

**IS WHAT'S MINE ALSO YOURS? FINANCIAL INTEGRATION IN NON-  
MARRIED COHABITING ADULTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY**

by

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# Is What's Mine Also Yours? Financial Integration in Non-Married Cohabiting Adults: A Phenomenological Study

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to gather information about the experience of the decision-making process that non-married young adult cohabiting couples have around the topic of financial integration, defined as: “the process of two individuals in a romantic relationship combining their financial resources towards a collective outcome”. The majority of the literature explores how married couples integrate their finances with one another, but very little exists on what the decision-making process being used by non-married young-adults entails. This is a particularly important demographic to study primarily due to the increasing rates of non-marital cohabitation in North America, which comes with a myriad of implications that occur as a result of the financial integration that occurs along with it.

Four couples were interviewed separately. Essential themes that emerged from the non-directive, exploratory interviews include: (1) Communication strategies and intentions, (2) goal oriented decisions, and (3) factors that influence willingness to financially integrate. This study contributes to the understanding of the experience young-adult, non-married, cohabiting romantic couples have when making decisions around financial integration, and can be used to inform policy around common-law financial matters, psychoeducation for financial integration workshops, and clinical interventions in counselling settings. Implications for future research and counselling psychology impacts are discussed.

## **Lay Summary**

The purpose of this study was to gather information about how young adult non married heterosexual couples who are living together make decisions around combining their finances with one another. In addition to there being a small amount of research that explores this particular phenomenon, this is a particularly important demographic to study due to the increasing rates of non-marital cohabitation in North America.

Four romantic couples were given separate non-directive open-ended interviews which resulted in three main themes. These included the role that communication strategies had in the decision making process to FI, the impact individual and common goals had in how decisions are made to FI, and lastly factors that influence an individual's willingness to FI with their romantic partner.. This study's findings can be used to inform common law policy, psychoeducation for financial integration workshops, and clinical training for couples counsellors and financial conflict based interventions.

## **Preface**

This thesis is the realization of an idea conceived by the author, Mark Antczak, who completed all work, including design, participant recruitment, data collection, (partially outsourced) transcription, analysis, and manuscript write-up under the supervision of Dr. William Borgen, with support from committee members Dr. Marla Buchanan and Dr. Ishu Ishiyama.

This research received ethics approval from the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board on 2018-08-29. The certificate number of the ethics certification obtained for this study was H18-01929, using the project title Financial Integration in Non-Married Cohabiting Adults.

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And a big shout out to coffee! You were truly one of the unsung heroes in this process.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Research Problem**

Over the past decade the topic of transitioning through relational milestones in a romantic relationship has been a dominant talking point in couples therapy. These relational milestones are defined as actions or events marking a significant change or stage in the development within a romantic relationship. At first glance these relationship transitions may be seen as an expected positive experience that every couple goes through, however often individuals fail to notice how these transitions can impact the couple. A particularly important demographic involves non-married young adults who recently made the decision to cohabit. These individuals are forced to navigate a number of milestones, such as introducing one another to each other's family and friend network, deciding the parameters around monogamy, and of particular interest, the couple's decision to integrate their finances. Whether the couple needs to decide how to pay for their meals when they go out, or how to split rent and buy their first pieces of furniture, negotiating financial integration (FI) can be a relatively smooth transition, or it can be a source of significant conflict and/or tension. It can be assumed that individuals often go into romantic relationships with certain attitudes or expectations, and frequently those expectations or attitudes do not align with one another (Addo, 2017; Brines, 1994; Dema-Moreno, 2009; Holmberg et al, 2003; Papp et al, 2009; Stanley et al, 2007). Within the context of incongruent perspectives, the literature discusses the benefits of utilizing the topic of finances as a counselling therapy tool, indicating the underlying communication patterns that come up around discussing money within the relationship, in addition to using the client's motivations or expectations around finances to

provide a window into the client's values and overall compatibility within the relationship (Papp et al, 2009; Stanley et al, 2007).

## **Rationale**

Non-married cohabitation is increasing in North America as a result of increased housing market prices and societal expectations, and the majority of the research that explores merging finances in couples involves married couples (Addo 2017; Sassler 2010). This increasing practice of couples moving in together makes the need for research around financial integration within this demographic that much more pertinent.

There are numerous ways by which marriage and cohabitation can be differentiated. Marriage has been identified as a union between two individuals that involves both significant degrees of trust and commitment, whereas individuals who prefer cohabitation do so in part because they prefer individualism and autonomy (Axinn & Barber, 1997; Brines & Joyner, 1999). Furthermore, cohabitation goes without many of the expectations and roles required within a marital union to manage a home. Time frame has also been explored in the literature, indicating that marriage is often associated with longer term time lines, whereas cohabitation is associated with shorter time frames resulting in higher degrees of relational uncertainty about the relationship looking forward (Cherlin, 2004; Nock, 1995). Society has normalized the practice of couples managing their finances once they get married, to the extent that couples have written their will to share finances in their vows to one another at their wedding ceremony; "What's mine is yours, and what's yours is mine". Individuals who are making the active decision to get married are usually at a point in their commitment level that integrating their finances is an easier decision, as indicated in a study that measured increased level of confidence or trust within the

relationship to take the additional risk (Papp et al, 2009). This societal normalization and increased commitment makes integrating finances significantly easier for married individuals more often than not, as compared to non-married cohabiting couples.

This leaves a largely untapped niche in the literature investigating how non-married cohabiting adults experience the negotiation that occurs during financial integration, and what influences the result of the decision that is made.

### **Study Significance and Expected Impacts**

Further research on what this process looks like can have a number of different applications. As addressed previously, data that sheds light on the decision-making process around financial integration can provide insight into potential treatments or frameworks used in couples counselling to inform successful interventions or psychoeducational programs (Papp et al, 2009). The topic of finances between two individuals can highlight underlying communication patterns, motivations, and expectations within a couple (Stanley et al, 2007). The findings from this study can also inform workshops and psychoeducational groups for couples who are moving in together for the first time and are looking for additional resources on how they may want to transition into financial integration. Lastly, research findings can provide context and information that can influence policy decisions around common-law financial matters. For example, within the province of British Columbia a romantic couple that has been cohabiting together for 2 years has the same legal equivalency regarding mutual finances that a married couple would have ([www.bclaws.ca](http://www.bclaws.ca)). That is, in the eyes of the provincial government after 2 years of living with a partner, the income from both parties is deemed by default as integrated and shared as it would be in a married couple. An individual applying for government

student loans for example is assumed to have access to their partner's income in addition to their own. It was hoped that the findings from this study could help make adjustments to these rigid policies with more realistic expectations from cohabiting couples.

### **Research Question**

The research question was: What is the meaning of decision making regarding financial integration in non-married, young adult (25-35), cohabiting romantic relationships? It was important to look at this phenomenon through the clients' perspectives and understand their experience and how they made sense of it. This research question, with the aid of the questions in the interview protocol (see Appendix D), drew out the essential structure of this phenomenon in the form of common themes identified in each client's description of their subjective experience.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The study of decision-making processes within the context of FI in romantic couples is not new to the social sciences. It originated with studies in the 1960's that began to investigate the role of money within heterosexual households from the perspective of a variety of different disciplines like sociology, economics, and psychology (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Davis, 1976). A number of studies have also been conducted focusing on decision making, the motivations behind the decisions themselves, money management systems, relationship development theory regarding commitment, and how gender influences financial decision making. Much of the literature regarding FI and what influences the decisions in romantic couples has focused on primarily well established, married heterosexual couples (Burgoyne et al, 2006), which still holds useful applications in studying cohabiting populations.

### **Motivations Behind Decision Making**

It is pertinent to address the body of literature that addresses the motivations behind why individuals in a romantic relationship choose to cohabit in the first place, as this is relevant information that inevitably influences the decision-making process.

#### **Social Exchange Theory.**

Relevant to motivations behind FI is Homans' (1958) social exchange theory, falling under explanations of rational choice. The theory suggests that individuals act out of self-interest by making choices through a cost/reward analysis, and picking the most beneficial option (Homans, 1958). Through a romantic couple's lens, this theory explains that individuals move in together to maximize their benefits, such as affording a nicer apartment together than they would be able to alone. Regarding two individual's finances, how they make decisions surrounding

money can very well be influenced by their own cross-benefit analysis. As an example, one individual in the partnership with assets in his bank would have less incentive to integrate finances with an individual who only has debt.

Clark and Mills (1986) build on social exchange theory by creating two distinct categories that incorporate an individual's expectations with regards to reciprocation of resource allocation. An example of an exchange relationship would be when an individual gives a benefit away with the set expectation that the same or equivalent value worth benefit will be returned (1986). In this form of exchange, the individual provides a benefit out of self-interest or minimizing most risk of loss for themselves. In FI among romantic relationships, this would be seen as individuals who track their spending to ensure that an equal level of reciprocation through financial expenditure is given by their romantic partner. The alternative category is described as a communal exchange, where a benefit is provided by one individual to the other in order to support them without any expectation to have the benefit be returned to them (1986). Within FI, this type of support can be seen as a partner providing debt relief to their significant other who is struggling to make a payment, or paying a larger portion of the rent without any expectation that it be compensated for elsewhere.

One of the initial frameworks from which decision making in romantic couples literature developed comes from research that identifies why couples choose to marry, which can also be applied to decisions with FI. Surra and Hughes (1997) made a distinction between relationship-driven reasons for marriage (e.g., wanting to develop a life with one another) and event-driven reasons (e.g., unplanned pregnancy).

Addo (2017) builds on the motivations behind cohabitation in couples in recent years, classifying three different types of integration that serve different purposes involving FI. The first form, termed Necessitating Integration, are practices adopted by cohabiting romantic partners that make living in a single residence more appealing than living in their own separate homes (Addo, 2017). During this form of integration, each individual in the romantic couple are interdependent and are reliant on one another to assist with housing support and financial stability (Addo, 2017). Two separate studies support this with their findings that financial convenience is among the top 3 reasons romantic couples choose to cohabit prior to marriage (Stanley et al, 2006; Sassler, 2004). Next, in Progressive Integration practices, Addo (2017) describes cohabitation as a decision made that allows couples to learn more about one another's financial practices, and as an extension how responsible they are as a way to test the potential foundation required for marriage. This has been reported by adults (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Johnson et al., 2002) and younger individuals (Johnson et al, 2002; Thornton and Young DeMarco, 2001) who believe moving in together with their romantic partner is an effective way to test their relationships for marriage. Lastly, Investment Integration practices involve the acquirement of larger assets (eg. car, home) with the belief that these assets will be beneficial to the longer term health and stability for the partnership as a whole (Addo, 2017). This is seen frequently with adults who disclose that pre-marital FI serves the goal of more easily acquiring home ownership, reaffirming financial practices with their partner, and affording a more elaborate wedding (Edin et al., 2004; Smock et al., 2005). These mutual assets are also described as a way to publicly identify as a couple and to indicate they are both invested in their future together (Addo, 2017). Within the context of FI, a romantic cohabiting couple can be at various



stages that Addo describes, ranging from deciding to cohabit to pay less rent, mutual budgeting and allowing one another to see one another's financial statements, to paying off their partner's debt and buying a home together.

## **Gender**

Another area of research pertaining to decision-making in romantic couples involves the analysis of the results of decision making processes in relation to gender roles. Many of these studies support the notion that decision making is often revolving around traditional socially ascribed gender norms (Katz, 1997), where men are expected to make specific decisions such as where to invest the couple's capital, and women having power to make decisions involving child rearing. These traditional gender norms apply to non-financial intrahousehold decisions as well, where women end up taking a larger percentage of housework than their male counterpart (Bittman et al, 2003). More recent ideals of a marriage aspire for fairness and equality with regards to financial splitting and cost allocation (Burgoyne & Routh, 2001). The literature shows however that as soon as children are brought into the family, men are placed into the breadwinner role, and women into the nurturing caretaker role as a result of typically lower wages they receive and the normative expectation that they will raise the children because they bear them (Bergmann, 1995; Webley et al., 2001). This type of research that identifies the relationship between gender roles and decision making also closely corresponds with research that incorporates gender based wage gap, career status, and how it influences power in financial decision making.

## **Resource Theory of Power**

The Resource Theory of Power by Blood and Wolfe (1960) links decision making power within the relationship to income and status resulting from the accomplishments of paid work. From this theory researchers have focused on investigating the differences in decision making within heterosexual couples where women were stay at home mothers, versus mothers who work outside of their home (Stamp, 1985; Hertz, 1988). This began a trend in research testing Blood and Wolfe's theory, investigating heterosexual couples where women earned more money than their male counterpart, with findings suggesting that the correlation between income received and decision-making power was not as positively correlated as previously believed. Women who maintain a higher income and socio-professional status than their male partner were found to not receive a higher degree of influence in the decision-making process within their relationship, especially decisions around finances (Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Brines, 1994; Tichenor, 1999). Elaborating on the mechanics of this further, men are more likely to hold higher positions of power from the privilege that comes from the typically higher wages they receive, resulting in having more of say where money is used, in addition to less restricted and more unquestioned personal spending (Elizabeth, 2001; Vogler, 2005). As a result, women who are not contributing financially not only tend to restrict, but feel guilt around personal spending because they are using "family money" (Burgoyne et al., 2007). Burgoyne and colleagues (2007) go on to explain that the disparity that exists due to the financial inequality results in less power and influence around financial decision making. With that said, there has also been literature published which also indicate that female partners with better opportunities for work or higher income than their male counterpart will have greater decision-making power within the relationship (Klawitter,

2008). Research investigating how women's employment impacts the control they had over shared income in their relationship supports more power related to financial decision making (Kenney, 2006; Heimdal & Houseknecht, 2003; Elizabeth, 2001; Burgoyne et al, 1997). These studies showed that women who had a higher income were more likely to play an active part in deciding whether to pool their finances with their partner, or to keep theirs separate.

### **Money Management Systems**

Social scientists who study the decisions romantic couples make around financial resource allocation often make a distinction between collective strategies, where couples amalgamate their assets, and private strategies which focus on the separate individual needs of each partner in order to prioritize their autonomy (Vogler & Pahl 1994). Volger and Pahl (1994) make distinctions between four different systems which include: pooling (earnings are pooled and managed jointly by both partners), whole wage (wages are given to one individual in the couple who has sole financial responsibility), housekeeping allowance (main earner in the couple provides an allowance to the other partner to maintain the house), and independent management (both partners retain and control their own income, expenses are kept separate and each individual keeps their own bank account). Literature supports that pooling has been the most common method that married couples engage in (Pahl 1989; Vogler & Pahl 1994; Vogler et al. 2008), but more recent focused attention has been spent investigating how cohabiting romantic couples manage their money, resulting in the creation of yet another system coined as partial pooling (Burgoyne et al., 2007). This literature describes how couples often do not actively discuss which money management system they would like to use, but rather their decision of money management system (and by extension FI) is influenced by the merging of

two individuals' ways of managing finances, chance, tradition and/or gendered norms (Evertsson and Nyman 2009; Pahl 1989).

These collective – joint strategies that couples engage in represent a division of labour within the household, which by extension Bennett (2013) asserts requires decision-making around the control and management of those finances. Using Social Exchange Theory described above, literature supports the notion that cohabiting couples during the initial stages of FI are driven to make financial decisions that minimize the cost of risky exchanges and maximize those that support their self-interest (Oropesa et al. 2003). Maintaining separate financial accounts and reducing the degree of FI has been a progressively increasing trend in cohabiting couples (Heimdal & Houseknecht 2003; Oropesa et al. 2003), with some data indicating cohabiting couples explicitly desire to maintain their financial autonomy as long as they are able to (Addo & Sassler 2010; Heimdal & Houseknecht 2003). Literature indicates that the decision to either pool or maintain separate finances has been associated by the individual's perceived relationship cohesion (Addo & Sassler 2010), level of investment in the relationship (Heimdal & Houseknecht 2003; Oropesa et al. 2003), partner's debt as well as perceived lack of equality due to income discrepancy (Dew & Price 2011; Dew, 2007).

### **Relationship Growth and Commitment**

It is important to consider the role decision making to FI has on the continued development of the relationship itself. Self-expansion theory (Aron et al., 1991) assumes that every individual has a fundamental motivation and desire to grow, and when applying within the context of their romantic relationship, emphasizes that this need and desire is met through taking on novel and challenging tasks and transitions. Considering the potential negative impacts

financial stress has on romantic relationships, such as increased interpersonal conflict (Conger et al. 1999), decreased relational satisfaction (Vinokur et al. 1996), and being one of the highest predictors of divorce (Dew, 2007), it is reasonable to assume that romantic couples risk navigating FI to at least in part advance their relationship.

Working in tandem with self-expansion theory, the decision to FI especially within cohabiting premarital relationships is commitment to one another. Commitment theory (Stanley & Markman, 1992) makes a distinction between forces that encourage individuals to stay and maintain connection with their partners (dedication), versus the forces that make dissolution from the relationship more challenging because of higher costs (constraint). An individual measuring with a high degree of dedication reports a strong desire to be with their partner for the long term future and incorporates the attachment to their partner into their own identity as “we” instead of “me” when making decisions in their life (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Within the decision to FI, dedication is exemplified by romantic couples that are willing to place the needs of their partner first and a willingness to sacrifice for one another (Van Lange et al., 1997). This is seen when couples provide one another access and control to their bank accounts, which relinquishes some of the financial autonomy they had before (Addo, 2017) or supporting a partner pay for their loan payment they are struggling to afford. Constraint commitment are factors or variables that make leaving a relationship more challenging due to higher cost (Stanley & Markman, 1992). When looking at the nature of commitment within cohabiting couples, Stanley and colleagues (2010) describe pooling finances or combining assets as constraints that serve to increase interdependence, which assists with transitioning into the next relationship phase. This overlaps and reaffirms the role self-expansion theory (Aron et al., 1991) has during

FI with cohabiters, with Stanley further postulating that the difference between couples who make the decision to continue cohabiting versus the cohabiting couples that decide to get married is the degree of risk and vulnerability they are willing to be constrained by (Stanley et al., 2010).

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

The methodological approach chosen in this study exploring non-married cohabiting clients' experiences of decision-making in the financial integration process was qualitative in nature. A qualitative approach was taken based on the belief that listening to the experiences of the individual through their stories, interpretations, and descriptions of these experiences would provide a deeper and richer understanding of the phenomenon of interest. By engaging with the participants while they share their experience and allowing them to lead the conversation, the researcher is also provided with opportunities to learn and explore aspects that may not have been evident initially. These are reasons that supported the decision to utilize a phenomenological methodology in this study.

By describing and exploring the experience that young adult non-married cohabiting couples have of the decision-making process around FI, this research will provide a deeper understanding of a growing and underrepresented phenomenon in the literature.

#### **Research Design**

##### **Methodological Approach: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.**

Martin Heidegger's phenomenological stance is referred to as interpretive phenomenology or hermeneutic phenomenology (Langdridge, 2007), due to its historical basis in hermeneutic tradition (interpretation of experience), making the interpretation of the lived experience a central goal. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is also rooted in post positivism, a metatheoretical stance that acknowledges that the researcher is influenced by their own theories, knowledge, background, and values when making their own observations (Langdridge, 2007). When using IPA, the methodological approach emphasizes that researchers

utilizing this type of methodology actively incorporate their own understanding of the phenomenon to understand the meaning of the participant's lived experience. The participant's experience however can be hidden so interpretation of the participant's experience is used to uncover its meaning (Van Manen, 2009). A unique tenant of interpretative phenomenology acknowledges that through the process of making sense of a participant's experience, perception, or views of a phenomenon, the researcher cannot remain objective enough to capture only the participant's experience (Langdrige, 2007). Langdrige (2007) elaborates on Martin Heidegger's "being-in-the-world" philosophy, that it is impossible to compartmentalize and separate our being and sense of self from the world and reality we live in, meaning that we have a biased lens when making an interpretation of a phenomenon based on our own theories, experiences, knowledge and values. Because of this, IPA holds a two-stage dual hermeneutic process of interpretation. As Smith and Osborn (2003) explain, while participants attempt to articulate how they make sense of the world, the researcher attempts to make sense and understand the way that the participant makes sense of the world. Both the participant and the researcher are engaging dynamically with one another and cannot be viewed independently. This process of interpretation (named the hermeneutic circle) is described as making a shift between the whole and its parts, with the goal of combining both meanings (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Having a lived experience of the non-married cohabiting decision-making process in FI, I as the researcher will have the ability to understand the phenomenon being described while also being open to new meanings and understanding (Landridge, 2007).

Another element of IPA is that it collects and analyzes data ideographically, narrowing in the unique and specific elements of the phenomenon of interest, rather than evaluating and



collecting information that is more general and broad in nature (Smith & Osborn, 2003). By focusing on the experiences of individual participants on a specific phenomenon, Smith and Osborn further elaborate that the individual's experience can provide understanding and insight into more general populations. Exploring and analyzing the experience of a smaller sample of participants brings about a richness and depth that a nomothetic study would have difficulty doing.

### **Suitability.**

There are a number of reasons interpretative phenomenology was chosen as the methodology for this study. First and foremost, a qualitative, and particularly a phenomenological methodology was deemed most suitable because of the limited amount of information that is available on the existing phenomenon of decision making in non-married cohabiting couples during FI. The ability to fully explore this phenomenon without any leading questions that a structured interview or survey would offer, provides the most unrestricted insight on the topic (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Secondly, this study is focused on an experience that occurs between two individuals, and this same experience has strong socially ingrained scripts and cultural norms. The participant's meaning making of FI is heavily dependent on these various levels of influence. Interpretative phenomenology allowed for the authentic exploration of the impacts these conversations and systemic messages have on the participant's experience of making decisions around FI with their romantic partners (Creswell, 2003, p.8). The phenomenon of decision-making between romantic couples on the topic of FI would be difficult to replicate in an artificial environment so it is appropriate to analyze this experience using IPA.

Lastly, the lived experience I have with FI likely influenced the way in which I interacted with the participants or framed the questions. This would impact the results gathered and how the data was analyzed. In other qualitative methodologies my role as a researcher would require me to try and compartmentalize and detach from my experience, whereas IPA requires the interviewer to be an active collaborator in the process of collecting data and analyzing it (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Acknowledging my experience of the phenomenon that is being explored while grounding myself in the experience of the participants being interviewed provides accountability that other methodologies may be less able to do so.

### **Situating the Researcher**

As mentioned in the above section, interpretative phenomenological analysis researchers do not seek to fully remove themselves from the study, but rather, as a result of their interpretative role, are deeply connected to the research. As such it is important to note my own background and the personal biases that I hold regarding FI in the context of cohabiting non-married young adult couples.

I am a counselling psychology student and a partner in a non-married cohabiting romantic relationship of 4 years. The topic of FI has been a fairly prominent one in my life. With that said, I have found that the decision-making process in my own relationship regarding FI revolves around a number of different factors, primarily involving communication that occurs between the two negotiating parties, and the extent of honesty, willingness to be vulnerable, and trust that goes into the conversation. I have also observed in both my own relationship and disclosures from others the weight of societal and cultural expectations have in making decisions

around FI, and that these conversations can be a catalyst for growth in the relationship, or contribute to the development of interpersonal tension.

This short summary shapes my potential bias as a researcher. It is my intention to make these potential biases clear so the reader may understand how they may have guided my interview facilitation or transcription analysis. The findings in this manuscript should be read through the lens portrayed by the above description described in my own personal experience of FI. During the data collection phase and analysis, I continuously developed awareness of my own experience of FI to better inform my research.

### **Participants**

Langdridge (2007) suggests five to six participants as sufficient to reach saturation, and Smith (2004) recommends five to ten for a phenomenological study. Based on these recommendations, eight participants were deemed appropriate by the primary researcher and supervisor Dr. William Borgen to maintain the rich data gathered from an idiographic case study, and large enough to gather data to compare and formulate some patterns if any were to arise. After the fifth and sixth participants were interviewed, limited novel codes were identified and repeated prior patterns continued to emerge. For this reason the researcher justified stopping with eight participants.

### **Participant Demographics.**

All eight participants were part of a heterosexual couple, with four self-identified as male and four self-identified as female. Age ranged between 25-31 (mean age = 28), three of the couples reported being the same age and one couple reported being one year apart in age. Regarding participant's race, three participants identified as Asian, one as mixed, one as black,

and three of the eight as Caucasian. Six of the participants identified having a Bachelor's degree, two of which were pursuing graduate programs, and the other two disclosed completing a diploma program and a technical trades program. Six of the participants described themselves as employed with five reporting full time employment, and one as self-employed. The remaining two participants were full time students. The salary range reported by couples was between \$35,000 – \$67,000 with disparities ranging from \$0 - \$25,000. Three of the couples resided in British Columbia (two in Vancouver, one in Surrey), and the fourth couple reported living in Montreal. Participants reported a range between two years and 9 months – five years of romantic involvement, and cohabiting from two – four and a half years together. Three of the four couples reported cohabiting within 6 months of romantic involvement, and the fourth couple reported deciding to cohabit within one and a half years.

## **Recruitment**

All four couples in the study were obtained through recruitment posters (see Appendix A) uploaded onto Facebook research study groups and through snowball sampling procedures of primary participants.

Interested participants were asked to email the graduate student researcher to schedule a time for a phone pre-screen interview. At the beginning of the phone screen interview, the researcher asked for verbal consent to ask a few questions to determine the participant's suitability for the study. The researcher then explained the purpose of the study, the ethical considerations, and the expected time commitment to determine their suitability for the study. Following the screening phone interview with interested participants, participants who were deemed eligible to participate by the student researcher were invited to schedule a time to

interview with the graduate student researcher, or given up to a week to reply via email with their decision to participate. Participants were provided with the option to meet for their interview at the Psychoeducation Research and Training Centre located at the University of British Columbia, in their home, or over videoconferencing software Zoom. The couples who wished to take part in the study that met criteria to participate were sent an electronic copy of the consent form for them to review prior to meeting. Both individuals in the couple were asked to schedule a time to have an individual interview with the researcher right after the other to avoid any form of biasing or collusion with one another. Scheduling participants independently as opposed to interviewing them together was decided as the best course of action based on literature that identified the benefits of speaking independently in couples research, as this would furthermore increase self-disclosure around sensitive topics without having the presence of their significant other being there to inhibit them from doing so (Eisikovitis & Koren, 2010).

Upon meeting for the interview, the consent form was reviewed together, the participant was given an opportunity to ask any questions about consent or details of the study itself, and then asked to sign the informed consent form prior to participation (see Appendix C). All participants were made aware that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time and that they would receive a copy of their interview themes produced for the research report. Opportunities for third party recruitment and snowball sampling occurred during the initial recruitment stage, in which case the third party was provided the contact information of the primary researcher of the study to be passed onto the interested person for participation. Participants were given a \$10 Starbucks gift card after the initial interview for participating in the study.

### **Inclusion Criteria.**

This study aimed to obtain data from 4 romantic couples (8 participants total). A purposive sample was obtained with the following selection criteria: (a) English speaking; (b) Couples must be self-identified as "financially integrated"; (c) Both members of the couple are between the ages of 25-35; (d) Couples who have been in a relationship a minimum of two years; (e) Couples who are currently living, and have been living together for a minimum of one year; (f) Couples who both identify as heterosexual.

The English-speaking criterion was required because phenomenological research requires in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, and the participant's ability to convey and share that experience. The second criterion required a self-identification of the phenomenon in question. The study required participants to share their experience of the decision-making process with their romantic partner, and they would be unable to do if they did not believe they were financially integrated. The third inclusion criteria's intention was to target the "young-adult" population that is old enough to have started to make decisions about FI. Statistics Canada defines this age group as individuals between the ages of 18-35 ([www150.statcan.gc.ca](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca)). The fourth and fifth criteria were set with the intention to target individuals who were developed enough in their relationship to have had experience living together, which would allow them to have already started making decisions around FI with one another. Due to the small sample size of this study, an emphasis on romantic couples who have tangible experience with this phenomenon were emphasized.

### **Exclusion Criteria.**

This study has three exclusion criteria, including (a) Participants who did not speak English fluently (their speech may not be clearly understood by the researcher); (b) Couples who were married; (c) Couples who had children. These latter two exclusion criterion were put in place to ensure the study recruited the population of interest, which were non-married couples who had experience integrating finances. Children are not typically involved in younger adult couples who are beginning to make decisions around FI so romantic couples with additional children were specifically omitted for that reason.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected at three separate points of contact: the screening interview, the main interview with an additional demographic questionnaire, and the follow-up member check interview six months later (See Appendix B, E, and D for the screening interview protocol, main interview protocol, and the demographic questionnaire).

During the screening phone interview, interested participants were asked questions to verify they met inclusion and exclusion criteria (See Appendix E for screening interview protocol). Once participants were screened and agreed to participate in the study, the interview was scheduled. These interviews were aimed to be conducted face to face to ensure the richness of the in-person contextual details were not lost. Three out of the four couples opted to have the interviews conducted in their home, and one of the couples was interviewed over Zoom due to the geographical barriers around living in a different province.

Upon meeting for the first time, the consent form was reviewed together with both members of the couple and signed (See Appendix C for consent form). In addition to obtaining

signatures for the consent form, the study participants had the confidentiality protocols explained to them, in addition to the risks and benefits of participation in the study. The participants were then asked to fill out a short demographic questionnaire (See appendix D for demographic questionnaire) that identified additional contextual variables to help understand the experience being studied and the sample of participants that were being interviewed. Once this was explained to the client, the romantic couple decided who would be interviewed first and the other would retreat to a separate room and put on headphones.

At this point, the audio recording began, and verbal consent to proceed was asked. Smith (2004) outlines that most phenomenological studies are conducted through the use of open ended interviews. My neutral prompts and open-ended questions were directed at the participant's elaboration of their experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions around the couple's decision-making process of integrating their finances together. Using the open-ended qualitative methodology, I was able to stay true to a traditional phenomenological approach, where the prompts and questions acted as an evocative, rather than a prescriptive approach that deepened the conversation (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) explain that in this process, the participant who is being interviewed is the one that ultimately decides what direction to go in, and the researcher only uses the neutral prompts or elaborative questions to focus the participant on the topic being investigated. An example around the subtle nuances around the topic of FI include study participants sharing what methods they utilize to integrate their finances, rather than the process with which they made the decision, the latter which was the topic of interest.



To explore this phenomenon fully without leading the participant's responses with researcher bias, Eatough and Smith (2006) suggest the use of funneling in phenomenological interviews. With this in mind, I started the interview by stating what the research project was investigating, followed by a definition of FI (see above). I then asked a very general question asking the participant to share their experience of decision making with their cohabiting romantic partner about FI. Based on the participant's response, I then used neutral prompts, reflections, basic empathic responses, paraphrasing, and open-ended questions to encourage detailed expansion around their experience. Funneling in this sequence allowed the participant to decide their own views on the topic, whereas if they were first asked more pointed questions around a specific topic, the participant would disclose information that was biased towards my views or interests disclosed in the leading question. This technique was used to ensure the participant still had the control to steer the conversation in the direction they wanted to go in. If however the participant would stray from the decision making process of FI, I guided them back to focus on the topic of interest with an open ended question (See appendix E for interview protocol).

The last point of data collection occurred in the follow-up email to conduct a member check. At the end of the first interview, participants were reminded that they would be contacted within 6 months time to verify the themes that come from their interview. In this follow up email, the participants were asked a series of three questions to determine resonance, coherence, and comprehensiveness, three requirements in an IPA study (Smith & Osborn, 2004). The follow-up email was the participant's opportunity to indicate whether the themes created for them reflected their experience and to make any corrections or additions if the themes provided did not accurately describe and reflect their experience.

## **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

As an added credibility precaution, a member check was completed to access that the information collected was representative of the participant's experience. Each participant was sent an email with the list of themes that were created from all the combined interviews (See table 1). The participants were asked to respond to the following three questions within a week after spending some time reviewing the themes and descriptions independently. The three questions asked were meant to access resonance, coherence, and comprehensiveness of the themes and are recommended in an IPA study (Osborn & Smith, 2003).

1. How well do the themes listed from your interview reflect your experience of decision making with your romantic partner on the topic of financial integration?
2. Are the main themes that you see from your interview easy to understand?
3. Do the main themes that you see from your interview cover all aspects of your experience? Is there anything you feel should be added that you feel is important for me to know?

Any theme that the participant did not identify with or felt did not represent their experience of the phenomenon in question would not have been included in the final thematic report.

Responses from the four out of eight participants that responded were: a unanimous "yes" to question (1), three out of four said "yes" to question (2), and a unanimous "yes" to question (3). Three participants provided additional comments to supplement their responses. With regards to question (2), one participant wrote: "They all are except for Theme 2, Sub Theme 2. I feel like it overlaps with Sub Theme 1 that they might be the same ". This integrative element was accounted for and the two subthemes of "Deciding to FI by asking specific question" and

“Deciding to FI to meet specific goal” were merged in Theme 2 and renamed to “Goal Oriented Decision”. Regarding question (1), two participants provided feedback: “ I think the themes listed reflect my experience well! Especially surrounding open communication and seeing a future with your partner” and “I don’t think I could have summarized it succinctly like that better myself”. Regarding question (3), one participant provided feedback: “I think you’ve done a great job summarizing everything in a nice succinct and easy to understand way“. Four of the eight participants did not respond to the member check email. Two of these participants came from one dyad, and the remaining came from separate dyads.

Once this member check was completed, the results were sent to the research committee who are both experts in phenomenological analyses and have experience in researching with couples. The final step to ensure trustworthiness and rigor involved all members of my research committee reviewing my final written thesis prior to a public defence where they had the opportunity to ask me additional questions.

### **Confidentiality**

Many measures were taken to ensure that the confidentiality of the participant was being maintained. All consent forms were stored in a secure filing cabinet in the primary investigator’s research laboratory on UBC campus. The demographic questionnaires, original audio recordings, and copied back-up audio recordings were also placed in the secure filing cabinet. Transcriptions and audio recordings uploaded to the co-investigator’s computer and onto the back-up hard drive in the secure cabinet were password protected and additionally encrypted with VeraCrypt to ensure confidentiality was maintained. For additional security, any identifying information, besides the participants name on the consent form was coded using the participant’s pseudonym

of choice. Any third party information disclosed was changed to protect the participant's identity.

The consent form with the participant's name was stored in a secured cabinet in the primary investigator's research laboratory. The supplemental documents collected (demographic questionnaire and interview recording) had a pseudonym attached of the participant's choosing. A Microsoft Excel file linked the participant's name to the research identifying pseudonym that was stored separately from the data on the co-investigator's password protected computer. Aside from the consent form, no identifying information of the participant's was included on the transcription or demographic questionnaire.

The secure server, UBC workspace 2.0, now stores the data. Now that the study has been completed, any physical copies of the data collected (e.g., consent forms and original audio recordings) are kept in a secure filing cabinet in the supervisor's office for the minimum 5 years required by the UBC Policy. After the graduate student's thesis defence and the allotted 5 years have passed, the documents will be shredded. All digital data that has been password protected and encrypted (e.g., transcriptions and audio recordings uploaded to UBC Workspace 2.0) will also be retained on the primary investigator's computer for the minimum 5 years and then deleted after the allotted time frame. The primary investigator will be responsible for the storage of this data.

Precautionary confidentiality measures regarding outsourcing transcription services were also taken to protect the privacy and identity of the research participants. A professional transcriptionist who had already previously worked in tandem with UBC ethics and confidentiality policies was hired to transcribe half of the audio interview recordings. Prior to

being sent the files, the professional transcriptionist was asked to sign a UBC confidentiality agreement (See appendix G for confidentiality agreement) to ensure his understanding and agreement that any of the data from the interview recordings would not be distributed to anyone, and that storage of the files while being transcribed were secured. The audio files themselves were shared via private google drive download link that required a password to access. Once confirmation was received from the transcriptionist that the audio files were downloaded, the files that were uploaded to the private google drive link were deleted. The audio and word document files stored on the transcriptionist's computer were then placed in a password protected folder, and each individual interview also had a unique password to access. Once the transcriptionist securely sent the private password protected download link with the word document files of the interviews, I received email confirmation that all UBC affiliated research files that were sent to the transcriptionist were deleted, as per the confidentiality agreement. Aside from these audio files that were sent to the transcriptionist, the co-investigating graduate research student and the primary investigator will be the only two individuals who have open access to the raw data.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

The data for this research project was collected by recording the interview on a smart-phone app followed by transcribing the recording, half of which were transcribed by me and the other half by a professional transcriptionist. The additional memos written on paper during the interview were incorporated in with the analysis for additional context. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was be used on the transcribed interviews and memos collected. This included preliminary thematic analysis, followed by linking and clustering the

various themes to highlight any patterns that emerge from the participant's responses. A total of 170 codes emerged from the interviews. Nine categories in total were created, two of which had an addition two and three sub-categories. These were then subsumed to create three main themes.

Specific steps for the phenomenological data analyses as noted in Smith and Osborn's (2003) model are as follows:

1. The researcher thoroughly reads and rereads the transcribed interviews to identify with the data and to acquire a sense of each individual and his or her background and experiences. From the transcripts the researcher identifies significant statements which pertain directly to the proposed phenomenon and makes notes in the margins on the qualitative data analysis program Atlas TI. Smith (2004) adds that this free textual analysis takes into account interpretations at the surface, metaphorical, and theoretical level.

2. The researcher rereads the transcribed statements and makes notes in the other margin of any emergent themes that arise (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The participant's specific words and phrases are used to develop interpretive meanings that are reflective of the lived experience of the topic being investigated.

3. The emerging themes are then clustered into meaningful units. These units are then given a representative name and serve as superordinate themes. These steps are repeated with each individual transcribed interview. The superordinate themes from the first interview are used to inform the subsequent analyses, and more easily identify similarities and differences between the other transcribed interviews.

4. In the final step, the transcribed and thematically sorted interviews are used to conduct a cross-case analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003) using the participant's demographic information. The results of the participants are presented in a thematic analysis with quotes.

The additional data collected through the short free response demographic questionnaire was used to provide additional context and information with each individual participating in the study. The data acquired from the individual interviews was compared with each member of the couple separately. Eisikovitis and Koren (2010) write about the rich perspective that results from contrasting partner's experience in phenomenological research, providing insight on new issues such as the nature, type, and dynamics of their relationship. Through the overlapping of the two individual's perspectives, the researcher is able to construct a third dyadic perspective without corrupting or changing the individual experiences (2010). Brannen (1998) explains that separate interviews in dyadic analyses is especially useful when researching topics that are private, sensitive, or difficult to navigate. Because FI and the decision-making process around it often fit all three of these criteria, I felt it was more appropriate than conducting joint interviews. Morris (2001) goes on to explain that separate interviews have a number of different benefits, one being that each participant is more likely to disclose their account or experience from their own perspective without being limited by their partner's presence. The information acquired from each individual was not shared with the other partner nor incorporated into the interview, so the added confidentiality of their perspective would encourage self-disclosure (Morris, 2001). Additional benefits of separate interviews include the ability to capture each individual's perspective independently while still focusing on the phenomenon of interest within the dyadic

perspective (Morris, 2001), and through triangulation of the interviewer having trust levels and self-disclosure increase by both individuals being interviewed (Denzin, 1985; Yardley, 2000).

### **Phenomenology Drawbacks**

With regards to the drawbacks of conducting separate interviews in phenomenological analyses, there are two worth mentioning. The first is the potential inability to compare the data collected because of the incongruent perspective of the phenomenon in question. Holmsberg and colleagues explain that both participants in the couple will have their own version of what they deem “financial integration” (2003). If there is absolutely no overlap or means of comparison with the type of disclosures the participants provide, analyzing both with one another may prove to be challenging. The second drawback has to do with the participant’s partner being “virtually” in the room, despite being interviewed individually. As Eisikovits and Koren (2010) explain, “the virtual presence of the significant other throughout the interview about the intimate relationship is inevitable, for even in the natural standpoint, a man experiences his neighbors even when the latter are not at all present in the bodily sense”. This means that although the study interviews couples and acquires their experiences separately, obtaining a genuine independent perspective without the influence of the participant’s partner may be difficult.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Regarding ethical considerations, approval from the behavioural research ethics board was received for the study and determined to be a low risk study. Added precautions were taken due to the potential issues that can arise when interviewing couples separately on a sensitive topic like their finances.



Firstly, discussing the accounts of a couple's decision-making process of FI can be a rich and valuable experience, but it could also potentially bring up some difficult memories or prior conflict that the couple had not resolved. This can bring up negative feelings and emotions because of the recollection itself. These risks were explicitly stated, and the couples were told they would not have to discuss or elaborate on any topics they felt distressed by or wanted to keep private. Both members of the couple were also told that they had the freedom to withdraw from the study at any given point in time without any justification or consequence. In the event that tension or conflict would arise from either party during or after the interview, members were provided a list of local sliding scale resources for both individual and couples counselling (See appendix F).

Extra care and consideration was also taken to ensure confidentiality was upheld independently with each party of the couple. While going over informed consent, the couple was reminded that they were entitled to their own results and transcriptions, but not their partners. They had the power to share the results with one another, and in doing so may predispose themselves to additional risk. Because couples were also being interviewed separately, couples were informed that the researcher may be exposed to information that one participant in the relationship is unaware of resulting in secret keeping (Forbat & Henderson, 2003). I informed the participants that I would do my best in sequestering any information they shared in their interview but that there was still risk that it may be revealed unintentionally.

## **Chapter 4: Research Findings**

The results of this study are described below in the thematic structure of this phenomenon as described by the four romantic couples interviewed. The purpose of this study was to understand the essential structure of the lived experience non-married young adult cohabiting romantic couples have of FI and the decision-making process behind it. The research question being addressed is: What is the experience of decision making regarding FI in non-married, young adult (25-35), cohabiting romantic relationships? Interviews with participants included questions, that progressed from open to more specific, to assist them in describing their experience of decision making around FI. Below is a description of the three super-ordinate themes and their various sub-themes that were extracted from the data that make up the essential structure of the phenomenon. To maintain participant confidentiality, each participant is identified using a pseudonym that they chose at the start of the interview.

## Overall Theme Structure

Through the analysis process, three super-ordinate themes emerged from participant data. These main themes include: communication strategies used during FI conversations, the use of goal orientations to make a decision, and factors that influence willingness to FI. All themes include sub-themes. See Table 1 for the overall theme structure.

**Table 1: Theme Structure**

Theme 1: Communication Strategies/Intentions Used During FI Conversations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Open Communication</li><li>- Reassurance<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>o Explicit Reassurance</li><li>o Implicit Reassurance</li></ul></li><li>- Mutual Decision Agreement</li></ul>
Theme 2: Goal Oriented Decisions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Equity</li><li>- Value to Save Money</li><li>- Relationship Development</li></ul>
Theme 3: Factors that Influence Willingness to Financially Integrate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Perceived Financial Risk<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>o Financial Responsibility</li><li>o Reciprocated Level of Sacrifice and Financial Risk Taking</li><li>o Income Disparity and Partner Debt</li></ul></li><li>- Trust in Future with Partner</li><li>- Family Upbringing and Gender Role Expectations</li></ul>

## **Theme 1: Communication Strategies/Intentions Used During FI Conversations**

When describing their experience of decision-making during the process of FI, all eight participants shared the discussions and negotiations that were salient to them, and the variety of strategies and tools that were required during this process. These strategies were described by participants as an opportunity to provide a foundation to establish trust that makes the decision to FI with their romantic partner easier. The overarching theme of the importance of communication and the consequences without it can be represented by the statement shared by Dick:

We lived together for four and a half years now, and then- - like I think the key thing in our financial relationship is communication. Like, I've always told her so many times like "everything could be solved with communication and once the communication is broken that's where everything goes down". So we're both always understanding or knowing where we are at.

Communication strategies are broken down into 3 additional subthemes that include open communication, seeking and providing reassurance, and mutual decision agreement. Though these components are described separately, they were occasionally used in conjunction with one another.

### **Open Communication.**

One of the major components experienced in the decision-making process during FI involves the ability to communicate things to your partner. The process of open communication is described by individuals in the romantic relationship as being transparent without keeping any secrets, allowing yourself to be vulnerable in sharing financially related fears, as well as sharing both your own financial needs that you require from your partner and a willingness to understand the other's perspective.

The thread of transparency without any secret keeping was explicitly stated by seven out of eight participants, many of which outline its rationale and the consequences it would have on the relationship and the FI process. For example, Christian shared his experience of the impacts withholding information would have had on taking steps towards developing financial trust:

It was a very hard kick to the ego when I could like “this is what my credit card looks like and it does not look pretty”, but had I not been open or had I lied about that or had I not wanted to talk about it, like there would have been no progress moving forward and there wouldn’t have been a clear-cut solution

The need for transparency is further exemplified by the negative impact withholding financial related information had on the participants and their partners. Hobbs described a situation involving a tax assessment that resulted in the stress of one individual and betrayal from the other:

There was a time I got another letter after the assessment, and because it was a stress to me, it totally stressed Calvin out. So she had opened my mail without asking me because she’s just like, it’s bothering me a lot, I had to know what was in there which felt like a breach in privacy.

Calvin described her stress from this experience stemming from not knowing what potential debt she was now affiliated with, and guilt of potentially implicating him based on their recent common-law declaration. With regards to the function of transparency however, Calvin and Christian described it as an opportunity to assert when they were unable to afford something that their partner wanted, or as Gabby shared as “an opportunity to access and look towards the future to see how we’re getting there”.

Involved in the process of open communication, seven out of eight participants described the importance of being vulnerable and sharing fears with their partners which serves a multitude of different functions. Given the inherent challenges that are involved when having the

conversation around finances, being vulnerable with the significant other requires a sizable amount of trust. Gabby shared an example depicting the fear involved when disclosing financial decisions she had made in her and Christian's monthly "money meetings":

I think there was a lot of guilt and shame in those meetings, he's sort of being more of like "Oh like she's going to see that I have credit card debt that I didn't pay off" and then mine would be like "Oh he's going to see how much I spent on a flight."

Christian further elaborated on the role vulnerability has in disclosing flaws and developing trust:

You shouldn't feel like you can't be vulnerable with your partner and say like "these are my flaws like we need to talk about this". Even in relationships where both of you feel like you're both financially like set, I still think that you should be open about that because it shows you're trusting this person to be a partner in life and like you trust them to like be a person who can see your weakness, not just your strengths.

He goes on to describe how being vulnerable allowed for him and Gabby to not only get a clear idea of what decisions they needed to make to manage their finances together, but also allow them to feel closer.

In another example, Bill disclosed how he showcased vulnerability by sharing a negative experience from his last relationship as a means to protect himself:

I definitely tried to make all of my like fears and anxieties clear right away. I think it was made that like much more clear at the beginning of our relationship that we would keep things fair, like I'm not sure if I scared Barb with that. I feel like I was trying to be pretty clear upfront that these were the issues I had in my last relationship and I'm not sure whether that meant she compensated more to keep it equal or not.

Through disclosing fears and vulnerabilities to your significant other, he explained how doing so can also provide the opportunity for the individual on the receiving end to acknowledge their partner's sensitivities or to provide support in some way. Whether it was through reassurance, or for their partner to be more aware of their own behaviors so as to not contribute

to their partners stress or instigate some form of financial based conflict. In the case of Bill's relationship, Barb was already focused on equality, but it allowed for her the opportunity to be extra diligent with her financial decisions.

Closely related to vulnerability when describing open communication patterns, seven out of eight participants noted interactions they had during the FI decision making process involving disclosing financial needs to your partner, and a willingness to understand their partner's financial perspective. In this passage, Emily shared the impact it had on both herself and her perceptions of her partner when she shared her financial needs:

He knows about my sensitivities around commitment to finances but he was and is still committed in that sense even though he knows how I feel. That kind of makes you feel "oh ok, you'll still commit financially even though you have a higher risk at losing something". That gives you a sense of strong development in the relationship because it gives you the sense that this person still really cares.

Without having to hide her financial fears and insecurities from Dick, she described more confidently believing that the relational commitment would not be linked to their "more limited" FI as she had feared, instead providing her with an environment where trust about finances could be developed further by her partner.

Hobbs reflected this sentiment of feeling cared for when he asked his partner Calvin for rent money after she forgot to send it to him a few times. He shared "always feeling awkward asking for rent", disclosing to her that he did not want to feel like he was "nagging her". The resulting reaction of Calvin setting a reminder on her phone without any protest, so he would not need to remind her made Hobbs recognize that "it wasn't a big deal at all to her, I loved that she just jumped in to prevent any future discomfort". These types of reflections support the role open communication has, and how a willingness to disclose needs provides an opportunity to develop

the relationship by making the asker feel supported through their concerns. In his interview, Dick spoke to how one of his biggest learning lessons around open communication was to “not shut your partner down when listening to what they wanted to share, because it helps me understand where she’s coming from”, which he then continued to elaborate on: “it makes it easier to meet halfway”. Similarly, Barb described how understanding Bill’s financial anxiety allowed her to be more patient with his occasionally restrictive spending or vocalized “what if” thoughts:

I think he was pretty young but I think it was a pretty like significant moment where he was like “Oh my god this is what happens if you’re not financially careful. So I think because of that situation he’s just been a little bit more hesitant to like spend money and like we do lots of things that we want to do, but he always says it’s like “we spend money like we have it” because we totally do but I think he just has more concern around like “well what if we can’t pay this off”? It makes it easier to understand.

This speaks to the importance of understanding your partner’s needs are in not only making them feel supported, but allowing for more tolerance for the financial decisions they make that the other individual may not agree with. For example, Emily and Gabby both speak to their partner’s fascination with video gaming and how it has allowed them to be more “flexible” and “patient” knowing how meaningful video game time was to them.

### **Reassurance.**

The second most common sub-theme situated under open communication involves seeking reassurance due to the paucity of uncertainty that is involved in the process of decision-making during financial integration. All eight of the participants interviewed shared through their examples instances where they received reassurance either by directly asking for it (explicit reassurance), or by making judgments based on the behaviors of their partner (implicit



reassurance). Obtaining reassurance through these two means allowed for continued FI when the individual lacked confidence to make a decision on their own.

### ***Explicit Reassurance.***

When requiring explicit reassurance, participants described wanting information or support to mitigate their worry about financially driven decisions. They addressed their worry by directly bringing it to their partner so there was no room to misinterpret and perpetuate their fears. A common example described by participants was the reassurance that was required when bringing a large asset to the relationship, and worry about the potential loss of that asset if they were to FI. Emily described how reassurance helped her in developing trust in the relationship which allowed for further commitment when she was worried about her property that she brought to the relationship was going to be taken advantage of:

I had brought up things like, “oh you know if I’m paying the mortgage it’s an asset to me and if you leave the relationship there’s nothing you’ve paid via assets or nothing you can take from this relationship”, he just kept saying that he doesn’t care, he wouldn’t do that, and that its fine. It’s also really reassuring for me, that you know it wouldn’t be messy in that regard. Just knowing I wouldn’t have to feel like he would be so dramatic if anything were to happen. I could still have my own safety net and feeling reassured, which makes me feel we’re committed to the relationship even if something were to happen.

Similarly, Gabby recalled the worries she had when bringing in savings into the relationship: “Well if we break up tomorrow I’m not 50/50 anymore, which I felt really guilty about”, and how Christian reassured her by giving her the space to openly talk about the guilt and fear of losing her savings, which led to her deciding to take a step toward FI. The experience participants had around the fear of losing their resources is supported by the fact that the two individuals who were bringing a larger asset into the relationship shared a higher degree of fear

and need for reassurance, compared to the other two couples who had equal levels of risk of losing their financial assets.

Another context within which explicit reassurance was required were situations when an individual had concerns that their partner would use their finances as leverage. When faced with a tax audit that required financial repayment, Hobbs shared a memory of his response when his partner offered to pay for a debt he was unable to afford at the time, and how his partner was able to provide him with reassurance:

And I'm like, "Oh, no, I don't want you to get mad at me. And then bring this up somehow", but she's like, "Have I ever done that?" I was like, "No, that's just my insecurity."

Calvin further elaborated on the same conversation where she shared why she believes Hobbs decided to let her pay for the taxes:

After a couple of back and forths he finally agreed. I would never hold that against him and I think the reason why he finally gave in is because I told him that I am here to help and it's like I'm going to never be like "oh I'm going to have to pay for your taxes like now you owe me this thing".

This example with Hobbs and Calvin's experience suggests that providing reassuring messages that an individual's generosity has positive intentions rather than manipulative ones, allows for more trust to develop in order to continue relationship development and making decisions towards FI.

One last context where explicit reassurance was utilized involved encouraging partners to make a financial decision they felt guilty in making. Barb shared when going clothing shopping a memory where she had to reassure her guilted and uncertain partner Bill that he was justified in

spending more money on a winter jacket, which contradicts the value he developed from his step-father of spending less money on things that were not necessary:

We had to leave it and go and shop for another hour and then I brought him back, and I said “why don’t you try it on, one more time? It’s a jacket you could invest in and it’s worth the money.”

Similar “guilty decisions” that required reassurance from partners to justify included going out for sushi (Gabby), buying a videogame (Christian), getting a treat from the grocery store (Emily), or purchasing a direct flight as opposed to one with layovers (Calvin and Hobbs). These were items that at times required some reassurance from their partner or themselves to justify purchasing.

### ***Implicit Reassurance.***

In implicit reassurance seeking, all eight participants described using the actions and gestures of their partners to access their partner’s level of commitment. These actions and gestures were characterized by being more generous or showcasing their willingness and ability to risk their own financial resources. This form of reassurance is one that is observed rather than asked for directly, which some participants reflected was one of the initial influences that helped in their decision to FI. Emily recalled the rate of her FI journey, and how the actions of her partner gave her willingness to take her own risks regarding FI:

I would describe the shift as like very gradual. Over the past few years and just like seeing actions on his end, not just words, like actual actions, then I feel like that makes me feel reassured and understand that my partner is in it for the long term, then I can be so too, and to start breaking down my walls. I’m willing to reciprocate what he gives out to me. It helps me feel comfortable that it’s going to be long term.

Here Emily makes a distinction between word (explicit) and action based (implicit) reassurance, and how impactful they have been in allowing her to develop trust and reciprocate

through her own FI oriented risk-taking decisions. Emily's experience also implies that her partner is the one that sets the bar for financial risk taking and that she will only match what he does, underscoring the importance of implicit reassurance to make a decision towards FI.

Both Dick and Christian shared similar experiences of their partner's financial ambivalence to FI, and how they took active steps to provide implicit reassurance through their actions. Christian took it upon himself to proactively track his finances and budget independently as he knew Gabby would feel reassured by financial responsibility, whereas Dick was continuously more keen to take on financial risk because of his awareness around Emily's financial ambivalence, and because he wanted to model trust to help her take FI oriented decisions as well:

She's always been the kind of type where it's like this is her stuff, this is my stuff. And I kind of like to be like "oh I want you to be a little bit part of my stuff". I think she's slowly kind of moving towards that, where instead it's like "oh we both own this one thing together"

Similar themes with implicit, more action based reassurance were indicated by gestures such as relief from their partner's willingness to take on rent while they job searched (Calvin), seeing how keen their partner is to pay for debt repayment they cannot afford (Hobbs), or noticing their partner's lack of concern over a significantly higher visa bill than their own (Barb). Bill at one point even speaks to the peace of mind he gets when he connects his partner's personality and skillset to how he envisions the future money management system in their relationship:

The way that I envisioned it is 1 bank account. I don't want to assume that's how it'll go but it would be so much easier I think since she's much more organized than me and I could naturally see her dealing with finances over me because she is more type-A.

### **Mutual Decision Agreement.**

The final subtheme falling under communication strategies and intentions describes the goal of making a decision that both parties in the couple agree with during FI conversations, including the ability to reach a compromise where equal levels of sacrifice is made. All eight participants interviewed share instances where they have had challenging FI conversations, and how an intention to make a decision that both parties are satisfied with us make a large difference in the process of decision-making.

Three of the 4 couples described a negotiation process that involves both individuals developing “arguments” or “pitches” for the decision they are leaning towards. Gabby eloquently explained the notion of “buy in” when working together with her partner to make a decision:

So I think the fact that we make a lot of the decisions together and really like look for the other person’s support and buy-in before we do anything. So usually the conversation is like “Okay this thing I’ve really wanted is now on sale, what do you think?” and there’s been times I think I’m a little bit more aware of our budget than Christian is, and it’ll be a thing he’s like: “Oh I just want to buy this game or whatever” and I kind of said like are you getting paid on Friday? Cool can we wait till next week? He understands my rationale but there’s never been a situation where we’ve had to say “Absolutely not”.

Dick further adds to the attributed meaning he associates with making decisions together, speaking to a process that is meaningful to him and his relationship with Emily:

I guess I just really like the fact that after talking about it we both made a decision together. It’s not just a dishwasher you decided to get anymore, it’s one that we decided to get since I was involved. It’s nice that we had just talked about it and we both found a fair ground for both parties and we came to a conclusion.

What stands out in this quote is Dick’s value in contributing to his decision with his partner, one that provides a sense of a unified front. Even when the decision is not their ideal

preference, participants like Bill, Emily, and Calvin talk about compromising for the sake of their partner. Here Bill discusses the decision made around rent with his partner:

I would have never spent the amount of money we're spending right now on a place like this. If I wasn't with her, I don't think I would have, but there is this agreement with both of us, we want a place that we're proud of. I think that's also a product of the fact that we're like figuring it out together.

Merging with the sub theme of open communication, Emily shares how understanding her partner's needs interacts with the need to make decisions that they are both able to "meet in the middle" with:

I think after you have enough of those situations come up you just understand where that other person is coming from and you recognize what is important to them and you sort of start to give a little bit. Give more room on each end. I think it's over time, that's how we've come to meet in the middle.

This process of mutual agreed financial decisions and understanding their partner's perspective may extend to non-financial decisions as well, as Calvin implies during their decision to foster kittens:

We're good at communicating with each other with our financial needs and I think it's similar to anything else, it's always like give and take, like okay then I understand you're not a big fan of pets or whatever but I understand that this is what you need and then so we'll do it together, and now we're like fostering kittens!

## **Theme 2: Goal Oriented Decision**

When interviewing participants about their process of decision making during FI, it became apparent that the participants were motivated to integrate to reach a specific goal. Both members of the couple would reach this goal either asking themselves a series of questions or following an implicit rule that they determined together. All eight participants shared a large

variety of goals, and the ones included below were the most prominent examples. These included goals to achieve equity, saving money, and the development of the relationship.

### **Equity.**

Prominent at the start of the FI process amongst all four of the couples interviewed, equitable spending was one of the most common motivations that guided decision making. This centered around individuals wanting to maintain a sense of fairness to ensure that all expenses would be equivalent to one another or to ensure individuals were not spending money they did not think was justified.

Bill and Barb both recalled having a mutual expectation around keeping things “fair” and “equal”, both for different reasons. In Bill’s experience, it was around a negative experience from a past relationship that he wanted to protect himself from repeating:

I think it was made that like much more clear at the beginning of our relationship that we would keep things fair, like I’m not sure if I scared Barb with that. I feel like I was trying to be pretty clear upfront that these are the issues I had in my last relationship and I don’t want to repeat them.

Whereas Barb was motivated by her values in gender equality and not wanting to fall into the pattern of having Bill pay for her meals all the time:

When we were dating it was like we would go on dates and we would kind of- - I’ve always been very like “Being equal is key” and like the feminism and so that we often would kind of split, change who bought dinner- - and not that we split it down the middle, when we went on dates, but it was just kind of whoever would buy like it would just kind of go back and forth kind of haphazardly.

Bill further elaborates on this “who paid last” system by describing it as an “unwritten thing”, where “I paid for the last big one, so she’ll pay for this big one”. Dick and Emily described a similar process, using cost splitting for a dishwasher in their example instead. Dick

stated that he would always offer to put in fifty percent of the cost on an item they would both use in the home for fairness, so when Emily proposed a price cap for an item they were considering, Dick would occasionally do research to see if his portion of the cost of the item was fair.

Fairness and equity is impacted by a partner's debt and income as well, as exemplified by Gabby when deciding the portion of rent that is paid based on these variables:

We both live here, we should both contribute 50% equally to it. I think for a long time that was sort of our definition was just like we both put in the same amount of money. It has always sort of tried to come out of like a place of equality and then when we got a little bit later into our relationship when we started looking more at like income and stuff like that like Christian would bring home more, but then he also had student loans and car loans and I didn't have that. So we kind of thought okay it evens out.

Even in the situation where there is unequal levels of income coming into the relationship, fairness and equity is still taken into account, as described by Calvin when she first moved with Hobbs to another province and she was unemployed:

He always thought that it was fair that since he's making money then he should pay for rent and rent is really affordable here, and I still had enough savings that I could at least pay for groceries, certain utilities, the internet and all that other stuff.

Individual interests and priorities also influenced the sub theme of fairness, where participants all described paying for things themselves if it was more important to them to avoid their partner's feeling a sense of inequality. Calvin reflects on the decision-making process for vet bills for cats that she primarily wanted:

I'll never ever put it on Hobbs to be like "you should pay for this because I want it". If it's my idea then I have to pay for it, that's only fair. When it comes to cat bills and stuff, I'm going to pay for it. If you pay for it then it's basically my cat because it was my idea, so I'll pay you back if I wasn't able to take it to the vet.



Other examples where a personal interest was paid for explicitly by the individual include paying for faster internet (Dick), paying for higher quality furniture (Emily, Hobbs), nicer clothing (Barb) traveling expenses (Gabby), video games (Christian, Dick), and nicer meals (Bill).

### **Saving Money,**

Another subtheme that falls under the category of implicit rule following and goal oriented behaviors is participants' value in saving money. When making financial decisions together all eight participants' decisions were motivated to save money in the present context or in the long-term future.

Three of the couples explicitly indicated deciding on purchasing items together based on how much value there was in the item, and whether it was on sale. Dick explained that he and Emily focused on finding deals through second hand purchases to furnish their apartment when they first moved in:

We always like bargain shop like crazy, she's really good at finding deals and everything and then that's when I learned like oh wow I could like buy so many things cheaper. For example, when we moved here like if you ever look at our apartment like maybe less than 10% of the stuff is bought from a store everything is Craigslisted. So like we found such sweet deals on everything of like it's like a quarter of the price.

Gabby spoke of her and Christian coming from a less affluent upbringing which influences her cost saving decisions:

I think we are both pretty frugally minded probably just a result of like upbringing like not having a ton of money, I've always prided myself on being able to find a deal and research and stuff like that. I go on quite a few trips, Christian comes on most but like I always find the best flight deal and I think it helps me justify it when I can say like "Oh but it's usually this much, but now it's this much, we have to grab it".

In both of these examples, the couples were motivated by making a direct comparison in cost to quantify how much they can save. If an opportunity presented itself to save a significant amount of money, they decided to take it. Hobbs however indicates that another consideration like time and can be involved in the decision making process:

We found a really good deal, it was I think \$400 cheaper if you have a layover. But for us, it's like if it's only going to be 100 or \$200 more to not have a layover, we'll do it because it's worth the cost of just getting there and not dealing with the extra layover time.

When couples were not motivated by short term savings to make a decision together, they indicated making decisions based on long term saving potential when FI was in a more advanced stage. In an example provided by Barb, empirical evidence was referenced to inform the thoughts she had between renting and buying property in her and Bill's future:

They've done some studies that have shown it's actually cheaper to rent long-term and like there was a point at which it was like that bad in Vancouver that it was like it actually makes more sense to rent for the rest of your life than to buy like at least for like a detached home or something.

A similar perspective was taken on the use of research to determine the quality of an item the couple was debating on purchasing, opting to buy the higher quality item that had higher longevity in order to save money by not having to buy it again earlier. This included furniture (Hobbs and Emily), fitness/biking gear (Dick), and various amazon purchases (Gabby).

Assisting with debt repayment to save money proved to be another example three of the four couples discussed being a large influence in their decision to FI. This occurred when participants with a larger amount of financial resources made the decision to support their partner with debt repayment to prevent unnecessary interest from accumulating. In this recollection that Calvin shares, she explains how she was able to convince Hobbs to accept money to help pay off

a tax debt: “Let me help and so we don’t have to incur any interest. Why don’t you just take this and pay for the rent next month if you want, it’s not a big deal.”

Gabby shared a similar experience with assisting her partner pay off a student loan with her savings to reduce interest, and Barb goes even further to share the discussion she had with her financial planner after obtaining an inheritance to take on some of her partner’s credit to reduce “collective interest”. All the participants who were willing to contribute their own resources to pay their partner’s debt did so later on in their relationship, suggesting a higher degree of investment in the relationship.

### **Relationship Development.**

A prominent sub-theme that all eight participants described under the goal oriented theme also included making FI based decisions for the purpose of developing and advancing their relationship. Here participants describe being motivated by the collective needs of the relationship, rather than their own needs individually.

As Gabby described, FI is a “tool” which contributes towards the strengthening of the relationship as a whole:

We’re not just integrating our money but we’re like integrating our lives, this is like how we build a life together. I think this is a tool that’s going to make us more successful by doing that because it’s more transparent and it’s simpler and it’s less shame and guilt and less of like a “mine versus yours” and more of just like “ours.”

Similar sentiments were mirrored by Calvin when sharing how despite not being able to contribute as much financially during her unemployment, she felt the decision to take on more by her partner was a result of a mutual feeling of support:

I think we both just kept it in mind that we are in this together, we are both just going to support each other financially and it’s not really the important part of the relationship, so we just need to do this because that’s what we have to do to survive, one way or another,

and we are both in this so let's get it done and so now it doesn't become a problem for us as a unit.

Reaching milestones together through FI was another way that all eight participants described their relationship developing. Although in different stages of reaching those milestones, participants noted the need to make financially based decisions to do that. In one example, Emily described her experience of beginning to think about the future with her partner and the finances that would be involved:

So I mean in the beginning relationship I was always concerned because I had come out of a long term relationship where I learned not everything was certain. So I tried to keep myself in the present. Whereas now because we are in a committed relationship then it's like, OK I can start taking steps to think about our financial future and what we want to accomplish together.

Bill and Barb both describe the financial planning involved in preparing to purchase a home during their medical residencies, similar to Gabby and Christian who discussed making decisions to accommodate their goal of moving to Europe for a year. Calvin and Hobbs also explored what their financial arrangement would be if one of them went back to school, or what kind of arrangement they would have when they started planning for children. These future goals were described as being heavily influential in how they spent their money.

Additionally, all participants interviewed described some form of tracking or budgeting of their collective accounts or expenses. Half of the couples (Emily, Dick, Gabby, Christian), maintained the tracking around their financial decisions for increased "transparency", "awareness" and "peace of mind", while the other half (Calvin, Hobbs, Bill, Barb) relinquished the effort they put into tracking their expenses which made things more "convenient", "simple", and less "knit-picky". In both systems, all the couples described continuing/stopping tracking

made making financial decisions less prone to arguments and conflicts which helped ease any tensions that existed. In this example, Bill reflected on the idea of having all financial resources pooled into one account:

I think it simplifies things. I'm not very, I try, but like I'm not the best with keeping track of my spending and like what I'm doing and like am I having any extraneous charges, where are they coming from, tracking that down, it actually drives me nuts. And I feel like it would simplify things if we had one account where we're not keeping track and would kind of create a little less work and strain for both of us.

### **Theme 3: Factors that Influence Willingness to Financially Integrate**

The final theme identified when looking at the experience of the decision-making process during FI are the myriad of factors the participants shared that influenced their willingness, and by extension their decision, to combine and integrate financial resources with their partner. Weighing the risks and benefits of this decision was suggested to be complex in nature, and numerous sub-themes became apparent that impacted the participant's confidence to make their decision. These three sub-themes included the participant's perceived financial risk assessment based on certain characteristics, the level of trust they had in seeing a future with their partner, and a combination of familial and societal influences, the latter of which primarily revolved around gender roles.

#### **Perceived Financial Risk.**

When deciding to FI with their partner, participants shared experiences that listed a number of factors which served to either increase or decrease their sense of risk of FI with their partner. These were also described as pieces of information that relieved the fear that they would be at a loss if they decided to integrate collectively their financial and personal resources. These

included their partner's financial responsibility, the degree with which their partner reciprocated financial risk, as well as the degree of income disparity and debt that existed in the relationship.

***Financial Responsibility.*** An attribute that seven out of eight participants mentioned influenced their degree of risk taking in FI was the perception of their partner's financial sense and responsibility. These examples revolved around how individuals spent or tracked their finances, and how these observations were applied to what they could be doing with their own resource if they were to FI. In Gabby's relationship, she described the struggle of deciding to merge finances from the passive role her partner initially had in managing his own finances:

He would show me his budget breakdown and I was like okay great like this is your expenses but what are you actually spending? Because he would just sort of break down like "Oh this is how much goes to this loan and this is how much goes into this loan or other things like that". I was like "Okay but like how much are you spending on coffee? How much did you earn? He didn't know how to answer those questions and I think that was another part of my hesitation in integrating more fully. It was like I don't want to be the one who has to track all of this stuff. So I think in the last couple of months for sure he's done a much better job of taking a more active role with that.

This was similarly reflected in Emily's experience stating that they frequently argued over what was deemed a "good expense", so when Dick wanted to purchase a bike that was out of his budget or when he had not sold his other bike first, similar to Gabby, it gave them both a sense that their partner could have been more financially responsible which reduced their willingness to contribute their own finances and integrate more fully. The reaction that followed Dick and Christian's acknowledgement of their passive roles and them taking more active steps to showcase financial responsibility was their partners feeling "reaffirmed", "relieved", and like their partners were "taking it more seriously". Here Dick shares a statement around his epiphany that he needed to become more financially responsible if he wanted a future with Emily: "I know

if I want a better future with her I know that we're going to have to save money, I can't be reckless, I can't do this, I can't do that".

A byproduct attribute that stems from financial responsibility is also trust, which overall contributes to willingness to FI. As Hobbs shared from his relationship with Calvin, their degree of discretionary spending acts as a way for them both to access how financially responsible they both are:

She knows I still have a job, she knows I'm still obviously conscious of my spending and we make sure that I'm not stretching myself too thin. We never step on each other's toes in that sense. I'm never like- - like, Liz has a lot of clothes but I'm never like "Why are you splurging on clothes?". No, she wouldn't go out and buy a \$700 handbag or whatnot, I know she shopped conscientiously so I trust her with money.

And even when there is ample trust in the relationship with financial responsibility, occasionally disagreements around spending habits can contribute to uncertainty. This was apparent when Barb shared an example of her spending a large amount of money on clothing, and Bill questioning her financial judgement as a result. This was later resolved when put into perspective of the fact that they are both in a busy graduate program, and Barb had just spent half a year's worth of clothing budget at once.

### ***Reciprocated Level of Sacrifice and Financial Risk Taking.***

An additional sub theme that was reflected in all the participant's interviews relating to accessing financial risk was the degree to which their partner reciprocated financial risk and what financial resources and habits they were willing to sacrifice . This was indicative of the fact that all eight participants were more inclined to FI if they noticed that their partner reciprocated or sacrificed a greater or equivalent amount of financial resources.

Calvin described a time in the relationship where she left a stable, well-paying job to move to Montreal with her partner Hobbs, and how they took a “reciprocated risk together”, shown by Hobbs paying for majority of the rent or willing to pay for the shipping expenses of her furniture. She stated that she felt like he was “doing his part” which made the decision easier. Emily described a similar situation where she over time was willing to be more trusting of putting her money towards the relationship and not maintaining independence when she saw the level of generosity and risk Dick took with his financial contributions. Similarly, Barb described a time when she recognized their visa bills were not equal, but because she knew from prior experience that Bill paid higher amounts than she did in a month, that the degree of reciprocation was balanced out:

Now I’m like I have no idea who spends more. I think a month or two ago Bill was like “my visa bill was like a thousand dollars” and mine was four. We were laughing because we like what the hell happened this month? But it doesn’t matter, I know it’s been the opposite. Whereas I feel like had it been a year ago it would have been like “Oh my God, my Visa bill is so much higher and that’s not fair.”

A memory of unequal financial contribution on his partner’s end from a previous relationship shared by Bill is another example that supports the negative impacts unequal reciprocation can have:

I literally put a number on it. Like the last relationship I was in, she left me like 15 grand in the hole, and that’s like I’m not going to run after her for the money but I never want to go through that again where I felt that kind of imbalance in financial contribution, and now I have a negative sort of outlook on that person in my life because I feel kind of screwed out of money.

Bill then explained that seeing Barb’s push for financial equality allowed him to realize that she would not take advantage of him like his last partner did.



The impact seeing a partner's sacrifice has on willingness to FI was consistently reported, with all eight participants describing examples where they were increasingly willing to take FI oriented risk based on the sacrifices that their partners made. In the example shared by Christian, he described how seeing his partner's generosity to pay off his car helped with his willingness to sacrifice it later on when insurance and gas became unaffordable:

I would really admit now that the car I purchased was too expensive for what I could afford. So we sold it. It was more of a situation like I want to find a way to try to get me back at least to even with Gabby, because some of her saved money when we ultimately did fully integrate financially, she used some of her savings that she had made and just completely paid off that car.

Sacrifice was made evident in other relationships, for example when Dick sacrificed his need to purchase expensive bikes, Hobbs spending his own time and cleaning after cats that Calvin primarily wanted, as well as Gabby and Barb spending their own savings to reduce debt or transfer credit. All of these instances provided a level of confidence and trust that their partner was willing to sacrifice their own needs, for the needs of the relationship as a whole.

### ***Income Disparity and Partner's Debt.***

A contributing factor that influenced willingness to FI was the income disparity and debt within the relationship, as this impacted the degree of financial risk that was perceived. When there was unequal contribution to mutual expenses, it would come as a result of one individual having lower income or needing to redirect their income towards debt repayment, forcing the other individual to contribute more than they would have preferred to. Examples pertaining to this sub theme are shown by both the participants who were contributing more financially to the relationship as well as those that had equal levels of income or debt.

As Bill reflected on the differences between his last and current relationship, he describes how much of an impact similar levels of income make:

I think this gets to a little bit of the core of it, equality vs equity. For example like in the last relationship I was in, there was much more of a strain with money because my partner wasn't working, and I had the money and I was spending much, much more on everything including rent and it actually puts such a toll on the relationship. Whereas with this one, I totally view her as my counterpart and equal like she's bringing- - although we're both not making money as students, we both have the same earning potential and like the same- - like I view her as literally like the same situation that I'm in. So I feel like out of that there's less strain on the relationship and I can give more.

Barb adds that despite being both in debt to be in their program, it brings her comfort that her and her partner are both in equal amounts of debt:

So we're both living in significant debt but we both have access to lines of credit that give us a lot of money basically. So it was kind of like just all debt, I feel like maybe it would have been more challenging had one of us been the one who was going into their line of credit and then putting all this money on interest but it's like we both have the same amount of interest no one's getting dinged more.

When asked to elaborate on this, Barb shared she would have had a harder time deciding to get involved in a relationship where she knew she would need to contribute because she would be "predisposing myself to loss". Gabby's perspective adds on to this when sharing her partner's debt was one of the primary reasons she was apprehensive about FI:

I think before we like started talking about our money, I never really had an idea of what his income was like I only ever saw- - like I saw the debt because he'd talk about it and I'd see that like he would struggle like with his monthly budget and he would struggle with like credit card debt and things like that. Like I was the one bringing in- - I had a bigger pot sitting in my account and I was just like "Well if we break up tomorrow I'm not 50/50 anymore, the pot I brought in."

Participants who were contributing to a partner's debt or felt they were contributing without consistent reciprocation disclosed at some points feeling entitlement, anger, and proceeding guilt over the level of risk they felt they had to take on. This was described by three

participants, during the initial stages of financial integration. In addition to Gabby's guilt of having to take money out of the "mutual pot" to take an independent vacation, Hobbs described being willing to spend more money than his partner when his partner was in school, but noticed the challenge of that willingness when he himself did not get paid during holiday season. Similarly, Emily at the start of the relationship was apprehensive to FI with her partner who did not have any established career goals or was not making a comparable income to her as this was deemed a risky decision to her. All three participants who were relying on their partner's financial resources alleviated their associated risk for the partner by decreasing their own expenses in order to contribute to debt repayment more effectively, or getting a higher paying job.

#### **Trust in Future with Partner.**

When exploring the process with which non-married cohabiting couples make decisions around FI, the role of engaging in a practice where the individual is predisposing themselves to potential loss has been correlated with how much trust they have that the person they are with will be in their future. As all eight participants shared, the degree with which they see a future with their partner reflects to an extent the level of FI they are willing to engage in.

A powerful example comes down to the feeling of "just knowing" and her partner being "the one". As Barb puts it:

Like Bill and I started dating it was like a few months in that I was like, oh yeah like, this is it. This is the real deal, so I think that's why it's been so easy to financially integrate because it's like I don't see an end date and I'm not worried about an end date.

She added how a pivotal moment of mutual trust and their combined futures developed when they decided to stop tracking their finances for equity and how that contributed to her wanting to take on some of her partner's debt:

I think that was the key for us, getting rid of Split Wise. Before Split Wise it was all like I don't know about this, but he would spot this and it'll all work itself out in terms of getting even. Whereas now it's like I bought this you bought that it doesn't really matter because our money is going to be in the same pot soon anyways. We were at the point of me being willing to take on like \$25,000 worth of his debt to make it so that we had less interest as a couple.

Bill reflects on the impact Barb's willingness to take on his debt was, and supports the notion that FI is linked closely with the trust in the relationship's future in this recollection:

It was a big deal when we both like looked at each other and said like "My debts, your debt" and I think that was a big point in my relationship where like hey this is really serious because her and I have both been in the past more like a lot more protective of our money. So it's ultimately this like I trust that this is going to work out and like you and I are going to make it. It was kind of a big moment in the relationship where it was actually made me realize like, hey I better just put a ring on this one.

Bill's experience of his partner's willingness to FI by taking on his debt was an impactful prompt that contributed to him taking the steps to secure a future with Barb through proposing for marriage.

In another example, seeing a future with their partner increased the willingness to take on FI risk through an unequal contribution of finances towards rent. Despite Emily's ambivalence around FI and placing her resources at risk, imagining her future with Dick allowed her to pay a larger portion of the rent without a sense of injustice:

I was thinking about our future and how he wouldn't be able to support himself or us with his current job. So I had to steer him in a direction that would get him a better paying job. But that was also what justified me to take on more of the expenses.

Another way in which FI and the trust of a future with their partner intersects was the use of the word “our” and “we” instead of “my” and “I” with regards to finances or other assets that were brought into the relationship. Gabby described the link between FI through shared expenses and how that has changed her thinking around independent versus mutual goals:

Yes I think it was kind of just looking more to the future and sort of thinking like “Okay, well like if we’re you know planning just to stick this out and be together like this will be our shared money and we have shared goals. So I started making it less about like “Okay I want to do this thing, let’s see if I have the money for it” and more of like “Okay, here is the thing we’re doing, let’s see if we have the money for it.

For Dick, identifying the mutual ownership of items they bought together rather than seeing them as independently made him hopeful of the growth of the relationship’s future:

For her in her past relationship they never really had like “Our” things I guess. To me I just like having our things because it just feels like it’s a step forward to me, step towards like the future of what we both want.

This is similarly reflected in Calvin’s experience where although she paid for the car herself, she sees it as mutual property based on the level of future oriented commitment her and her partner have:

I bought my car, I paid it all off once I got money from my house sale and Hobbs always considered that to be my car, but it’s like one of those things that’s shared like, what’s mine is yours. I mean we’re in it for the long haul.

### **Family Upbringing and Gender Role Expectations.**

Two external sources of influence around FI decisions that were mentioned among all the participants were the familial upbringing and lessons modelled by their parents, as well as the gendered societal expectations of who pays for what. The examples provided were often used in tandem with one another which support a link between gendered financial expectations and

family upbringing, while some were used individually when discussing its influence in the decision making process to FI with their partner.

All the participants were strongly influenced in their FI oriented decisions based on how their parents managed their own finances. Bill and Emily had similar experiences from their parents when describing the importance of finding the best value of an item, and the importance of reflecting on the degree of “need” there is for it. Bill’s example spoke directly to not spending money recklessly:

My stepdad has always been the person to say “Before you take out the credit card you should really think about what you’re spending and like do you actually need it” or putting things into “Need” and “Want” and then if it’s a “Want” you kind of have to prioritize that in your life. Like is it a “Want” for right now, maybe down the road, like do you have to save up a little more for it? That drives me nuts but I’ve taken some of the principles of that and I try not to spend money recklessly or carelessly.

Emily reflected on the differences in financial rearing her and Dick received, and how similar lessons around saving money have influenced decision making around finances in the relationship:

He comes from family where they didn’t save a lot, they would just spent what they needed, whereas my family would ask me why I was spending an extra penny. My parents went to great lengths to save a dollar on something. And now I would never spend money on myself or someone else.

Mirroring Bill’s financial family influences, Christian described how not having an allowance and cash when he wanted things growing up gave him a false sense of security that transferred into his adult financial decision making: “I think myself growing up I never had that restriction on things which probably translates to my spending over the last few years of having less worry about that”. He went on to reflect that when he got his first job that had a large income, this lack of financial concern contributed to him buying a brand new car, and his

struggle with his financial literacy. The struggle Gabby had with the lack of financial responsibility she saw in her partner Christian during its initial stages was also put into perspective when she shared how her mother raised her to be generous and giving:

She's always grabbing the cheque like "Oh people are coming over, great, I'll order food" she's always like wanting to share with other people sort of thing but like in our family you fight over who gets the cheque to the point where you're like you know the person's driving out of the parking lot and you run and you slip like a \$50 bill under their windshield and run back to the car that was like an active tactic that we'd have to do.

She suspects her mother's behaviour was a strong motivator in choosing to FI to maintain that value of generosity, despite the ambivalence she had.

The familial rearing influences from both Calvin and Hobbs mutually coincide with their mutual values in supporting one another. Both were reared with a fear of debt and the consequences on the relationship it could have. This served to motivate them both to support each other through being more financially generous in order to prevent any debt from developing or accumulating. As Calvin described, she saw the impact debt and financial power dynamics had on her parent's relationship and the degree of conflict that occurred as a result:

Well I never want to put that kind of stress on our relationship because I know it's scary (yes) and it doesn't have to be scary if one of us can pull the weight when the other, just maybe get each other out of the hole.

This Calvin describes as being an influence in her decision to help pay off Hobbs' tax debt, similar to Hobbs' decision to pay for Calvin's portion of the rent when she was unemployed.

Lastly, gender roles were seen as an influencing factor that contributed to the decision making process to FI with their significant other. These occurred in two different presentations: the first being men feeling compelled to be the "provider" in the relationship and to contribute more readily to gendered expenses like paying for the meal on a date, and the second is women

striving for equality or pushing back on the expectation that they have to rear their children by staying at home.

Surrounding the topic of financial pride, three out of four men described in their interviews examples where they were motivated to FI in order to fill the role of the “provider” or “breadwinner”. In the example Bill provides, he links “breadwinning financial pride” to his Ukrainian background:

I feel like our situation might change in like 10 years where we are actually earning money, we have kids, one person might be on part leave where there would be a breadwinner at one point. I don't know how that is going to change the dynamic because I have so much pride around money. I'm Ukrainian we don't like power sharing, way too much pride around money, so I wonder if I would be affected more so in the future than now, I hope not.

He further elaborates how the struggle around his identity as a man came from his partner wanting to keep things equal:

I think it was more Barb who wanted to do it because she felt like I was spending- - I was trying to be the man of the relationship and pay for all the dates and I think she was like “No I want to keep it fair”.

Similar to Bill's experience, Hobbs shares how he's less comfortable with accepting financial gestures from his partner because it takes away from his “male pride”, which resulted in being more motivated to FI to maintain it:

If money was tight, I would have told her right away. Pride does come in, there's times where I'm like, “Oh, man, like, I don't want to have to, like, take her money or whatnot”. But she's always very clear that it's not her money. It's our money, (right) Yeah, maybe some male pride thing, I think it's like my selfishness that it's just like, I need to be the provider.

Additional emotional impacts were referenced when the male is unable to fulfill the gendered need to be the “provider”. Gabby shared her hypotheses that one of the main



contributors to her partner feeling guilt was the fact that his income was primarily being used to pay off his debts which prevented him from sharing more financially in the relationship. Rather than experiencing guilt, Calvin reflected on the anger that her father felt when he was unable to be the “provider” in the relationship, which motivated her to contribute as much as possible through FI to prevent her partner from feeling insecure or anger. Emily framed her partner Dick as consistently being more generous and offering to pay for a larger portion of items they purchase together because he wanted to feel like she was “being taken care of”. All of these examples support the claim that gendered expectation of being the “provider” in males acts as a large motivation to make a decision in line with FI.

Regarding the pattern found amongst the female participants, all four of them made a point of discussing their value in making FI decisions through the lens of equality and/or their opposition to the expectation that they must be the ones that give up their careers or sacrifice an income to rear their children. All four couples specifically made mention of planning a future where they would rear a family, and Calvin’s experience captures the strong emotion involved with the expectation that women are expected to sacrifice their income in order to care for the children instead of their male counterpart:

He would say “maybe you will be the one at home staying with the kids or whatever”. I basically get that and I hate it, so I don’t know what could have happened in the future that there might just be a need for one of us to stay home a little bit more than the other but I would imagine women especially now just have so many more options and it’s just like, why do we need to stay home and give up our careers and our profession to rear children. There are other people that do that for a living on. A lot of men that are also able to stay at home with the kids, whatever, you know.

Gabby similarly recognized that because she does work in freelance, she will be relying on her partner for financial support since she will not receive maternity leave. This was a strong

influence in her decision to FI by helping pay off his debt now so she would feel fair with relying on him during maternity leave:

When we first started maybe I threw in that small pot that gave us the boost but then if we have a baby and I can't work because I do freelance, it's like we're totally going to be relying on his income and his benefits. So sort of seeing it like where it'll be his turn to kind of throw in the pot or whatever. It's weird because that still kind of comes back to that like 50/50 rule I have.

So where Gabby reported feeling the need to contribute initially to receive support later on from her male partner, Hobbs is described by Calvin as being more willing to accept his female partner's financial support when he was reminded that she would be depending on him financially, further supporting men using the role of "provider" as a means to influence their FI decisions: "When I said "I am going to take care of you because I know that one day you are going to be able to take care of me or help me" he agreed". This reliance on their partner's income during maternity leave is emphasized when Emily described the expectation that if she were to have kids, she and Dick would create one account to "feel supported" and that "everything was transparent". These three participants help provide context for how the decision to FI is done so out of obligation in the scenario of child rearing, and the dependence that occurs when they rely on their partners for finances. Having seen the financial struggles her mother went through as a single mother, Gabby describes how maintaining her financial independence and pride influenced her decision to contribute more equally in the relationship rather than depending on her partner:

My mom just being a single mom, there's always like sort of an independent woman thing for me because she had to work so hard, so there is never any of like a "of course the husband can bring in 70% and I don't care". Like no, I am bringing in the 40% or 50%.

The need to establish equality in the FI arrangements seemed to be established early on in the relationship as described by all four female participants. Some were motivated by their feminist values (Barb, Calvin) while others were motivated to protect their assets and prevent loss (Emily, Gabby). Both motivations however influenced their decision to spend less than their partner or equivalent amounts at the start of the FI process. Barb described in her segment the emphasis she placed in establishing a standard of equality around cost splitting, and how that subsided over time as they developed more trust through FI practices.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The purpose of the study was to describe and understand the decision-making process with which non-married cohabiting young adults engage in when navigating FI. In this chapter, the study's findings are situated within the previous literature and the unique contributions that this study offers are presented. This chapter also includes a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the study, possible directions for future research, and implications for counselling psychology practice and training.

### **Situating Findings Within Previous Research**

#### **Equity.**

The notion of fairness and equality is a consistent theme identified among all eight participants in the exploration of the FI decision making process within non-married cohabiting couples. The notion of equality within the context of romantic relationships arrived as a reaction to the restricted financial access women had in traditional marital money management systems, which also forced them to ask for money (Zelizer, 1989). As Burgoyne and Routh (2001) support that in both married and cohabiting couples, modern ideals of both participants often include fairness and equality regarding financial splitting and cost allocation. Especially noted in the beginning of the relationship with the four couples that were interviewed, all eight participants indicated their emphasis on establishing a system that was fair and equal, which impacted how they made their decision. The degree of equality that exists in the couple's FI money management system may also indicate an individual's level of commitment to the relationship. Findings suggest that couples who are financially integrated and report feeling a sense of fairness in mutual expenses are more likely to stay together long term (Brines & Joyner, 1999), whereas

couples who emphasize more rigid control over spending equal amounts of money report feeling less stable in their future relationships (Vogler 2005). The eight participants all described being rigid at the beginning of their relationships to ensure their partners were contributing just as much as they were, and when starting to make future plans and seeing things as being more serious despite still wanting some degree of equality in their cost splitting, were less concerned because they had more confidence in their commitment to their partner.

### **Relationship Development.**

When making FI oriented decisions, participants shared their experience of enmeshing themselves further financially with their partner to encourage the continued development of the relationship. This was done in a number of contexts, whether it involved making a decision to FI further to model commitment with an ambivalent partner, taking on a partner's debt, or reducing the extent of "financial fairness" tracking, they were all expressed as decisions that were made to increase trust and support in order to expedite the growth of the relationship.

Homans' (1958) social exchange theory, suggests that individuals act out of self-interest by making choices through a cost/reward analysis. A form of communal exchange coined by Clark and Mills (1986) is supported by the participants experience in this study. Described as an exchange where a benefit is provided by one individual to the other in order to support their partner without any expectation to have the benefit be returned to them. Multiple participants described this notion of offering financial support to their partner (and by extension the relationship as a whole) in times of need without any immediate reciprocation expected. These examples could include Gabby, Barb, or Calvin offering to pay their partner's debt, or offering to

pay a larger percentage of the rent as shared when their partner ~~was~~ received a lower wage by Emily or Hobbs.

Additionally, Surra and Hughes' (1997) literature on differentiating event-driven reasons vs relationship-driven reasons for marriage can also be applied to the decision making process during FI in non-married cohabiting couples. Most participants indicated that their decision to FI was a relationship driven reason, as indicated by their perspective that it was in large part motivated by their intention to build a future with their partner. As Gabby described it: "We're not just integrating our money but we're like integrating our lives, this is like how we build a life together" or Barb recalling how her beliefs that Bill was "the one" who helped her in the decision to stop tracking for fairness.

Many participants when describing their FI process also used the term "our" instead of "my or mine". Individuals in a romantic relationship who are committed to developing a future with their partner incorporate the attachment to their partner into their own identity as "we" instead of "me" when making decisions in their relationship. Applying this within the context of FI decision making, individuals may see the financial resources or debts that exist in the relationship collectively instead of independently. This was seen in Dick's desire to have "our" items together instead of "mine and hers", Gabby seeing Christian's debt as "our" debt, similar to Barb and Bill who saw one another's debt as "our" debt.

### **Perceived Financial Risk.**

In this study all of the participants described the importance that perceived financial risk had when helping them decide whether they wanted to FI with their partner. The reason behind this closely aligns with social exchange theory again, where individuals act out of self-interest by making choices through a cost/reward analysis (Homans, 1958). Certain factors were made evident by the participants which helped them access whether the individuals were predisposing themselves to additional costs or losses. The three sub themes of perceived financial risk in helping participants make FI oriented decisions included financial responsibility, degree of reciprocation of financial risk and sacrifice, and looking at income disparity and debt that exists in the relationship.

### ***Financial Responsibility.***

Financial responsibility has been explored in the literature as a trait that is assessed to help cohabiting couples determine whether they would like to take steps towards marriage. Addo (2017) described the term “progressive integration practices”, defined as a decision made to cohabit within a romantic relationship in order for couples to learn about their partner’s financial responsibility more closely, and by extension access compatibility for additional integration involving marriage and finances. This is supported in adults (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Johnson et al., 2002) and younger individuals (Johnson et al, 2002; Thornton & Young DeMarco, 2001). Many examples were provided to account for the participant’s ambivalence to further financially integrate, such as Gabby or Emily’s struggle with their partner’s more passive money management or their spending habits.

Conversely, trust in their partner's spending behaviours made FI easier for other participants as indicated by Calvin and Hobbs. In the example Hobbs provided, trusting his partner to make smart financial decisions in addition to her not micromanaging his own financial decisions made him "trust her with money". This gave Hobbs a sense of his money not being misused or taken advantage of. To add further, when financial responsibility was improved as indicated by Christian and Dick, their partners were more willing to take FI oriented risks from the trust that developed.

### ***Reciprocated Level of Sacrifice and Financial Risk Taking.***

The second factor influencing an individual's perception of financial risk if they were to FI with their partner was described as the level of reciprocation that existed from their partner and the degree with which they were willing to make sacrifices. The notion of reciprocated financial risk runs parallel to Clark and Mill's (1986) exchange relationships, individuals give a benefit away with the set expectation that the same or equivalent value worth benefit will be returned to them. This was especially congruent at the beginning of the relationships in all four of the participants where there was an expectation that whatever finances were spent on communal expenses would be reciprocated. This is shown through the use of "taking turns" paying for meals, or keeping track of mutual expenses through the use of an app to ensure that one individual was not paying more than the other. Bill described the impact his last partner's lack of financial reciprocation had on the relationship, and how much easier it had been to FI with his current partner because of their more equal contributions and future earning potential.

The literature similarly states how joint bank account ownership in a couple assists in determining their ability to take on higher risk practices like sharing a credit card or a mortgage



for a home, and if one partner is taking advantage or is not reciprocating have less likely chances to take on additional commitments (Addo, 2017). This for example is shown in Dick's consistent financial risk offerings to Emily, and her mirroring of financial risk taking as a result, or how in Bill and Barb's decision to stop tracking finances led them to start discussions around their future goals involving buying a home and building a family.

When accounting for sacrifice, dedication framed within commitment theory is characterized by the willingness by romantic couples that are willing to place the needs of their partner first and a willingness to sacrifice for one another (Van Lange et al., 1997). As participants described, a partner that is able to make a financially related sacrifice is putting themselves in a position where their own resources are at risk for loss. This show of trust and commitment was captured in Calvin's decision to leave a high paying job to move across the country with her partner, Dick respecting his partner's wishes to not pay for a more expensive bike, or even Christian selling a car that he really enjoyed in order for him and his partner to afford payments on a loan they were both paying off. These sacrifices were difficult decisions that participants described having to make that resulted in their partner's increased willingness to FI.

Self-expansion theory assumes that every individual has a fundamental motivation and desire to grow, and when applied within the context of their romantic relationship, emphasizes that this need and desire is met through taking on novel and challenging tasks and transitions (Aron et al., 1991). Stanley and colleagues' (Stanley et al., 2010) research points out how self-expansion theory has a role in making decisions, highlighting that the degree of risk and vulnerability a couple is willing to take on together predicts in the decision to maintain

cohabitation or progress to marriage. All eight participants disclosed having conversations about marriage, where the couple with the highest degree of FI oriented risk taken had just recently become engaged, ranging to the couple with less FI risk beginning to have conversations about marriage and family. This implies a relationship existing between the degree of financial reciprocity and risk being correlated with making decisions to further FI.

### ***Income Disparity and Partner Debt.***

Literature exploring money management systems in cohabiting couples support the theme reflecting that a large income disparity and partner having debt reduces the desire or willingness to FI. For example, the desire to create a pooled or separate financial account is largely dependant on whether the partner has debt, in addition to the amount of it, as well as the perceived lack of equality that exists from an income discrepancy (Dew & Price 2011; Dew, 2007).

Dew's research has also found that a partner's debt can be a significant stressor and impact relationship quality (Dew, 2007), with some couples reporting that they wanted their partner to pay off their debt independently prior to getting married and by extension, financially integrating further (Smock et al. 2005). The participants that had a significantly larger income required assurances from their partner to feel confident enough to make FI oriented decisions, for example Emily wanting her partner Dick to find a better paying job to make a living wage. Those with one-sided debt reported their partner being ambivalent to FI from fear of how those consequences may impact them, like with Gabby supporting Christian to pay off his loans. Lastly, a unique couple that further supports debt and income disparity reducing the willingness to FI is in Bill and Barb's experience. They both describe having equal amounts of debt and

similar wage potential in the future making the decision easier because they feel like they are at similar levels of risk.

### **Trust in Future with Partner.**

Research supports one of the main subthemes found in this study which identified the participants having a belief or trust in a future with their romantic partner influenced their decision making process to financially integrate. When observing the progression of FI practices in the eight participants interviewed and their willingness to only take on lower level financial risks may be explained by the fact that they were unsure how committed they were to the relationship itself, and how much financial risk they were willing to take on. Literature notes that the decision to create joint finances can be a reflection of the level of investment an individual has in their relationship (Heimdal & Houseknecht 2003; Oropesa et al., 2003). As the participants made decisions to take on more FI oriented risk, as exemplified by participants taking on a higher portion of the rent (Emily, Hobbs), paying for their partner's loan (Calvin, Gabby, Barb), or buying assets together (Emily, Bill, Barb), Stanley and colleagues (2010) explain couples are pooling and combining assets resulting in increased interdependence which assists with transitioning into the next relationship phase. These decisions that served to FI the participants further were described by participants motivated by the fact that they not only saw a future with their partner, but that the decisions would get them closer to that future they envisioned. Dick, Emily, Calvin and Hobbs for example took specific FI measures to save money in order to save up for a future housing property they wanted to buy together, or Gabby and Christian described the most cost efficient way to pay off Christian's debts together to save up for their move across to Europe in the coming year. As Barb and Bill's example

supports, having an intention to get married could in large part be the reason FI practices occur as well. Ashby and Burgoyne (2008) suggest that the process of FI may serve as a preparation for marriage, as indicated in their study that cohabiting couples with an intention to marry engaged in similar financial practices as married couples did. As Barb described, much of the higher level risk FI oriented practices began when she realized that Bill was the man she wanted to marry. This is further supported by the fact that cohabiters with an intention to marry were more likely to acquire assets together or support pay off their partner's loans prior to marriage (Addo, 2017). Although only one of the four couples interviewed had made their intentions to get married official, the degree with which participants saw a future with their partner through their disclosed mutual goals can support the influence perceived future had on FI oriented decision making.

### **Gender Roles.**

The theme of gender influencing the decision-making process to FI was shared by all participants in specific contexts. Although the majority of the research investigating financial decision making and its relationship with gender focuses on married couples, many of the findings were mirrored in the non-married cohabiting couples that were interviewed. Literature investigating the societal gendered roles within the nuclear family revolve around child rearing, and financial decision making is strongly influenced by that role. Before a child is even brought into the relationship, men are expected and tasked with the responsibility of being the “provider” or “breadwinner”, whereas women default to the “nurturer” or “caretaker” role because of wages that are on average lower than men's in addition to the expectation that they stay home and care for the child because they rear it (Bergmann, 1995; Webley et al., 2001). This is reflected in the participant's experiences as they describe how gender roles influence the way money is spent in

the relationship and the expectations are around career and child rearing. Three out of the four male participants used the words “financial pride” motivating them to be the “provider” in the relationship. All four of the male participants took the perspective of “wanting to make her feel cared for” when discussing the motivations behind spending more money, with one participant noting he wanted to “be the man in the relationship”. This was used within the context of men insisting on paying for dinner, supporting their partner when they were unable to on their own, and two of those four men feeling insecure or shame if they were unable to commit to the “provider” role like when they had to receive financial assistance from their female partner. The topic of having children was also brought up with all four couples, with two of the four men assuming their partner would stay at home with the child, and all four women acknowledging that they would have children when they were ready, however some vocalized anger or anxiety over the expectation that they would need to give up their income and depend on someone else financially. All women participants disclosed the desire and value of financial equality in their relationship, and were intent on keeping it that way contradictory to married couples who were more resolved in relying on their male partner’s finances (Pahl, 2004).

Closely affiliated research exploring how women’s employment impacts the power they have in financial decision making in the relationship was also reflected in this study. The literature suggests that women who earned a higher income through their employment were more likely to play a more active part in deciding whether they created a joint financial account or remained separate (Kenney, 2006; Burgoyne et al, 1997). In both of the couples where women earned more of an income, they were the individuals that decided whether they would pool their resources or keep them separate.

## **Unique Findings of the Study**

Many of the findings from this study included by the review above may serve to expand our understanding as to how non-married cohabiting romantic couples make decisions around FI. As much of the literature on this specific topic investigate how married cohabiting couples make these decisions, more emphasis in general should be placed on how many of these findings are similar in non-married populations, and how they differ.

### **Reassurance.**

A unique finding of this study that highlights a large gap in the literature is the degree of influence and impact reassurance has in the decision-making process to FI in non-married cohabiting couples. The study supports that giving and receiving both implicit and explicit reassurance can make a large impact on the decision made toward or away from further FI with their romantic partner. All eight of the participants shared through their examples instances where they received reassurance either by directly asking for it (explicit reassurance), or by making judgments based on the behaviors of their partner (implicit reassurance). Obtaining reassurance through these two means allowed for continued FI when the individual felt too much uncertainty to make a decision on their own.

No literature was found exploring the role reassurance has in the decision-making process in any romantic relationship context, or specifically the role reassurance has in making FI oriented decisions. The findings gathered however can be applied and partially informed by relationship development literature on uncertainty reduction theory and its applications on the limited findings studying the negative interpersonal impacts financial uncertainty has in relationships.

Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory proposes that relationships continue to develop for as long as uncertainty can be reduced between both romantic parties, and the relationship dissolves when uncertainty is maintained and the affiliated emotional states and beliefs continue. Uncertainty is defined as a psychological state that involves a sense of not knowing or lack of knowledge about specific situations or witnessed behaviours that are seen as unpredictable, unclear, or complex (Hogan & Brashers, 2009). Although not explicitly called "uncertainty", all participants described experiencing financial worry and concern over a potential outcome they wanted to avoid or when struggling to make a decision that could implicate them in some way.

The literature studying this phenomenon affirms the various contexts that participants can experience uncertainty in. The first includes when an individual lacks confidence in their understanding of a specific situation (Brashers, 2001), like when Barb disclosed wanting to discuss how interest builds because she was unsure whether reducing her partner's debt with an inheritance she received made financial sense. Uncertainty has also been prompted when the best choice or action in a decision that needs to be made is unclear (Shaha et al., 2008), when Gabby was left to decide whether she wanted to pay off her partner's debt with her own savings, or Hobbs' concern around the financial implications in the relationship if he quit his job and went back to school. The third context in which uncertainty can flourish involves being unsure of the likelihood of something happening, coming from a feared outcome of something happening or the consequences of a desired outcome not happening (Brashers 2001). This was the source of uncertainty that most participants described, with some examples including Emily's concern around not knowing whether Dick would take some of her assets in the event there was a

dissolution, Bill's worry that they would not be able to afford paying debt repayment or other shared expenses, and Hobbs' worry of his partner using her financial generosity as leverage in the relationship. The last source of uncertainty results from individuals not having an adequate amount of information or consistent information (Brashers, 2001), as seen by Gabby and Hobbs' concern that they were financially integrating "incorrectly" due to the lack of research on the topic, Calvin agreeing to repairs on her car that she was unaware were not necessary and getting cheated out of money as a result, or Dick, Christian, and Bill wanting to learn more about investing and not knowing where to look.

Within the context of FI, individuals use reassurance to reduce uncertainty by explicitly asking for it, or implicitly observing partner's behaviours to measure their level of commitment to the relationship. Some findings support the impact their partner's financial habits have on the continuation or dissolution of the relationship. As Dew and Price (2011) show in their study, when first starting to cohabit romantic partners become familiar with one another's financial status and their "consumption behaviours" which can alter the trajectory of the relationship. The financial qualities can be positive in nature that contribute to the continuation of the relationship, or they can be negative and lead to the eventual dissolution instead. These "consumption behaviours" can be seen as sources of implicit reassurance which may contribute to the individual's staying in the relationship if they trust that sharing their financial resources would not lead to a loss. These behaviours may equate to gestures that indicate a willingness to take on higher level financial risk as indicated numerous times by the participants, including willingness to take on a partner's debt or offering to contribute more income to a shared expense.



Other literature frames one of the motivations to FI with their partner as insurance against financial loss. Since cohabiting couples often have mutual expenses, a motivation to FI through a joint pooled banking account was determined by some individuals to be a means of reducing financial uncertainty (Romo, 2014). Romo elaborates that by having access to their partner's money to pay for shared expenses, they reduce their risk of being taken advantage of which decreases their uncertainty. Despite the fact that this particular example was not shared by the participants, the insurance motive can be seen as another example of how reassurance may motivate an individual to FI with their partner.

The shared experiences around reassurance suggest that its role in reducing uncertainty has an important role in promoting the decision to FI. The participants described using the information gathered from their implicit or explicit reassurance seeking as a significant way to access their partner's level of commitment or to reduce their own worry about their financial resources being implicated by financially integrating with their partner.

### **Open Communication.**

The other unique contribution of the study includes the need for open communication when making FI decisions with their partner. Participants described this as a foundational tool used to make decisions by disclosing one another's vulnerabilities, sharing their financially oriented fears so they can be addressed, and to maintain transparency so both parties have all the information to make a decision that reflects the needs of both parties.

Limited literature explores the role open communication has in the decision-making process of FI, however research does confirm the negative impact "communication uncertainty" can have when individuals struggle discussing finances with their partner (Romo 2014). Romo

went on to describe in his qualitative research study that relationship tension and arguments would result when partners were unable to discuss financial planning for future milestones they wanted to reach, or when their partner shut down when addressing their less responsible spending habits. The findings gathered in the current study supports that when financial uncertainty exists in the communication around finances, decisions to FI are impacted.

Participants noted how withholding financial information inhibits the decision-making process, as noted in the case of Calvin opening an invoice addressed to Hobbs from the government to pay a tax debt and the worry she experienced around how much she might need to provide, or Gabby's larger degree of ambivalence that existed to FI when she was unsure how much debt her partner had. Modeling open communication by sharing their financial fears also allowed their partners to address any worry that inhibited the decision to FI. Emily for example shared being fearful of Dick taking a portion of her apartment in the event of a dissolution, or whether his parents carried any debt which made her reluctant to want to FI. But because she was able to communicate her fears, Dick was able to address them which made the decision to FI less risky to Emily. Communicating financial needs similarly led for opportunities for their partner to make adjustments in their behaviours that enabled more confidence to FI. This was seen for example with Christian being more diligent with tracking his expenses as requested by Gabby, Emily asking Dick to spend more mindfully which increased her trust in his spending habits, Barb insisting to Bill that they keep things equal at the start of their relationship, or Hobbs reminding Calvin to pay rent and setting up a reminder system so she would not forget in future instances. Addo and Sassler pose that a minimum amount of communication is required for joint financial practices to exist in the relationship, and the findings outlined above support that

communicating in a specifically open manner with their partner increases the likelihood of deciding to FI.

### **Relevance of the Findings to Counselling Psychology Practice and Training**

The findings indicated in this study of the experience cohabiting non-married young adults have with their decision to FI is relevant in clinical counselling settings that address financial related struggles. Given the lack of training offered to counsellors in addressing financial matters through therapeutic interventions and the prominence with which money influences or causes conflict within relationships (Bailey & Markman, 2002), the need for additional support and understanding finances within the couple relationship cannot be understated.

As Shapiro (2007) proposes, discussing finances within a romantic couple is representative of complex interpersonal variables within the relationship such as power, control, achievement, self-worth, competence, caring, security, commitment, and feeling loved and accepted. The themes outlined from the experience of the decision-making process regarding FI in the current study outlined many of these variables, supporting the belief that finances within a therapeutic context are a reflection of other interpersonal issues that may exist in the relationship which can be used as a counsellor to highlight.

Participants' descriptions of the need for open communication in order to FI with their partner, suggest that therapists may use financial struggles as a cue to educate couples on communication tools that allow them to be more vulnerable with one another, and to help understand and support each other through their financial oriented fears. The theme of goal-oriented decisions during FI indicates the importance of negotiation and setting mutual goals

together. If the two individuals in a couple are unable to do these things together, a therapist can be useful in training them how to find overlap in the thing they want in order to develop their future. The theme participants shared involving reassurance and their perceived financial risk during their decision-making process may have been indicative to a therapist that there is insufficient care and security that is being exhibited within the relationship. If a romantic partner feels like they are at risk of losing something, not just finances, findings from the current study support a link to feeling a lack of safety to make higher risk decisions as well. A therapist could explore both individually or together with the couple what prompts that lack of safety and security, and what it would look like to have more of it in the relationship (eg. more reassurance). Lastly, perhaps one of the strongest themes in what influences the decision for an individual to FI may include the degree with which they see themselves with their partner in the future. A therapist may identify the indecision to financially integrate due to the partner's apprehensive commitment to the relationship itself.

As some of the participants indicated, there is a need for additional research, articles, or general resources on how couples decide to FI who are still in the early stages of their relationship. Not having access to that information made the process of FI more of a challenge, as Gabby indicated:

I remember like when we first started integrating money, I would like look up articles thinking “how do couples split money?!” and like this is where your research is really going to come in handy, like there was nothing helpful out there. It’s always like “oh you’re married who cares”, but we are not. Lots of articles were saying like “oh we split it based on income, so like he makes this much like he puts in 70% I put in 30” and in my head I was kind of like that makes sense but how do they get there?

The findings from this literature may be used by financial institutions or counsellors to provide not just information on money management systems while the couples are cohabiting and deciding to FI, but also specific strategies and communication practices they can utilize during the process of making the decision together. This may assist in couples having a more gentle transition with less tension or conflict that might otherwise arise.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This exploratory study has laid groundwork for future research on the decision-making process cohabiting young adults engage in, specifically those that are unmarried as a substantial literature gap exists with this particular population. A number of factors were indicated to be an important influence for individuals to feel confident enough to make the decision to FI with their partner. Two unique findings however that have a limited research support included open communication and reassurance, suggesting that a willingness to be honest and vulnerable with your partner around FI related needs and fears has a strong influence on the decision to FI as is the degree of reassurance you are willing to both give and ask for to address FI uncertainty. Additional research investigating how large of an influence these factors can be in the decision making process as compared to the other factors known in the FI literature (e.g., degree of financial responsibility, commitment to partner, debt vs assets) can help determine what strategies and tools couples and clinicians can use when navigating the decision to FI with their romantic partner prior to marriage.

Continued research in non-married young adult populations specifically is required in FI matters to address the growing trend of cohabitation occurring prior to marriage and earlier in the relationship timeline in general than previously recorded. This would provide useful information

by bringing awareness of unique phenomenon transpiring in the non-married cohabiting population, and can inform the creation of resources and support where needed. Since the demographic range in this study's participant pool is limited, recruiting participants that can represent other intersections of the population can provide a more general overview of the impacts variables like race, culture, sexual orientation or SES has on the decision making process during FI has in young adult non-married cohabiting couples.

Lastly, research needed in this population includes the impact that marital status policy (i.e., Automatic common-law classification) has on the FI process and how both relationship as a whole and the individual are affected by it. The limited research on the impact being seen as a joint unit sharing assets and finances by the government when the couple itself has not declared through marriage an explicit commitment, can inform any policy changes required in the future.

### **Limitations of the Methodology and Study**

In this study interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to explore the essence of the experience young non-married cohabiting couples had in the decision-making process during FI. Due to the limited sample size of eight participants (four couples), the findings represent a small intersection of the population that share the same phenomenon. The demographic variables of the participants represent heterosexual, university educated adults in various different stages in their relationship development and cultures.

An additional limitation includes two of the participant's interviews being conducted over skype that disconnected due to internet difficulties. The interruptions during the interviews may have inhibited a natural flow of the experience being shared and minor cues that would be gathered in person like body language may have also been missed.

## **Conclusion**

This study was conducted to understand the experience that non-married cohabiting young adult romantic couples had in their decision-making process to FI. The goal was to explore the decision-making process and how it is influenced in non-married couples particularly, as the majority of literature with this phenomenon looks at romantic couples who are already married. Findings identified a number of factors that influenced how and why cohabiting couples choose to FI with one another using in depth interviews and interpretive phenomenological analysis. These findings were condensed into three superordinate themes which included the use of communication strategies and intentions during FI oriented conversations (open communication, the use of implicit and explicit reassurance, and making mutually agreed upon decisions), making decisions motivated by a specific goal (equity, saving money, and relationship development), and factors that influenced an individual's willingness to financially integrate (individuals perception of their partner's financial risk, the degree with which they saw a future with their partner in it, as well as their family upbringing and gender role expectations). The final analysis supports the notion that the process of decision making to FI is influenced by a number of factors as indicated by the themes outlined. Of particular interest is the role that open communication and reassurance has in the decision-making process as these factors are explored to limited degrees in the literature.

The findings of this study support the limited existing research exploring the process of decision making during FI in non-married couples, in addition to similar literature that studied the same phenomenon in married couples. Unique findings were also identified that provide further understanding as to how romantic couples navigate this challenging financial task. It is

recommended that additional research is conducted to include different intersections of the population in the growing trend of non-marital cohabitation and to further advance the body of literature that explores decision making during FI. This can be used to inform potential resources for couples, clinical interventions used in individual or couples counselling, and policy reform that addresses FI.



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## **Appendices**

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

Appendix B: Pre-Screen Interview Protocol

Appendix C: Consent Form

Appendix D: Demographic Form

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Appendix F: Community Resources Sheet

Appendix G: Confidentiality for Transcription Services Agreement

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

## Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

# Making decisions about money with your romantic partner?



Do you and your partner want to participate in research investigating how unmarried couples make decisions around money?

We are looking to interview couples interested in sharing their experience of integrating finances with one another. There will be **two interviews** conducted roughly 4 months apart (1<sup>st</sup> Interview: 1-1.5 hours long, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview: 30 minutes) in person, in your home, or over video-chat. Traveling and Parking fees will be reimbursed!

Financial Integration: “the process of two individuals in a romantic relationship combining their financial resources towards a collective outcome”

### To Qualify:

- Be between the ages of 25-35
- Been in a relationship with your partner for a minimum of 2 years
- Been living with your partner for at least 1 year
- Self identify as “financially integrated” (definition above)
- Both partners identify as heterosexual
- Fluent in English

\*\*\*Please note that liking or following the page on Facebook this poster was posted in may consequently identify you as a participant for the study

### Restrictions:

- Couples who are married
- Couples who have children

### IF INTERESTED, CONTACT:

[mark.antczak@ubc.ca](mailto:mark.antczak@ubc.ca)

**Primary Investigator:** Dr. William Borgen

Phone: (604) 822 5261

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Graduate Researcher: M.A. Candidate Mark Antczak

Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology and Special Education

The University of British Columbia



Version 3; August 29/18

## Appendix B: Screening Interview Protocol



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www.ecps.educ.ubc.ca

### Pre-Screen Protocol

**Study Title :** Financial Integration in Non-Married Cohabiting Adults: A Phenomenological Study

#### Participant Screening Questions

When a potential participant contacts me over email and is interested in the study, I will request a phone number with which to contact them at. I will begin by thanking them for taking the time to contact me and I will answer any initial queries they may have. I will then start by explaining that in order to participate in the study, it is important that I ask them a few questions to determine their eligibility. I will inform the participant that both they and their romantic partner will need to complete this screening separately, and I will request their partner's contact information if they are not able to answer the screening questions over the phone shortly after the current interview. I will remind each potential participant that the information they provide during this call and throughout the research process will remain confidential. The screening questions will include the following:

1. How did you hear about the study?
2. How old are you?
3. The study orients itself around financial integration, defined as "the process of two individuals in a romantic relationship combining their financial resources towards a collective outcome". With this definition in mind, would you say that you and your partner are financially integrated?
4. Would you feel comfortable sharing your experiences of financial integration with your partner?
5. How long have you been in a relationship with your current romantic partner?
6. How long have you been living with your romantic partner?
7. Are you and your partner married?
8. Do you and your partner have children?
9. Would you feel confident in your English ability to speak about your experience of financial integration with your significant other?
10. Are both you and your romantic partner able to meet in person or over online video-conferencing for an interview that will take about an hour?
11. I will also be contacting each participant once I have transcribed and analyzed the interview for a brief follow-up phone interview. Will you be able to commit 30 minutes for this follow up interview?
12. Are you currently experiencing any stress that may make it difficult to talk about your experiences at this time?
13. Are you currently receiving any counselling or psychotherapy?
11. What interests you about participating in this study?
12. Do you have any questions for me?

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Version 1; July 25/18

1 of 2

**Information for Interview After the screening questions are answered**

I will further describe and clarify with the eligible research participants the study and what participation will entail. If both the participants meet the criteria for the study, they will be invited at this point to schedule an interview. If they would like to think about it, they will be instructed to notify me within a week of the pre-screen interview. The participants are then sent the consent form to review in detail.

At the end of the interview, I will state the following:

Through the interview, I would like to gain a thorough understanding of your experience around the decision making process of financial integration with your romantic partner. In preparation for your interview, I invite you to think about and reflect on your experiences. I want to clarify that this research is interested in your experience and the meaning behind the decision to integrate finances with your partner.

## Appendix C: Consent Form



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### Consent Form

**Title of Study:** Financial Integration in Non-Married Cohabiting Adults: A Phenomenological Study

**Principle Investigator:** Dr. William Borgen, Professor, Ph.D.; Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education; Faculty of Education; University of British Columbia (UBC); Office telephone: 604-822-5261; E-mail: William.borgen@ubc.ca

**Co-Investigator:** Mark Antczak, M.A. (Candidate), Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education; Faculty of Education; UBC  
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*This research is part of Mark's thesis requirement for completing a Master of Arts (M.A.) in the Counselling Psychology Program. Upon completion, the thesis will be a public document that can be viewed through the UBC library*

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**Why are we doing this research?** Romantic couples are frequently transitioning through milestones together (eg. moving in together), and financial integration and the decision making process behind who contributes to what and by how much can bring rise to potential conflict within the relationship. In the context of this study, Financial Integration is being defined as: "the process of two individuals in a romantic relationship combining their financial resources towards a collective outcome". A particularly important demographic to study involves cohabiting non-married adults primarily because of the increasing rates of non-marital cohabitation in North America. Research indicates that non-married cohabiters face a number of additional challenges than their married counterparts when integrating their finances, and the consequences from a dissolution being higher on the individual's mental, physical, and financial health justify a great need for additional investigation on this topic.

The purpose of this study is to use interpretative phenomenological analysis to provide insight into the range of experiences cohabiting young adults have with their romantic partners around the topic of integrating finances and the decision making process behind it. These non-directive qualitative interviews will allow the opportunity for participants to share their experience of decision-making with their romantic partners around financial integration. This data is incredibly useful and can be used to inform policy around commonlaw financial matters, psychoeducation for financial integration workshops, and clinical interventions in couples therapy.

**What happens if you agree to participate?** If you choose to participate, you will be asked to engage in an open-ended interview. This interview will be conducted by the student researcher (Mark Antczak) and will be held in a private and confidential room in the Psychoeducational Research and Training Centre located at the University of British Columbia Vancouver Campus, at the participant's home, or over videoconferencing programming Zoom. You will be invited to share your experience around financial integration with your romantic partner. The interview will last approximately 1-1.5 hours, and you get to choose what you would like to share. The researcher may ask follow-up questions once you have finished telling your story, to which you may choose to respond according to your own level of comfort. Following the first interview, you will be contacted to verify the information collected has been accurately portrayed, this will occur no later than January 1 2019. At that time, the researcher will share the themes he has written based on what you share in the first interview. You will have the opportunity to comment further, as well as request any alterations to ensure that the story represents your

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experience fully and accurately. **Should you decline to participate, all written documentation of the initial screening interview that you partook in will be shredded.**

**Study Results:** The themes and data constructed from the interviews will be analyzed and put together for a final research essay that will be submitted to complete the educational requirement of the co-investigator. The information may also be shared at meetings and conferences and may be published in academic journals or magazines for other people to read. Your name will not be shared in any presentation or publication.

**Potential Risks:** Discussing the details of you and your partner's process of financial integration can potentially bring up some difficult memories or prior conflict that has been resolved or placed aside. If a topic comes up that you would like support for, we have a list of community agencies and supportive services that will be provided at the beginning of the interview. It is important to note that the interviewer will be speaking with you from the perspective of a researcher, and will not be treating or measuring mental-health related therapeutic outcomes of the interview. In addition, you have the right to choose not to answer any question, to take a break, and/or end the interview at any time without justification or consequence.

**Potential Benefits:** One of the strengths of phenomenological qualitative research is that through gathering data about your experience, you will have an opportunity to reflect on the decision making processes during a potentially challenging topic. The report that you will be provided with in the second interview can serve as a useful application for future decisions you may need to make by yourself or with your partner specifically. The research will also contribute to the knowledge base that can be utilized by counselling psychologists and couples/martial counsellors to inform clinical interventions used when couples have problems with making decisions and navigating financial conflicts. Data collected in this study using a qualitative approach will also provide insight into the range of experiences non-married young adult cohabiting couples are having. This is important because it will more clearly identify what supports, policy changes, and public education resources are needed.

**Confidentiality:** All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist that has signed a confidentiality agreement, to ensure any identifying information and data is safely handled and stored. Interview tapes and handwritten notes referencing participant data will be stored in a secure, locked cabinet in a UBC research laboratory, and all electronic files of participant data will be encrypted and password protected. Your identity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym identifier on all documents related to the information you provide, including copies of transcripts, researcher notes, and the final research report. It is UBC's policy that all data must be maintained for a minimum of five years, after the necessary allotted time all audio recordings will be destroyed.

There are three exceptional circumstances in which confidentiality of your identity cannot be maintained: 1) If there is a reasonable cause to believe that a child or vulnerable adult is being abused and is in need of protection; 2) If a participant is at serious risk of suicide and/or other serious harm to self; 3) If the participant presents a clear and imminent threat to someone else or society at large. If at any point the researcher assesses the participant's self-disclosure to indicate any one of these three situations, the researcher will be obliged to intervene to ensure the safety of participants. Interventions may include, but are not limited to: emergency services, reporting to the Ministry of Child and Family Development, and counselling support services. Participants will be informed of the precautions that are being taken and will be given the option of accessing these services themselves with support of the investigator.

**Remuneration or Compensation:** You will receive bus tickets to and from the interview or parking reimbursement as required. You will also receive a Starbucks gift card for \$10 after the second interview is completed.

**Contact for Information about the Study:** If at any point before, during, or after the study you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the principal investigator or co-investigator (contact information above).

**Contact for Concerns about the Rights of Research Participants:** If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail [RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca) or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

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**Consent and the Right to Withdraw:** Consent to be part of this research study is completely voluntary. You can choose to withdraw at any time with no explanation and with no consequences. Should you wish to withdraw, all of your participating data (including information from the screening interview, your consent form, any of your audio recordings and interview data) will be appropriately destroyed. You have the right not to answer any questions you do not want to answer, and can take a break at any time during the interview.

**Signature:**

Your signature below indicates that:

1. You understand the information provided for the study "Financial Integration in Non-Married Cohabiting Adults: A Phenomenological Study".
2. You have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.
3. You consent to participate in this study and to be audio recorded for the interview portion.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

## Appendix D: Demographic Form



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Psychology, and Special Education  
2125 Main Mall  
Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z4

Phone 604 822 0242  
Fax 604 822 3302  
www.ecps.educ.ubc.ca

### Participant Demographic Form

Please answer the following questions by filling in the blanks sections and circling answers where appropriate. If you need any help, please feel free to ask the researcher. If there are any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering, please remember you have the right to leave them blank. All information provided will be kept strictly confidential. Thank you so much for participating!

Participant I.D. Pseudonym: (definition: a fictitious name, especially one used by an author.)	
---	--

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

City of Residence: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_ City of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest Level of Education \_\_\_\_\_, in (program name) \_\_\_\_\_

Employment Status: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_ Industry / Field: \_\_\_\_\_

Net Income (before taxes): \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you and your partner been romantically involved? (Months/Years) \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been living with your current romantic partner? (Months/Years) \_\_\_\_\_

How long after you and your current romantic partner became romantically involved did you move in with one another? (Months/Years) \_\_\_\_\_

How often do you and your partner on average in a month discuss finances? \_\_\_\_\_

How much comfort do you have discussing finances with your partner, on a scale of 1-10 (1 being not comfortable at all, 10 being very comfortable) : \_\_\_\_\_

Using your own judgement, on a scale of 1-10, what degree of financial integration would you say you have with your partner (1 being not at all, 10 being completely integrated): \_\_\_\_\_

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## Appendix E: Interview Protocol



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### Interview Protocol

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Department of Educational and Counselling  
Psychology, and Special Education  
2125 Main Mall  
Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z4

Phone 604 822 0242  
Fax 604 822 3302  
www.ecps.educ.ubc.ca

**Study Title :** Financial Integration in Non-Married Cohabiting Adults: A Phenomenological Study

#### **Orienting Interview Question**

Through the interview, I would like to gain an understanding of your experience around the decision making process of financial integration with your romantic partner. I may ask you specific questions if I need clarification or if I want to know more about something you mention. This is about your experience and how you make meaning of that experience. If there is anything that you feel uncomfortable sharing, remember that you can always choose to not include something, to not respond to a question, or to stop the interview at any time. It is completely your choice what you would like to disclose to me. Also, please feel free to take as much time as you need to respond to a question or think about what you would like to say. Before we begin, do you have any questions for me? Let's begin the interview now.

At this point I would start the recording devices and state: "It is (date) and I am with (pseudonym that the participant has chosen). We have gone over the consent form and are now beginning the interview portion of the study. Do I have your verbal consent to start the interview portion of the Financial Integration study?"

#### **Main Interview Question**

In the context of this study, Financial Integration is defined as: "the process of two individuals in a romantic relationship combining their financial resources towards a collective outcome". This study is aimed at exploring the experience individuals have when making decisions to achieve financial integration with their romantic partner. Think back to when you had first thought about integrating finances with your partner – and your first discussions with them on this topic. What has your experience been like since then?

#### **Possible Facilitating Questions**

I intend on starting with the main interview question in order to explore each participant's experience in a very open fashion, to follow where they go, and probe aspects of the experience they raise and deem important. I will use active listening, empathy, clarification, paraphrasing, and probing statements to elicit additional information. The use of open ended questions free of presumptions can also be used to have the participant further explore and share their experience. I have included the following prompting questions in case a participant finds it challenging to continue to access their experience without facilitation. These may or may not be used in interviews.

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1. What does financial integration mean to you? On a scale of 1-10 what is your level of satisfaction of financial integration with your partner?
2. What did a conversation with your romantic partner look like when making decisions around integrating finances?
3. Describe to me a time you were discussing financial integration with your partner. What was your experience?
4. Describe your first experience of decision making around money with your partner.
5. Describe your last experience of decision making around money with your partner.
6. What has been a challenging experience when making decisions with your partner surrounding financial integration?
7. Describe to me any profound or significant experiences you may have had when making decisions around merging finances. What makes it stand out?
8. Can you describe your experience when going into a conversation with your partner about financial integration?
9. Can you describe your experience after you've had a conversation with your partner about financial integration?
10. How does your experience of decision making around financial integration with your partner relate to your life?
11. Describe any surprises that may have come up for you when making decisions with your partner around financial integration.
12. What haven't we touched on that is important to know?
13. What has been important to you in reflecting on your experience of making decisions about money with your partner?

#### **Follow-Up Interview Protocol**

At the end of the first interview, participants will be reminded that they will be contacted within 4 months time to schedule a short 30 minute secondary phone interview. The participants will be sent their interview report a minimum of 1 week prior to the phone interview for them to review their data.

In this interview, the participant will be asked the following questions:

1. How well do the themes listed from your interview reflect your experience of decision making with your romantic partner on the topic of financial integration?
2. Are the main themes that you see from your interview easy to understand?
3. Do the main themes that you see from your interview cover all aspects of your experience? Is there anything you feel should be added that you feel is important for me to know?

## Appendix F: Resource Sheet



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Phone 604 822 0242  
Fax 604 822 3302  
[www.ecps.educ.ubc.ca](http://www.ecps.educ.ubc.ca)

### Counselling Resources

#### **Crisis Centre Distress Lines**

Greater Vancouver 604-872-3311  
BC-wide 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)  
Online Distress Services [www.crisiscentrechat.ca](http://www.crisiscentrechat.ca)

#### **211**

Call this 3-digit number for information and referral to a range of community, social, and government services

#### **Directory of BC Couples Counsellors**

<https://counsellingbc.com/counsellors/practice/marriage-andor-relationship-issues-142>

#### **Dragonstone Counselling (Kitsilano)**

604-738-7557  
Sliding scale counselling offered with supervised interns

#### **Empower Me** (Contracted free short-term counselling available to UBC students)

<https://students.ubc.ca/health-wellness/counselling-services#empower-me>  
1 844 741 6389

#### **Family Services of Greater Vancouver**, Counselling Program

604-874-2938 Fees based on household income Can have a waitlist

#### **Oak Counselling** (Vancouver BC)

604-266-5611 Reduced fee counselling provided by supervised volunteers with Master's degrees

#### **UBC Counselling Services** (Drop-In)

<https://students.ubc.ca/health-wellness/counselling-services#wellness-advising-drop-in-hours>

#### **UBC Scarfe Counselling Centre**

604-822-4639 Free counselling provided by counselling psychology graduate students

#### **Terra Counselling**

604-442-4769 Sliding scale, long-term counselling (if appropriate)

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## Appendix G: Confidentiality for Transcription Services Agreement



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### Confidentiality Agreement for use with Transcription Services

Faculty of Education

Department of Educational and Counselling  
Psychology, and Special Education  
2125 Main Mall  
Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z4

Phone 604 822 0242  
Fax 604 822 3302  
www.ecps.educ.ubc.ca

**Study Title :** Financial Integration in Non-Married Cohabiting Adults: A Phenomenological Study

**Principle Investigator:** Dr. William Borgen, Professor, Ph.D.; Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education; Faculty of Education; University of British Columbia (UBC); Office telephone: 604-822-5261; E-mail: William.borgen@ubc.ca

**Co-Investigator:** Mark Antczak, M.A. (Candidate), Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education; Faculty of Education; UBC  
Contact Information: 778-230-9831 or e-mail: mark.antczak@alumni.ubc.ca

1. I, \_\_\_\_\_ transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality of all research data received from the research team related to this research study.
2. I will hold in strictest confidence the identity of any individual that may be revealed during the transcription of interviews or in any associated documents.
3. I will not make copies of any audio-recordings, video-recordings, or other research data, unless specifically requested to do so by the researcher.
4. I will not provide the research data to any third parties without the client's consent.
5. I will store all study-related data in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession. All video and audio recordings will be stored in an encrypted format.
6. All data provided or created for purposes of this agreement, including any back-up records, will be returned to the research team or permanently deleted. When I have received confirmation that the transcription work I performed has been satisfactorily completed, any of the research data that remains

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with me will be returned to the research team or destroyed, pursuant to the instructions of the research team.

7. I understand that the University of British Columbia has the right to take legal action against any breach of confidentiality that occurs in my handling of the research data.

Transcriber's name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Transcriber's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_