When Two Become One: Exploring Identity in Marriage and Cohabitation

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Abstract

We examine the psychosocial impact of marital status change, and the spontaneously emerging theme of identity. In-depth interviews were conducted with 82 cohabiting, married, widowed, and divorced British adults, focusing on changes in daily routine, social relationships, and social support. We draw attention to findings of interviews with men and women who entered a married (*n* = 30) or cohabiting (*n* = 8) relationship for the first time. The interviews provide an insight into the complex process of identity change in marriage and cohabitation. Participants described an identity shift from "I" to "we" which was associated with social and personal changes in how they understood themselves. Marriage and cohabitation were viewed as positive transitions facilitating personal growth. However, importantly, marriage, in particular, was also associated with a process of depersonalization which posed a challenge to private identity. We conclude with a discussion of the ways in which participants managed this identity conflict.

Keywords

social psychology, qualitative, dating/relationship formation, cohabitation/informal marriages, dyadic relationship/quality/satisfaction, family processes, intimate relationships, life course

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Transitional periods increase identity exploration and changes in identity (Anthis, 2002). Prior theoretical and empirical studies address how people's social network provides the contexts for their identity management, and serve as a source of validation of identity, reminding people of their beliefs, values, and their abilities (Cotten, 1999; Stryker & Burke, 2000). We aim to extend the limited existing work on identity across the life course and expand the current understanding of identity reconstruction in the face of marital status change through in-depth qualitative interviews with British men and women. Despite recent demographic changes, being married remains the normative status (Bennett, 2006). Married adults are most often used as the comparison group in marital status research (DePaulo & Morris, 2005) and the evidence of a positive effect of marriage on health outcomes is compelling (e.g., Waite & Gallagher, 2000). However, becoming married may also be considered a stressful transition (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) and we believe that there is more to learn about the lived experience of moving into a married relationship. Additionally, the number of heterosexual couples who choose to cohabit has increased (Smallwood & Wilson, 2007). Thus, the focus of this article is on the identity processes that occur following entry into a heterosexual married or unmarried cohabiting relationship. Such insight is important if we want to know more about the psychological impact of major life transitions.

Issues of identity and self have long been of theoretical interest. The concept of identity has become increasingly complex but, in essence, identities are answers to the question, "Who am I?" (Allport, 1961). The emphasis in this article is on the potential for marriage and cohabitation to affect our sense of who and what we are. We employ a theoretical framework which posits a reciprocal relationship between the self and society (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and that identity comprises two distinct components: collective (or public) identity and private (or personal) identity (Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991). Broadly, collective identity is constructed through our relationships with others (Brewer & Gardner, 2004; Marcus & Cross, 1990). We understand collective identity to mean how a person views themselves in response to how they are viewed as a member of a particular public group, that is, "I am married." Private identity, on the other hand, is understood here as a sense of self separate from group membership and social roles and includes personal attributes, beliefs, values, and skills. Deaux (1993) argues collective and private identities are related to each other, where the private identity informs and is informed by a person's collective identity. Identity change may, therefore, be understood as changes in the meaning of the self, including changes through reference to a particular public group, or collective (collective identity) and what it means to be who one is as a unique person (private identity; Burke, 2006).

Evidence suggests that marriage provides a strong positive sense of identity and self-worth. A classic study by Berger and Kellner (1970) demonstrated that entering a married relationship requires reconstruction of identity, achieved by both reconstructing past identities and defining a new relationship identity. Burke (2006) suggested that the practice of performing everyday activities with a spouse changes the way one thinks about oneself, as does possessing the identity of "spouse." Over time, identity becomes rooted both in the marital relationship itself and to the spouse through a gradual process of depersonalization (Lopata, 1973). More recently, Pals (1999) proposed that marriage is an identity investment. She outlined four prototypes of identity in marriage which reflect the different ways women invested and evaluated their identities in the context of marriage: anchored, defined, restricted, and confused. Women who felt their identity was "anchored" in their marriage integrated different elements of their identity and maintained a sense of individuality. "Defined" women described being immersed in the married relationship and family life and felt aspects of their own identity were secondary to the marriage. Women whose identities were "restricted" by marriage were frustrated by the limitations marriage placed on them. Finally, "confused" women lacked self-confidence and a sense of competence which were not being improved by the marriage. Although Pals' study focuses on women, these prototypes may have relevance for men and might help researchers understand better the impact of a transition into a married relationship on identity.

Entry into a cohabiting relationship also has the potential to prompt identity work, since it too is associated with a process of coupling. The prevalence of cohabitation as a precursor to, or indeed as an alternative to, marriage has increased in recent years (Smallwood & Wilson, 2007), but few studies to date have considered the impact of cohabitation on identity. This is an important deficit in our knowledge. There are legal distinctions between marriage and cohabitation and the experience of entering cohabitation may differ from marriage by level of intimacy and commitment (Dush & Amato, 2005). There may be differences with respect to parental responsibility and differences in terms of household practices. There may also be differences with respect to property ownership, financial management, and future pension arrangements. Furthermore, there are differences in the acceptance by others of marriage versus cohabiting relationships. In an early study with cohabiting college age students, Macklin (1972) found that cohabitors described identity loss as participants became dependent on the relationship and had fewer opportunities to participate in activities and see friends. On the other hand, Elizabeth (2000) suggested that cohabitation provides an opportunity to avoid the loss of relational freedom associated with marriage and argued that unmarried

cohabitation is free from social prescriptions. In this view, the absence of well-defined social expectations may mean that cohabitors do not experience any marked changes in identity.

The psychosocial implications of marital status transitions are still unclear and previous research has investigated this topic using predominantly quantitative methodology, focusing on psychological well-being (e.g., Wade & Pevalin, 2004) and social support (e.g., Kalmijn & Broese van Groenou, 2005). Qualitative interviewing is a useful method for examining people's experiences of life events and permits in-depth exploration to allow a deeper understanding of the research topic (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001). Despite the potential for qualitative research to enhance knowledge in the field, there are few studies that specifically consider the impact of marital status transitions on identity. A small number of researchers in the field of marriage (e.g., Banchand & Caron, 2001), widowhood (e.g., Bennett, 2010; Lopata, 1996; van den Hoonaard, 1997), and divorce (e.g., Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Vaughan, 1979) have used the inductive, exploratory nature of qualitative methodologies to understand the lived experience of marital status change. However, there has been less attention on changes in sense of self. Vaughan (1979) described the process of uncoupling and the associated renegotiation of an individual identity following divorce. Bennett (2010) highlighted the challenge of widowhood for identity. She analyzed interviews with 65 widows and, using Buss's (1980) distinction between the public and private aspects of identity, described a tension between how these women view themselves and what is expected of them by others. van den Hoonaard (1997) explored autobiographical accounts of widowhood and found that widows often described themselves as new women with a transformed identity.

This study used qualitative interviewing with cohabiting, married, widowed. and divorced British men and women to explore changes in social networks and social support as a consequence of marital status change. In this article, we focus only on data from the cohabiting and married interviews to extend understanding of the psychosocial impact of entering a cohabiting relationship or becoming married by considering its influence on identity. Widowhood and divorce are characterized by the uncoupling of the married relationship and the nature of these life experiences is substantially different. To consider them here would limit the depth of our discussion. The analysis draws on identity theory and, using the concept of collective and private identities as a theoretical framework (Trafimow et al., 1991), this article examines how people manage their identity following entry into a heterosexual married or unmarried cohabiting relationship for the first time. We aim to address differences between the two types of union and consider their specific role in identity change.

Method

Sample

The focus of the wider study from which this article originates was to understand some of the most common patterns in the experience of marital status change. A convenience sample of a total of 82 British men and women (age range: 19-86 years) were interviewed about their experience of marital status change. Interview participants were recruited using posters and Internet adverts, which communicated the aims of the research, from a range of social organizations, a research announcement on workplace announcement systems, and through snowballing techniques. The sample included people with a wide range of professional statuses, financial income, and educational levels, as extracted through the interview transcripts. Table 1 provides details of the characteristics of participants for each marital status group. Participants were interviewed about their experiences of entering a first cohabiting or married relationship, or the transition out of a first marriage through widowhood or divorce. This article is based on a subsample of 30 married and 8 cohabiting British men and women.

Data Collection

In-depth, one-to-one semistructured interviews were held between December 2008 and February 2010. Interviews were conducted in person in participants' homes or in a quiet, private meeting room at the University of Liverpool, except for three telephone interviews with participants who lived further away; all interviews lasted around 90 minutes. There were no notable differences between face-to-face and telephone interviews. A fluid interview schedule allowed freedom of question direction and an extensive narrative. Each interview began with a standard verbal introduction and sought permission to record the conversation. Participants were then invited to talk about their daily routine, their social relationships and support, and how these had changed over time. Example questions include, "Can you tell me about any hobbies or interests you have?" "Who do you spend most of your time with?" "How did becoming married affect how often you socialized outside of the house?" "Can you tell me a little more about your friendships?" and "Who are the people that will listen to you when you need to talk?" Where participants had experienced more than one of these transitions, they were also asked, more briefly, about these. For example, a married participant who had cohabited prior to marriage would be asked, in less detail, about how this transition had affected their daily routine, their social relationships, and support had changed over time. The researchers sought and gained approval

Table 1. Characteristics of the Interview Sample (*n* = 82).

	Cohabiting	Married	Widowed	Divorced
Men (*n*)	4	10	7	7
Age at transition				
Median	35.5	28.5	55	38
Range	22-36	23-38	42-78	24-63
Age at interview				
Median	38	46.5	72	52
Range	24-46	24-64	45-79	33-77
Women (*n*)	4	20	16	14
Age at transition				
Median	25	32	50.5	31.5
Range	23-27	17-53	21-78	24-60
Age at interview				
Median	27	45	60	41
Range	23-32	19-58	33-80	31-86

from the University of Liverpool Research Ethics Committee and participant confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

Sampling Issues

By its nature, this study may have been subject to a number of methodological challenges concerning selection. The sample size within each marital status group is relatively small, as is typical of qualitative studies (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). Furthermore, there may be a self-selection bias where those who were more socially active and had better levels of psychological well-being were more likely to agree to be interviewed. Unfortunately, certain demographic groups were also underrepresented in the sample, including ethnic minority groups. In addition, the qualitative study is influenced by the geographical limitations of its recruitment. The participants' experiences in this study may not, therefore, be representative of the wider population. In an attempt to minimize these challenges, we aimed for a sample of participants who were diverse in terms of social background, age, relational trajectories, and family circumstances. The interview data represent the diverse experiences of marital status change.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analyzed using grounded theory methods discussed by Charmaz (2008). The process

involves the development of categories following a series of progressively more focused data coding and eventually the emergence of generic themes. The concluding theory is generated from a synthesis of the perspectives from all of the participants. Each transcript was first read through in its entirety to gain an impression of the interview. Line-by-line coding was the primary analytical stage of the research process and allowed for the exploration of emerging themes in the data without the addition of inferences or personal assumptions. This process was reflexive; as new topics emerged they were looked for in earlier parts of the interview. Following line-by-line coding, a more focused approach was employed to generate categories that emerged as particularly significant or overriding in the data. Once categories were extracted for each of the interviews, the transcripts were cross-compared to identify broader generic themes and commonalities within each marital status group and within the larger sample . The interviews sought to identify the key social changes that occurred following a transition into a heterosexual married or unmarried cohabiting relationship, or out of marriage through widowhood or divorce. Through an iterative process of coding and analysis of coded text, three central themes emerged from the interview data: changes in the structure of the social network, changes in the availability of social support, and changes in identity. The focus of this article is on the last of these, identity.

Identity emerged as a salient theme within the interviews in this study. Codes within the theme included "roles/responsibilities," "becoming one," and "growth." The interview did not focus on identity change, but participants were prompted to consider any changes in how they saw themselves following their marital status transition. One question was "How does being married/living with your partner affect how you see yourself." Others included, "How does it make you feel day to day?" "How confident are you with other people?" and "How has that changed since you married/starting living with your partner?" We became interested in how cohabitation and marriage influenced identity and so the theme of identity was further examined in a more detailed analysis for marrieds and cohabitors, consisting of recoding to extract more specific themes. This revealed a distinction between two facets of identity: those which related to how the participant was viewed by others, or their collective identity, and those which were more personal, around private aspects of their identity. To ensure trustworthiness of the analysis, the second author independently analyzed a sample of the data. Developing themes were agreed through a process of discussion and consensus.

Findings

With little prompting, participants who had entered a heterosexual cohabiting or married relationship for the first time and remained in that relationship,

described a process of identity reconstruction and the data addressed changes in identity in both the private and the collective self (Trafimow et al., 1991). Our theoretical perspective is that identity develops from both our experience of how we are viewed by others and how we see ourselves. We first describe how marriage and cohabitation influence the collective identity, before moving on to explore changes in the private identity and the experience of personal conflict. Quotes from the interviews are used to highlight the participants' experiences. All names are pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Collective Identity

People derive an identity, in part, through their awareness of how other people recognize and respond to them (Milardo & Wellman, 1992). To some degree, all marrieds in this study described an awareness of a change in other peoples' expectations of how they should behave in their new status as a husband or wife. These shared meanings of marriage were internalized and contributed to the marrieds' understanding of their individual identity. This process was described by some, but not all of the (unmarried) cohabitors in this study, who appeared to be influenced by fewer expectations from others about how they should behave as a member of a cohabiting couple. Changing expectations noted by the participants extended to how others expected them to socialize, how they should present themselves to others, and the additional responsibilities they should manage.

Relational Reorganization. When asked about changes that they had noticed over time, marrieds and cohabitors talked about "being seen as a couple" (Jenny, age 55, married aged 34). Marrieds, in particular, felt that they were now recognized as one half of a public unit rather than separately (Berger & Kellner, 1970; Lopata, 1996). This served to publically validate and maintain their new coupled identity and prompted changes in social relationships over time. Both marrieds and cohabitors were aware of a change in how they were viewed by others and how others now expected them to socialize, which in turn influenced their personal experiences of social participation. We learned that, for most marrieds, marriage was associated with a process of relational change, including an increased involvement with the spouse's social network, increased frequency of social interaction with other couples, and changes in the exchange of support with members of the social network, with family typically becoming primary providers. For many, these changes were usually gradual and welcome. However, for others, there was a sense of loss and the challenge of feeling socially restricted.

> Before I was married you tend to find that friends would invite you to more things, erm, want to do more, different types of activities, and since you become married, you're almost very limited, 'cause your friends only wanna invite the single people round. So, I find since we have become married it [socializing separately] has become quite limited, to be honest. (Ben, age 32, married aged 31)

There was evidence of a shift toward a more couple-centered pattern of socializing among cohabitors, but not to the same extent as marrieds. Cohabitors typically maintained a more independent social network and were less reliant on their spouse[1] for social support and social engagement compared with marrieds. In line with this, cohabitors were more likely to describe a social network that was more independent from the cohabiting relationship and have maintained a greater sense of an individual identity compared with marrieds. The data suggest that cohabitors are typically not exposed to the same level of expectation about how they should socialize, compared with marrieds.

New Responsibilities. This second theme provided an insight into how participants understood their identity following entry into a cohabiting or married relationship. Cohabitors and marrieds described their own, as well as their understanding of other people's, expectations about the responsibilities they were to assume as a spouse. In their role as a husband or wife, marrieds described the feeling of becoming at least partially responsible for their spouse's well-being. Marriage and cohabitation represent a commitment to a relationship and a movement toward interdependence. A social exchange framework may be useful for understanding the adjustment to new responsibilities described by participants. In this perspective, participants provide higher levels of support so to invest in the relationship and, by taking responsibility for one another, are able to build a sense of togetherness and maximize relational rewards. Though the discussions were often focused around the performance of practical responsibilities, including domestic chores, they talked about the importance of accommodating someone else in their day-to-day lives and providing support, including the provision of emotional, informational, and instrumental support and social companionship, to their spouse. Gina described her awareness of becoming accountable to someone else:

> As a single person you do what you want, you live your life as you like, you do what you want. If you're living in a flat as I was when I was 21, you don't have to think about what time you're getting in, you can eat when you want. When you get married, all of a sudden you've got washing to do, you've got to tidy up in case your mess is impinging on someone else, or theirs on you, you've got

to think about eating at the same time. You've got someone else that you need to factor in, so your life changes completely. (Gina, age 50, married aged 27)

Being less selfish and having "to take someone else into account" (Jenny, age 55, married aged 34) was a common theme in the data. The interviews demonstrated the complexity of the experience of cohabitation and suggested that relational commitment and levels of independence may be important. For Rachel, her relationship with her spouse was central to how she organized her daily activities. She described an increased level of dependency and awareness of his increased dependence on her now that they cohabit.

I'm very conscious that, now that I'm living with him, that I should go home and get this done, because I need to get home, because [spouse] will be waiting for me. Whereas before, when we weren't living together, I would of been like "ah, he can do whatever he likes" [laughter]. (Rachel, age 26, cohabited since age 24)

Vanessa's experience was different: despite feeling that she and her spouse would "be together forever," she explained that she had no intention of getting married. She described herself as "quite independent" and when asked about new responsibilities, she said,

I guess what I did notice was the fact I had more dishes to do [laughter] you know what it's like! More washing, more tidying, but he does stuff, but not as much as I do! So I noticed that side of things, but I didn't really change my social habits. (Vanessa, age 32, cohabited since age 28)

On the whole, cohabitors did describe new supportive responsibilities, but were less likely to describe feeling the same level of personal responsibility to their spouse compared with marrieds.

Self-Presentation. Identifying as a spouse also influenced how participants presented themselves to others. Norma captured this theme when she talked about her reaction to expectations for her to look a certain way as a married woman, as if how she looked could allow judgment against her husband or their marriage.

I feel like I have to try and look physically a bit more respectable sometimes, I feel like a rag bag [laughter] because I have to be a bit more respectful for [husband] and a bit smarter [laughter]. (Norma, age 58, married aged 53)

The following quote highlights how wider expectations influenced how the participants felt they should act as a married or cohabiting person. Fern, a

38-year-old woman who first married aged 33 years, described modifying her behavior depending on context to conform to expectations of how she should behave as a wife where her behavior might reflect on her husband or, again, their marriage.

> If I were to go out with my friends back home, I think I would be that little girl I used to be and if I'm going out with my husband's work colleagues, I make sure I keep my mouth shut for 2 hours [laughter]! (Fern, age 38, married aged 33)

She went on to explain that she believes that there is a change in what constitutes appropriate behavior for a married woman. Again, there is a sense of restriction.

> I think there's definitely a change [in how you see yourself] because also, you're not available anymore, for instance. You know what is appropriate or not, you understand your role. You understand that you're married.

When asked to consider any changes she had noticed in how she saw herself following entry into a cohabiting relationship, Vanessa commented on more subtle changes, including how she dressed and acted in social environments:

> I don't feel like I've changed, but I suppose I have because I don't go out on the pull, so I guess when I'm at the pub I give off different vibes and dress differently, do you know what I mean? (Vanessa, age 32, cohabited since age 28)

Private Identity

As was clear in our data, social expectations inform and maintain a person's collective identity following entry into a cohabiting or married relationship. In addition, participants described a more personal process of identity change. These changes were distinct from how the relationship was recognized and performed publically and reflected the participants' individually held meanings of marriage and cohabitation. Specific themes included becoming one and self-development.

Becoming One. Marrieds described their personal understanding of themselves as becoming intertwined with their life as a couple. They spoke about feeling "half of one person" (Mike, age 54, married aged 22) or having "become one person" (Ned, age 57, married aged 26). One married man described feeling "more of a unit" (John, age 37, married aged 36) after getting married compared with being in a cohabiting relationship with his now wife. Mike said,

> It's not the piece of paper that makes the difference, just the mental, the fact that you are, in every way, attached to each other. Legally binding as well as, you do consider, I mean, I do consider myself as being one half of a relationship. (Mike, age 54, married aged 22)

In contrast to the married group, only two of the eight cohabitors clearly articulated that their personal identity had become grounded in their relationship, though there was evidence in other interviews that the cohabiting relationship offered a comparable sense of feeling complete and improved self-esteem.

> I feel more myself, and I can be myself whereas I think if you're single you, you know, there's kind of a risk of, you know, trying to be someone you're not to fit with whatever, whereas now I feel that I can be quite comfortable. (Rachel, age 26, cohabited since age 24)

Owen, a cohabiting man who had lived with his spouse for 5 years said,

> Your identity kind of changes a bit. I'm still me, but I'm still part of a larger organization, which is us, there is me and us and me is part of us, and it's not the same thing. (Owen, age 38, cohabited since age 33)

In this theme, we learn that marriage and, to a lesser extent, cohabitation are associated with a change in private identity, as individuals incorporate the societal meaning of being a spouse into their personal understanding of the self.

Self-Development. Marrieds expressed changes in their personal attributes and there was evidence that the married relationship, as well as their new social role and associated responsibilities, provided a foundation for personal growth and development. Marrieds conveyed a sense of feeling whole or becoming complete as a consequence of being married. This echoes Pals' (1999) "anchored" identity prototype. For example, Harry said that his marriage provided "a very, very close sense of belonging" (Harry, age 64, married aged 25). Abby felt that she had "found herself" on getting married:

> Whereas before I was sort of floundering, I didn't know really what I wanted to do or, you know, I was floating basically I think, now I've got an anchor. (Abby, age 52, married aged 46)

Participants described feeling "more mature being married" (John, age 37, married aged 36), being "more confident since becoming married" (Abby, age 52, married aged 46), and feeling "more rounded" (Kim, age 45, married

aged 42). Dave described the continued personal growth he was experiencing through his marriage:

> Being married to [wife] is molding the person that I am and who I'm becoming. It's helping me fulfil dreams and ambitions and goals, it's, forget the church for a moment, it's giving me a deeper meaning of love, it's given me, erm, a sense of achievement and a sense of encouragement. (Dave, age 45, married aged 38)

Being in a cohabiting relationship may also play a role in self-development and several participants noted that they felt more confident and had a greater sense of self-worth as a result of their relationship with their spouse (Harter, 1999). Becky, a 28-year-old woman who had been living with her spouse for 3 years described herself as previously being "quite defensive" and said that her spouse had "just opened [her] up" (Becky, age 28, cohabited since age 25). The opportunity for personal growth may be less about the transition to cohabitation or marriage, and more closely related to relationship dynamics and the self-worth offered by romantic relationships (Dush & Amato, 2005).

Personal Conflict

Participants were aware of the societal expectations associated with being someone's spouse and several described a resistance to the merged identity which developed. The data suggested a conflict between expectations of what it means, publically, to be married or cohabiting, or their collective self, and how they understood their identity privately. This was more noticeable among marrieds, which is perhaps not surprising given the differences in perceived social expectations of marrieds and cohabitors. Marrieds discussed challenges in consolidating a married identity with a desire for people to acknowledge them as individuals with their own independent identity.

> It's [being married] a little bit difficult because I think before people just see me as an individual, you know, they recognize who I was, who I am. Now, although some people still do that, the majority it's always "Ben and [wife]," "Ben and [wife]," "Ben and [wife]." It's not just "Ben." It would be nice if people would recognize we are two identities, not just one. (Ben, age 32, married aged 31)

Resistance to the public identity emerged as an important and challenging part of the adjustment to marriage and, though less marked, cohabitation. As John suggested, the married relationship can become "the biggest part of your life" (John, age 37, married aged 36). As a consequence, marrieds like Claire discussed how marriage can cause you to "forget the person that you were" (Claire, age 30, married aged 25). They referenced the personal

sacrifices associated with developing a shared collective identity. Gina explained,

> When you do get married, you do have to, not lose a bit of yourself but you do have to change, and I don't mean change who you are, but you do have to become less selfish. (Gina, age 50, married aged 27)

Several others expressed a loss of a sense of self or a loss of freedom on getting married. These stories reflect Pals' (1999) idea of both "defined" and "restricted" identity prototypes where, to different degrees, a sense of individuality is lost at the expense of the married relationship. Helen, a married woman, described the internal conflict she had experienced between feeling happy to be in the position to get married, but aware of the loss of her independence on transition.

> I can't think of a more wonderful thing for someone to ask you to do [to marry them]. One of the best moments, ultimate moments of my life. But then there was also a feeling of loss of independence, being married, because you know, I don't know what you call it but, there's that kind of "oh," I don't know what it is, it was a fleeting moment. (Helen, age 51, married aged 39)

Another participant, Evan, described being deeply unhappy in his married relationship. His interview further demonstrated the influence of expectations on personal sense of self. He experienced a conflict between his collective identity as a spouse and his private identity as an unhappy man knowing his marriage was, as he described it, "failing."

> I'm kind of a dependable married man with children who's been faithful to his relationship and so there's that side of it. But it's [. . .] in other sense it's quite oppressive when you feel your marriage is failing and is breaking down, possibly irretrievably. (Evan, age 48, married aged 25)

Not all of our participants used words like "loss," "difficult," and "challenging," but all talked about the personal and social challenges associated with managing public expectations of being married or a cohabitor, at some level. Thus, understanding how to manage the potential conflict between the collective and private identity is important. Dave had been in a relationship with his wife for 20 years and married for almost 8 of those years. After cohabiting for 2 years before marriage, they briefly separated. His interview offered an interesting insight into the way the challenge to private identity may be managed. Dave described the realization that he and his now wife "needed to be individuals, as well as together" and how, moving forward, they were

motivated to maintain a greater sense of individuality and ensured that they spent time apart.

> We've got independent lives and our lives together. You know, we go away together, but we both have separate holidays because we do different things. I go on a cruise, [wife] will go away with her mates. And then we'll go away together, and we'll go away at weekends, so I think we've got a nice balance. I think that's why were still together 20 years on. (Dave, age 45, married aged 38)

Isabelle started her relationship with her spouse when she was 16 years old. They separated for a 3-year period during her time at university and had started to cohabit 6 months before the interview. Like Dave, Isabelle talked about struggling with not having her own identity early in their relationship and emphasized the importance of being "your own person."

> I think it's very important to have shared interests, but I also think it's very important to still be your own person. I get a little bit of time to do my own thing and to be just me which I think is quite important. (Isabelle, age 23, cohabited since age 23)

Some participants like Caroline and Harry talked about the importance of maintaining independent friendships and enjoying leisure activities apart from their spouse. The data suggest that this personal continuity assists in minimizing identity conflict in the adjustment to cohabitation and marriage and makes a positive contribution to marital quality.

> I think that having outside conversations and outside influences, when you come back together you have things to talk about that are different. I think that's beneficial to a relationship. (Caroline, age 48, married aged 24)

> You don't want to be 24 hours a day under each other's feet, nice though it is to be a couple and to get on well as a couple, I think you do have to have your own private space. (Harry, age 64, married aged 25)

In an attempt to maintain a separate self, three married women had decided not to change their surname. These women felt strongly that keeping their maiden name was important and, again, the continuity allowed them to maintain a more individual sense of identity. Lucy commented,

> I didn't want to become part, taken by that family, taking their name was part of that, I kept my own identity, and I was always part of my family and not their family. (Lucy, age 55, married aged 42)

Contextual Influences

The sample represents a diverse group with different relational trajectories and relationship dynamics. We view this as a strength: the interviews in this article demonstrate the variety and complexity of the influence of cohabitation and marriage for identity. Relational independence, age, and gender influenced the identity process. Turning first to relational independence, cohabitation and marriage posed fewer challenges to identity where participants described other roles and relationships away from the spouse. Lucy articulated this most clearly. She married for the first time in her early 40s after being in a noncohabiting relationship with her now husband for 6 years. She suggested that they made the decision to marry to "stop both mothers wittering." Both regularly worked away from home, internationally, and marriage would also allow travel visas to enable them to visit one another more easily. While there is some suggestion that she is restricted by her responsibility to her husband, Lucy's social network and daily lifestyle remained relatively unchanged on becoming married. When asked what married life is like for her, she explained,

> What is it like? I don't really think its impinged on my life, to any great extent as far as, would it be any different if I was unmarried, I don't know, I wouldn't, I'd probably say it hasn't, because we don't have children, therefore we do tend to be quite independent so, yes, I think the only thing was, I think I certainly would be more mobile both work wise and socially if I wasn't married. (Lucy, age 55, married aged 42)

She went on to say,

> I think that is probably a part because we're not together all the time, therefore what does being married mean? (Lucy, age 55, married aged 42)

The concept of relational independence may help understand differences between cohabiting and married unions and their relative influence on identity. We found that marriage facilitated more marked changes in identity compared with cohabitation. One explanation may be that cohabitors have higher levels of relational independence, being more likely to maintain an independent social network and be less dependent on their spouse as a primary source of support and well-being, compared with marrieds.

In general, those participants who experienced the transition into a cohabiting or married relationship when younger described greater identity disruption, which was related to greater changes in their responsibilities and to social participation compared with older participants. While these identity changes

may also be related to the process of growing older, they tell us something about how different age groups may experience these normative life transitions. Cohabitors and marrieds who were older at transition described a more stable sense of private identity at transition, which may be on account of having established collective identities that were separate from their marital status in their social networks and in their professional roles, and discussed personal growth. Jenny reflected on the influence of her age at marriage. At different points during the interview, she mentioned feeling more established and confident as a 34-year-old woman and more inclined to want to "stand on [her] own two feet," compared with someone who married at a younger age:

> I was established as a person in my own right, at 34, yeah, I was established! I think it [age] actually does make a big difference. (Jenny, age 55, married aged 34)

However, Kim found it difficult to identify as an older unmarried person within her social network and expressed the relief connected to her new social role as a married person. She described feeling more confident and comfortable around other people in her social role as a married woman compared with being an older unmarried woman:

> You were this 32- or 35-year old woman, as people said and see, living at home with your mum, you know, how sad is that? And even close friends they didn't know how to slot you in. I've just felt a bit more confident and maybe it's been a chip on my shoulder rather than anything to do with them [people who she felt judged her as an unmarried woman] but I just feel more comfortable and, as I say, grounded and, as you can say "this is my husband" now. I don't know, I just feel more at ease and comfortable with people. (Kim, age 45, married aged 42)

She went on to say:

> Being Mrs. [marital name] in that partnership, and even before being married, people would be "oh alright yeah, I can see where you are now" and the same for having moved out from home. I feel as if it was just easier socially [laughter]. (Kim, age 45, married aged 42)

Cultural discourses may influence the meaning of the spousal role for men and women. Christensen (1987) found that women wanted greater closeness and intimacy in a marriage, whereas men prioritized greater autonomy. Overall, men said less in the interviews about identity reconstruction in the face of marriage and cohabitation compared with women. That is not to say that men did not experience identity reconstruction to the same extent as

women, only that they did not report them. Furthermore, the interview schedule did not focus on identity and the questions did not explicitly ask about identity reconstruction. In this study, women emerged as being the relationship specialists and had an important role in maintaining the social networks for the married couple and, in line with this, marriage appeared to provide a greater collective identity for men compared with women. Specifically, women were more likely to describe their collective identity as being anchored in their wider social relationships, as well as in their married relationship.

Conclusions

Few studies have considered the impact of marital status change on identity. Moreover, the emphasis is often on transitions out of marriage, including widowhood and divorce, rather than exploring the experience of entering a married relationship. Thus, this article explored identity change following marriage and cohabitation to better understand the lived experience of these major life transitions. Identity theory highlights the links between a multifaceted notion of the self and the wider social structure (Burke, 1980) and Trafimow et al.'s (1991) theoretical distinction between collective and private aspects of identity was a useful framework to explore the data. The data demonstrate that the coupling process involved in marriage and cohabitation challenges and transforms collective and private aspects of a person's identity, prompting both a public and personal change from "I" to "we" (Burke, 2006).

Overall, the interviews reveal a change in both how the participants viewed themselves and how they felt they were viewed by others, as a consequence of the expectations they associated with their new marital status. They demonstrate how wider expectations about what it means to be married or cohabiting exert an influence on patterns of socializing, limit a persons' sense of public distinctiveness, and have the potential to affect roles and responsibilities. For marrieds, in particular, there was a sense of performing to be recognized and accepted as a wife or husband. This public performance developed and reinforced participants' collective identity in their new cohabiting or married role. The interviews also suggest that marriage and cohabitation have the potential to influence an individual's personal understanding of themselves, informing their private identity. The data reflect Lopata's (1973) idea of a process of depersonalization, where marriage, in particular, was seen by some to be associated with a loss of self and independence. All participants cited some adjustment effects relating to the central themes discussed in this article. For some participants, the transition was relatively smooth and gradual and interviews demonstrated that marriage and cohabitation typically facilitate personal growth and improved self-esteem. However, some marrieds, and,

to a lesser extent, some cohabitors demonstrated resistance to societal expectations and described conflict between their personal understanding of themselves and how they were expected to act socially. Challenges to identity may be lessened where individuals maintain a sense of individuality. People manage boundaries which affect their personal identities by ensuring some continuity from pretransition, maintaining independent social relationships and leisure pursuits, for example. There was evidence that retaining aspects of the premarital sense of self improved the quality of the relationship. Conversely, where identity conflict was persistent, relational conflict developed.

Pals' (1999) distinction between the four different identity prototypes in marriage was useful in understanding the process of identity reconstruction for marrieds. For some, identity was anchored in the married relationship, yet they maintained a range of interests and social relationships outside the married relationship. For others, being a spouse defined their identity and their experience of social participation, in terms of their social network and the exchange of social support, was centered on their role as a married person. Within this group, a smaller number expressed a conflict between their private and collective identities. Only one participant, Evan, fitted to Pals' fourth prototype of being confused within the marriage. While Evan's interview may tell us more about the process of uncoupling, rather than coupling, it further demonstrates the importance of the married relationship to how people view themselves (Vaughan, 1979).

The extent to which cohabitation or marriage is disruptive to identity and the ease at which participants can reconstruct their identity posttransition may vary by relational independence, age, and gender. A closer examination of the social construction of gender and marriage would be useful to better understand differences in men's and women's experiences of marriage and cohabitation. Maintaining an independent identity positively influences adjustment to marriage and cohabitation. Overall, marrieds were more likely to discuss marked changes in identity compared with cohabitors. This may be explained by greater levels of relational independence among cohabitors in this sample compared with marrieds. Alternatively, the findings may reflect a lesser commitment and less pooling of resources in cohabitating relationships (Horwitz & White, 1998) or, as Elizabeth (2000) suggests, that the societal expectations of cohabitors are less clear compared with married people. Furthermore, since the wider study was not focused on motivations for cohabitation, we do not know fully what these participants' future plans are, or the extent to which they adopt conventions of marriage, which existing literature suggests may be an important consideration (Clark, Diener, Georgellis, & Lucas, 2008). However, the findings add to the limited literature and provide a platform for further exploration of this increasingly common transition.

Themes presented in this article represent the experiences of a diverse group of marrieds and cohabitors in the wider study from which these findings are taken and we acknowledge that care needs to be taken in generalizing from one group of married and cohabiting adults to another. In addition, the interview did not focus on identity change and so these themes were not explored in detail in the interview. However, we believe that the unprompted nature of the discussions around identity make the findings especially interesting and highlight identity change as an important part of the participants' experience (Becker, 1958).

The rich data demonstrate that marriage, in particular, is an anchor for identity and provides opportunities for personal development. Social and personal challenges and changes relating to identity are faced by those entering marriage and cohabitation. They are, in part, about satisfying societal expectations of marriage and cohabitation. In particular, marrieds and cohabitors highlight the challenges of retaining individuality and point to the importance of independent friendships, personal hobbies, and social roles separate from the spouse for identity adjustment. The findings have value in extending the understanding of the psychosocial impact of a change in marital status. Moreover, the findings may have implications for the performance of romantic relationships. Personality and value conflict have been identified as reasons for divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003). The more important a romantic relationship is for an individual's identity, the more detrimental the impact if that relationship ends (DeGarmo & Kitson, 1996). Our findings suggest that taking some time for yourself, socializing away from your spouse, and engaging with personal hobbies may facilitate the ability to retain a more independent identity within married and cohabiting relationships, which may encourage marital satisfaction and, in the event of widowhood or divorce, protect individuals in the severity of the loss of the spouse.

Note

1. For ease of writing, spouse refers to both marital and cohabiting partner.

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