisfaction and sex. These results suggest that dyadic coping may be an important factor associated with health behaviors in couples learning to live together. More research is needed to understand the impact of dyadic coping on eating behaviors over time.

Background

- Spousal like relationships are good for health (Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014).
- However, little research has been done to examine how health behaviors in newly cohabiting couples are associated with psychosocial phenomena.
- Previous research examined the role that eating behaviors play while couples adjust to living with one another. This study indicated the importance of the evening meal as a setting for sociability in newly married or cohabitating couples (Marshall & Anderson, 2002).
- Among married couples in the first year of marriage, the choice of joint food involves both convergence and conflict (Bove, Sobal, and Rauschenbach, 2003).
- Dyadic coping is significantly associated with marital quality among married couples (Bodenmann, Pihet, and Kayser, 2006).
- As meal decision making and dyadic coping involve both conflict and cooperation, we are interested in whether dyadic coping is associated with eating together in newly cohabiting couples.

Study Aim: To determine the relationship between dyadic coping and eating together in newly cohabiting couples. **Hypotheses:** We predict that there will be a significant, positive relationship between dyadic coping and the frequency of eating together as a couple. We also predicted that women who endorse higher levels of eating together with their spouse will endorse higher levels of dyadic coping.

Methods

Procedures: Data were collected as part of the Love, Anger, and Food (LAF) study that examined eating, exercise, emotion regulation, and weight maintenance in newly cohabiting couples. Data were collected using surveys (both baseline and daily diary), as well as through height and weight measurements.

Participants:

N= 100 (married or unmarried) heterosexual couples (200 individuals) within the first 6 months of cohabitation.

Measures:

- Dyadic Coping Inventory (DCI): self-reported measure of how couples communicated and handled stress for themselves and their partner (Ledermann, et.al., 2010).
- A survey ascertaining coupled eating behaviors during breakfast, lunch, dinner, dessert, and snacks.
 - Example, "How often do you and your partner eat breakfast together?"

Data Analyses and Results

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics

	Mean(SD)	Range
Age	26.8(8.8)	18.3 - 69.4
Relationship Satisfaction	6.5(1)	1-7
Relationship Duration (Months)	22.6(15.6)	1-72
Children	0.05(0.23)	0-1
Dyadic Coping Total	3(0.49)	1.4-4
Eating Together	2.3(0.43)	1.4-3
Race/Ethnicity (N = 200)*		
Hispanic	45(23.8%)	
White	126(65.6%)	
Black	3(1.6%)	
Asian	6(3.1%)	
Other	40(20.8%)	
Married	29(15.1%)	
Income		
0-25K	130(67.7%)	
25-50K	31(16.1%)	
50-75K	21(10.9%)	
75->150K	8(4.2%)	

SD = standard deviation; * not all participants answered all sociodemographic questions

Data Analysis:

- A sum variable of eating together was created for this analysis.
- A multi-level model was utilized to account for the interdependence of couple data. Dyadic Coping was the outcome variable.
- We tested an interaction between eating together and sex, however this interaction did not predict dyadic coping, and the interaction was dropped.
- In the final model, we controlled for relationship satisfaction, and sex in our model.

Results:

- Dyadic coping was positively associated with eating together ($b = .16$, $t(84) = 2.44$, $p = .02$) after adjusting for relationship satisfaction and sex.
- The interaction between eating together and dyadic coping was not significant $F(1,83) = .014$, $p = .91$, thus this relationship is for both men and women.



Conclusions and Implications

Findings:

- Newly cohabitating couples enter a transitional period as they adjust to living with another person, thus complications may arise out of this transition.
- This study is unique in that the population consists of couples who are all within the first six months of cohabitation.
- We found that eating together was positively associated with dyadic coping.
- These results can add to previous research which indicated the importance of a shared evening meal as a social time in newly married or cohabitating couples.
- Dyadic coping may be an important factor associated with health behaviors in couples learning to live together.

Implications:

- The relationship between dyadic coping and eating together may provide helpful information surrounding the adjustments couples engage in during the first six months of living together.
- This information could be used in couple's therapy as well as pre-marital or pre-cohabitation therapy as it addresses two processes (eating together and coping together) that involve both conflict and cooperation.
- These results may also serve to inform future relationship scientists interested in the transitional period in newly cohabitating couples.

Limitations:

- Data were self-reported by participants.
- Data were cross-sectional
- Future research should focus on longitudinal data such as diary studies, and follow up with couples after a transition period ends.

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- A PDF version of this academic poster is available at: <http://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/posters>

