

Experiences and Impact of Attachment among Women with Insecure Attachment in Cohabitation: Implications for Therapeutic Practice

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Abstract—Cohabitation among couples has been increasingly common in recent decades. Nonetheless, insufficient attention was given to the impact of attachment on cohabitation. This study discussed the experience of cohabitation among women with insecure attachments by collecting qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. Through thematic analysis, the study explored the characteristics of the women, the formation of cohabitation, struggles, coping mechanisms, and the impacts of cohabitation on the women. Moreover, the influences of the family-of-origin on cohabitation and the needs of the women were explored. The findings indicated that insecure attachment and the family-of-origin had significant effects on cohabitation and the interaction among the cohabitating couples. Women with insecure attachments were more likely to enter cohabitation unconsciously and without discussing what cohabitation means for their relationship with their partners. The findings also suggested that committing to marriage was not the only method for the women to feel secure in the relationship. Instead, long-lasting love and care, as well as reliability from their partners, could satisfy their emotional needs. More importantly, the findings revealed that repairing attachment problems and dealing with challenges in life stage transition is associated with positive impacts on the cohabitation experience. Additionally, to meet the needs of diverse family structures and to provide all-rounded support for enhancing the wellbeing of individuals, cohabitants, and couples, a comprehensive intervention model of relationship enrichment was discussed.

Keywords—Cohabitation, family-of-origin, insecure attachment, relationship enrichment.

I. INTRODUCTION

MARRIAGE has been recognized as a fundamental social institution. The legally married couple live together and commit to each other with love, trust and mutual respect [1]. Nonetheless, the family structure underwent unprecedented changes and became more complex and diversified over the last half century. Intimate co-residential relationship now not only refers to marriage, but also cohabitation [2]. Although cohabitation has not replaced marriage [3], the stigma against cohabitation has declined [4]. Cohabitation has become a more admissible living arrangement and intimate relationship [5].

Couples live together for numerous reasons; therefore, they may have different understandings and expectations towards the experience of cohabitation. Some cohabiters view cohabitation as a prelude of marriage or trial marriage, whereas other cohabiters view cohabitation as an alternative to marriage [6]. Nonetheless, cohabitation is simultaneously perceived as a

convenient way of enjoying the benefits of intimate relationship without undertaking the commitment of marriage [5], [7]-[9]. Cohabiting individuals experienced higher level of relationship instability than married individuals [10]. Previous studies found that the degree of commitment is closely correlated with the level of happiness of the relationship [11] and the individual's attachment security [12]. A study found that cohabiting to test the relationship could lead to higher levels of attachment insecurity and was more likely to have greater symptoms of anxiety and depression [13]. Therefore, the mental wellbeing of cohabitants must be a concern.

Although there has been extensive research on cohabitation, there is limited research on the experience of cohabitation from the perspective of women with insecure attachment, particularly in the context of Chinese culture. The aim of the study is to explore the subjective experience of cohabitation among women with insecure attachment in the context of Chinese culture.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Formation of Cohabitation

The formation process of cohabitating couples is grouped into three categories, which are prenuptial cohabiters, testers, and alternatives [14]. Prenuptial cohabiters are those who have planned for marriage but without a definite time for ceremony. The relationship is described as post-engagement [13] or a trial marriage [15]. The couples mutually agree to complete life accomplishment before marriage. They live together as if bound by marriage. Testers are those who are uncertain about marriage. These couples usually "slide into cohabitation" [16]. This formation process may include the couple spending most of the time at one's abode, with the accumulation of personal belongings to make the shared time easier. The chances of marriage only increase due to pregnancy, social or financial constraints. Living together without the clarification of the purpose of cohabitation and the possibility of marriage increases the tension among the couples as the uncertainty of when and how marriage or break-up will happen. Each member is unsure how his or her personality and relationship dynamic are being evaluated by the partner [14]. Alternatives are those who have no interest or plan for marriage. They prefer the legal, domestic, and sexual freedom in cohabitation [15].

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B. Understanding Cohabitation from Cohabiting Women

Culture and religion play an important role in shaping cohabiting women's self-perception. Chinese women are expected to remain chaste before marriage to maintain their value in the marriage market under the concept of patriarchy and male superiority [16]. Besides, a study found that Christian cohabitators may feel shameful and less comfortable than non-Christian cohabitators when experiencing closeness and intimacy in cohabitation [17].

C. The Experience of Cohabitation

Living together with partners brings positive and negative experiences to the individuals. Cohabitation provides a symbolic meaning to the individuals [18]. Couple experience companionship, sexual and emotional intimacy, daily interaction, share resources, as well as monitor and regulate each other's health behaviors that they may not be able to experience in dating relationship [19], [20]. Partners have a stronger sense of responsibility and kinship through linking to each other's social network [18]. Furthermore, cohabitation could be seen as a trial marriage. Couples can have opportunities to have a more realistic expectation to each other and adjust during cohabitation [21].

Nevertheless, cohabitation could be a method of obtaining the advantages of intimate relationship without long-term commitment embodied in matrimonial law [5]. Cohabitators have lower levels of happiness, and relationship quality, and lower degrees of commitment to the relationship than married individuals and the reasons for the difference between cohabitators and married couples are the absence of formal recognized status and the duration of commitment marriage entails [11]. The majority of cohabitators expect to get married within the first few years of cohabitation. They experience decreased happiness and relationship interaction, and higher levels of instability following with longer duration of cohabitation [22]. Moreover, a Hong Kong study found that cohabiting women experience higher risk of experiencing intimate partner violence. It was suggested that cohabitators are more likely to be younger people, to have a non-traditional attitude to marriage, to be atheists and grew up in a divorced family, which are factors contributing to the risk of intimate partner violence [23].

D. Attachment Theory

Attachment theory plays a significant role in intimate relationship. Different attachment styles profoundly impact one's perception, feelings, and interaction in relationships [24]. Attachment theory was developed by the psychologist John Bowlby and the psychologist Mary Ainsworth [25]. Attachment is an emotional security established through the experience infants have with their primary caregivers. Infants have a biological drive to stay close with their protective caregivers. Attachment behaviors occur to seek proximity and feel secure. The caregiver's attitude and sensitivity to infant's need satisfaction can increase infant's secure attachment. Infants view their trustworthy and available caregivers as a safe haven for comfort and safety and a secure base to allow them to

explore the surrounding environment independently [25].

According to the attachment theory, an internal working model is formed through the child's early experience with their primary caregivers. It is an inner system that guides an individual's behavior and future relationships. It shapes an individual's perceptions of self, others, and the environment, and influences an individual's ability of stress handling stress [26].

Based on Bowlby's attachment theory, Mary Ainsworth and other researchers devised an experiment called the Strange Situation. Ainsworth identified three distinct styles of attachment: secure, ambivalent, and avoidant attachment [27]. Later, Main and Solomon classified attachment into four styles: secure, ambivalent, avoidant, and disorganized attachment [28].

Children with secure attachment perceive themselves as able to seek proximity and care when needed. They perceive their caregivers as reliable and protective safe bases. They are confident and have a sense of independence to explore their world. Children with ambivalent attachment perceive themselves as able to seek proximity and care only when they maximize attachment behaviors. They perceive their caregivers as unreliable, unpredictable, and inconsistent. They may use inappropriate or dramatic way to express their needs in social interaction to maintain proximity with others. Children with avoidant attachment perceive themselves as useless and unable to seek proximity when distressed. They perceive their caregivers as indifferent and irresponsive. They feel unsafe. They retreat into a shell to avoid possible negative reaction and rejection from caregivers. They keep distant and avoid developing relationships with others. Children with disorganized attachment are raised in an environment with fear and usually have experienced abuse or neglect from their caregivers. They display contradictory or conflicting behaviors towards their parents [29].

E. Adult Attachment and Intimate Relationship

Attachment styles developed and established during infancy and childhood have an impact on future interpersonal and intimate relationships [26]. Intimate relationships in adulthood are related to the attachment styles shaped by family-of-origin and early life experience [28]. It is found that the attachment patterns and emotional bonds formed between intimate partners and those between infants and their caregiver are similar [24]. Intimate partners serve as a safe haven and are expected to be available, sensitive, and responsible to their needs physically and emotionally, so that they can cope with stress, maintain stable emotions and build self-esteem.

Romantic love is an attachment process and adults are classified in three attachment styles categories: secure, anxious/ambivalent and avoidant [24]. Based on Bowlby's concepts of self-model and self-in-relation model, Bartholomew and Horowitz [31] further conceptualized adult attachment into two dimensions and formulated a four-category model of attachment: secure, preoccupied, dismissing-avoidant and fearful-avoidant.

Secure individuals have positive attitudes to self and others. They have a strong sense of self-worth and trust their partners.

They desire closeness and enjoy intimate relationships while being able to set appropriate boundaries [32].

Preoccupied individuals have negative self-worth but have positive regards to others, which cause them to have high levels of anxiety, sensitive and insecurity. They have an intense desire for closeness and intimacy; therefore, they have difficulties setting boundaries with their partners [32].

Fearful-avoidant individuals have negative views of self and others. They are afraid of intimacy and tend to withdraw from intimate relationships because they have a strong feeling of being unlovable, and believe others are unreliable [32].

Dismissive-avoidant individuals have a positive feeling of self but have negative experiences with others. They are extremely independent. They set strong boundaries to avoid closeness with others [32].

F. Attachment and Cohabitation

As the intimate relationship develops, the emotion connection and romantic attachment between couple grows and the feeling of anxiety also arises. The individuals start to fear of losing the partners. According to the attachment theory, couples crave closeness with their partners to comfort their feelings of anxiety and insecurity. It is normal for couples in any attachment style to experience anxiety, but to varying degrees [33].

Commitment plays a significant role in the relationship as it can stabilize the relationship and increase an individual's sense of security, especially in the early stages of transition into long-term and committed relationships [34]. Nonetheless, commitment is limited in cohabitation. Most of couples slide into cohabitation rather than having discussed about the transition [35].

A study showed that individuals with anxious attachment were doubled the possibility of cohabitation, especially those at a younger age. They greatly desire closeness and had separation anxiety. Individuals with avoidant attachment enjoyed the sense of autonomy and distance, independence, and self-reliance in cohabitation [17].

Most cohabitation relationships occurred without thoughtful consideration or consensus between couples. Most male cohabitants regarded cohabitation as a test of relationship [13]. Therefore, it is understood that female cohabitants with insecure attachment become more anxious and restless when they are in a cohabiting relationship. Their mental health is of great concern.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this research, six female participants aged 18 years or above were recruited from the author's social network and selected by purposive sampling method. The participants must be in heterosexual cohabitation for at least half a year at the time of research, and with insecure attachment by self-report or the result of Chinese Version of Attachment Style Scale. The objectives of the research and privacy and confidentiality issues were explained before a semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted. The interview was in Cantonese and lasted approximately 90 minutes, with respect to the interview guide

containing questions about the relationship with their partner, and the experience of cohabitation and their coping mechanisms when faced with conflict in cohabitation. Audio-recording was transcribed for data analysis.

Thematic analysis supplemented by narrative analysis was used for data analysis. For thematic analysis, initial codes were generated based on the interview data and collated into initial themes. Then, the codes were grouped into themes related to the research question. Eventually, seven themes were identified: (1) characteristics of women with insecure attachment being in cohabitation; (2) formation of cohabitation among women with insecure attachment; (3) challenges in cohabitation; (4) copings with challenges in cohabitation; (5) impacts of cohabitation on women with insecure attachment; (6) impacts of family-of-origin on cohabitation and (7) needs of women with insecure attachment in cohabitation.

TABLE I
 PROFILE OF FEMALE PARTICIPANTS

Participant	P	D	K	S	W	C
Background						
Age	29	29	49	38	29	24
Status ^a	S	S	D	S	S	S
No. of children	0	0	0	0	0	0
Occupation ^b	SW	SW	HR	CA	T	T
Courtship (years)	5	7	2	4	1	4.75
Cohabitation (years)	3.5	1.5	1	3	1	1
Living condition ^c	SR	PM	PP	PA	PA	SR
Religion ^d	RC	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	P
Partner's religion ^d	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	P	P
Parents' marital status ^e	D	CM	CM	HM	CM	CM
Partner's parents' ^e marital status	SEP	W	HM	DM	HM	HM
No. of siblings	2	3	2	3	3	5
Seniority	2	3	1	3	1	1
No. of siblings of partner	2	2	1	3	1	2
Seniority of partner	2	2	1	1	1	1
Self-reported attachment style ^f	PA	Nil	PA	Nil	Nil	Nil
Chinese version of attachment style scale ^f	SA	PA	SA	PA	DA	FA

- S = single, D = divorced
- SW = social worker, HR = human resources, CA = clinic assistant, T = teacher
- SR = shared rent, BM = residing at partner's mother's place, PP = paid by partner, PA = partner's abode
- RC = Roman Catholic, P = Protestant
- CM = conflicted marriage, D = divorced, DM: detached marriage, HM = harmonious marriage, S = single, SEP = separation, W: widowed
- SA = secure attachment, DA = dismissive-avoidant attachment, FA = fearful-avoidant attachment, PA = preoccupied attachment

IV. EMERGING THEMES

A. Theme 1: Characteristics of Women with Insecure Attachment in Cohabitation

There are three groups of characteristics of women with insecure attachment being in cohabitation: perception of self and others, behavioral patterns, and adverse childhood experience.

Regarding the perception of self and others, most participants tended to have low self-esteem and feel insecure in cohabitation. They distrusted others and had a fear of loss, betrayal, and abandonment.

'I used to be a fat girl. I studied in a girls' school. My first relationship was at the age of 22. That boy hurt me deeply. Since then, I knew I was poor in managing relationship problems because of my low self-esteem. I feared of abandonment.' (Participant P).

'We had a conflict before. I complained of me of not doing exercises and having poor outlook. I was very unhappy, had low self-worth and doubted myself.' (Participant D).

'I was so conceited in front of him. I do not know why he is with be me. I always feel we do not match.' (Participant W).

'I believe it was easy to end a relationship as a girlfriend. I do not want others to firmly believe that we will be together forever. They will become disillusioned if they know we will break up eventually.' (Participant S).

Some participants with preoccupied attachment had a lower level of differentiation (Participants K, S and P).

'I have no idea why my boyfriend is my priority.' (Participant K).

'I dedicate all my personal time to my boyfriend. I am fine with anything if it means being with him.' (Participant S).

'I am demanding sometimes. I lived alone before. I always asked for his companionship, which left him with no space to be with his friends.' (Participant P).

Nonetheless, two participants with dismissive attachment and fearful attachment respectively (Participant W and C) preferred to maintain some distance from partner in cohabitation.

'I have lost freedom since we lived together... I think all couples need personal time.' (Participant W).

'I seldom have opportunities to go out or stay at home alone. I have had no me-time since we live together. My happiest moment is me-time.' (Participant C).

Regarding behavioral patterns, women with insecure attachment had a fear of loss, betrayal, and abandonment. Two participants had controlling behaviors for maintaining control and decision-making power to address their sense of insecurity. They had a desire of reassurance and sense of control to regulate their restlessness and low self-worthiness. (Participant K and C).

'I feel secure if all things are under my control. When I have decided on something and he does not agree, I will argue with him.' (Participant K).

'Lastly, I was unhappy. Then, he was forced to listen to me.' (Participant C).

Most of participants revealed that their childhood involved trauma or unpleasant experiences related to their family-of-origin, including experiencing domestic violence, divorced parents, parents with a high conflict level and parents with gambling problems.

'My parents divorced long time ago. My father had a mistress while my mother had a bad temper... I still remember my parents fighting... My mother was an addictive gambler.' (Participant P)

'When I was child, my family was rich. Nonetheless, my father lost all the money one night. We needed to stay

overnight at others' abode.' (Participant K)

'I had grown up in a family with domestic violence.' (Participant W)

'My parents always had conflicts.' (Participant D).

'My parents always argued. My family provided limited emotional support. If I remove my protective cover, I would be attacked emotionally.' (Participant C).

B. Theme 2: Formation of Cohabitation among Women with Insecure Attachment

There were two types of formation in cohabitation among women with insecure attachment: planned and unplanned.

Two participants revealed that there was a planned cohabitation. Either they or their boyfriends lived alone originally. They or their partners proposed to one of them to live together due to their family problems and then two parties started cohabitation after reaching a consensus (Participant P and W).

'I had lived alone before meeting my boyfriend. He slept at my place about twice a week. After we dated for about one year, my boyfriend said he wanted to move out because of conflict with his mother on a hygiene problem. Then, I proposed that I moved out and lived together. We then started finding a place together because my abode was very small. Finally, we moved together into a bigger abode.' (Participant P).

'My boyfriend said his parents lived in Canada. He asked me to move in because he lived alone. I agreed. Then, it happened.' (Participant W).

Most participants slid into cohabitation, without any prior planning or discussion. Three participants lived alone, and they moved into their partners' abode slowly for no obvious reason (Participant K, D and S). One participant lived together with their partners after a consensus was reached post-discussion. Nonetheless, they claimed that they planned to live with their partners as roommates, not 'cohabitation' (Participant C).

'Sometimes we wanted to go somewhere together in the morning during a holiday. He would stay at my house the day before. Gradually, he put more things at my place.' (Participant K).

'His mother went to the UK, and he lived alone in Hong Kong. We had a dog together. I started staying more at his place. I was unsure which day I moved in. Living together was not caused by having a house together. In fact, I moved into his place slowly and unexpectedly.' (Participant D)

'He gave me a key when we started having dinner together at his house on the holiday. Honestly, we never talking about cohabitation. But we did it. It occurred very slowly and spontaneously.' (Participant S)

'It was crowded in my house, which there was not sufficient space for me to rest. Meanwhile, my boyfriend also planned to move out. Therefore, we decided to live together as roommate to reduce the rent. We totally had no plan for cohabitation.' (Participant C)

C. Theme 3: Challenges in Cohabitation

Six participants revealed a variety of challenges when they cohabited. Consensus on daily chores, coordination of sexual life, communication problems with their partners, insufficient personal space, different values, fears, or discoveries of their partners' infidelity, facing social discourse, and experiencing break up during cohabitation were the common challenges experienced by the women with insecure attachment in cohabitation.

'We had a big argument after we lived together for a little more than six months. We had different daily habits. For example, he wanted me to clean the hair in the shower drain after showering. He did not want to store food in refrigerator. These daily habits were different from my family-of-origin. Although we had dated for many years, I did not realize we had such differences.' (Participant D).

'About having sex before marriage, I strongly disagreed although we lived together. Totally impossible! He raised up this issue when we had a conflict and broke up. This is my standard. If he did not agree, he was very disrespectful.' (Participant C).

'As for his personality, he likes hiding things. But he exposes everything at once. I always need to be very careful. I worry whether I make him feel uncomfortable, but he is reluctant to tell me.' (Participant D)

'There are some contradictions. I am happy to be with him. Yet, I lose the freedom as a single person.' (Participant W)

'The biggest challenge of cohabitation is having dissimilar values.' (Participant K)

'I always checked his phone. I also used the pet camera to check what he was doing... I always worry that he flirted with other girls.' (Participant D)

'It is naturally to associate cohabitation with sex life. People perceive the girl as not chaste. It seems bad.' (Participant P).

'When my boyfriend asked to break up, we were living together. I had no way out. If I returned to my home, I could not prepare for my work and my family would not give appropriate emotional support. It would be more annoying... It was such a difficult situation, especially it happened right before students' examination period. I did not have time to handle it practically and emotionally. I felt desperate at that moment.' (Participant C)

D. Theme 4: Copings with Challenges in Cohabitation

In the face of the challenges in cohabitation, women with insecure attachment found various ways to cope with them.

Increased self-differentiation helps to cope with conflicts in cohabitation. One participant stated that the feeling of insecurity would not fade out. Most participants revealed that they had tried to improve self-differentiation and set a clearer emotional boundary with their partners.

'In fact, I have stalked my boyfriend. I never overcome my anxiety. I think he may not change, but it is up to me, my acceptance and coping methods. That is like how I interpret things. I just assume that he may have a perpetual

tantrum. I can deal with it like treating him as a fool. I can use new method to deal with it.' (Participant P)

'I think in cohabitation, it is important that you could be by yourself, and your partner feels comfortable. I learnt to consider my boyfriend's needs at that moment and think whether he is really needs me to make him happy. After that incident, I realize that I need to share my feelings with him. I find that sometimes he just wants me to simply spend time together instead of doing something special make him happy.' (Participant D).

'It was normal to have conflicts. I need to learn to control my emotions. Instead of arguing, it is better to talk with each other and solve the problems peacefully.' (Participant W)

'Sometimes I needed to refrain from controlling him. I realize that things will not become better even if I control him.' (Participant K)

'I realize my job is more important. I will not put all my attention on my status in cohabitation.' (Participant S)

In addition, an effective communication, where needs and expectations are expressed openly, helps cohabitants to increase their sense of security, self-worth, and confidence. Most participants also revealed that experiencing love and security from their partners could reduce their anxiousness when expressing their thoughts and feelings.

'We started to communicate more. I realize that our relationship will not be destroyed even after sharing my feelings and thoughts. Gradually, I am willing to share more.' (Participant D)

'We have improved after few years. He has given me confidence that he is reliable. So, I am empowered to share more feelings.' (Participant P)

Additionally, three participants believed increased tolerance could help them to respond more appropriately to conflicts (Participant W, S and C).

'Take it easy. Taking a step back could be the best way forward.' (Participant W)

Facing conflicts in cohabitation, two participants sought support from others.

'I talk to my friends when I feel upset, and fear and suspect him. My friends usually remind me to relax, and I will ask myself to relax.' (Participant S)

'I seldom find friends. Nonetheless, I still found some friends to talk to when my boyfriend broke up with me. They provided emotional support' (Participant C)

E. Theme 5: Impacts of Cohabitation on Women with Insecure Attachment

Cohabitation leads to positive impacts on women with insecure attachment, including feeling loved and caring, feeling settled, feeling secure and meeting the needs of personal space.

'The happiest thing is to experience new things together. Also, I can be taken care of. I have been the eldest in the family. Finally, someone takes care of me.' (Participant W)

'I think my attachment needs are fulfilled in cohabitation, whereas they could not be fulfilled in my

family. I did not feel being loved and secure in my family. I was so insecure and thought that people did not like me.’ (Participant P)

‘I think we feel our lives are genuine when solving daily life problems. Dating is unreal. Living together is like a battlefield, so real. We share chores and domestic responsibilities together. That is the real life.’ (Participant K)

‘My sense of security has increased in cohabitation. In terms of time, cohabitation has allowed me to see him more. I do not need to worry where he goes. I know his whereabouts and his schedule. Additionally, cohabitation seems like developing a family together.’ (Participant P)

‘I am so glad that I have me-time in cohabitation. I have always dreamt about it because my family house was very small. I did not have my personal space in my family house. Now, I only need to accommodate my boyfriend, instead of the whole family.’ (Participant C)

Meanwhile, cohabitation leads to negative impacts on women with insecure attachment, including life being repetitive and without special occasions and feeling lost when the partner is not around.

‘After living together, life becomes too practical. He does not stage any mini romantic events or surprises to spice it up a little. I guess it is related to his personality. Yes, life became repetitive.’ (Participant D)

‘After living together for a long time, I got used to being with him. Sometimes, when he goes out with friends, I feel lonely and abandoned. I feel unhappy.’ (Participant D)

‘In the beginning of cohabitation, he used to meet friends during weekends. I was unhappy because he did not come back to sleep. I doubted my importance. It seemed his friends were more important than me.’ (Participant P)

Moreover, the experience of cohabitation changed women with insecure attachment’s perspective towards the relationship, including increased confidence in the relationship marked by decisions like buying a house together.

‘I think our relationship is quite stable now. We bought a house and now we are waiting to move in, which makes me feel more complete.’ (Participant P)

‘I must remember my status. I do not put all my stuff at his place, like my own place. Up to this moment, I still do not know everything about his house or family. I avoid commenting on his family issues. Sometimes, I just give my opinions and I don’t force him to follow me. (Sharing with hesitating tone) I don’t want to force him to marry me. But I did not want him to just settle like this. I have thought about breaking up. Nonetheless, I am afraid I will regret it as I am not young anymore.’ (Participant S)

‘We talked about marriage, but not concrete plans. I am not ready for it, as is he. His current condition did not give me confidence to proceed with him.’ (Participant C)

‘I always take it easy. I think it is fine if we are happy together. Whether getting married or simply cohabitation, it doesn’t matter.’ (Participant W)

F. Theme 6: Impacts of Family-of-Origin on Cohabitation

According to the attachment theory, individuals develop an internal working model through childhood attachment experience, which influenced individuals’ beliefs, values, emotions, behaviors, interaction with others, and expectations of others in relationships. This model operates primarily outside of conscious awareness and directs individuals’ behaviors and attention unconsciously [37]. All participants’ interaction pattern with their partners were like their interaction patterns with family-of-origin.

TABLE II
 PRESENTATION OF INTERACTION PATTERNS OF FAMILY-OF-ORIGIN IN COHABITATION

Participant	Experience in Family-of-Origin	Interaction Patterns of Family-of-Origin in Cohabitation
P	My mother is a hot-tempered person. She always blames and criticizes others. When I was a child, I was always scolded by my mother, and I was terrified and kept quiet.	When we have conflicts, I seldom talk back. I usually keep quiet.
D	If there are problems in my family, I usually deal with the people first and stop them arguing instead of solving the problems.	When I live with my boyfriend, I usually hide my emotions and do not let my boyfriend know what I dislike about him.
C	I can be able to expressive myself freely with my siblings. We can casually have a big fight and argument. Although the problems still exist after the big fight, we feel relieved. More importantly, our relationship is not changed by the argument.	He does not like communication. Consequentially, I was unhappy. Then he was forced to listen to me. He believes that he needs to accommodate me and follow my requests. But this is not my intention. I want to communicate and discuss things together.
W	I have been affected by my childhood experience. I grew up in a family with domestic violence and verbal violence. My mother even took a knife and wanted to stab me.	I suppress or hide my feelings to avoid emotional outbursts. I remind myself to avoid my mother’s mistakes. If I am unable to control my emotions, I still try very hard to calm myself down. I will throw things when I am out of control.
S	My mother is a hot-tempered person. She feels annoyed and throws a tantrum when others do not follow her.	After living together, I did not treat my boyfriend gently. I complain and argue whenever I want since I feel he is now family.
K	I experienced lots of ups and downs in my childhood. I learnt to not to trust others. I only feel secure when everything is under my control.	I am controlling in cohabitation. I feel secure if everything is under my control. When I have decided on something and he does not agree, I will argue with him.

Apart from presenting the generational patterns of family-of-origin in cohabitation, attachment patterns developed in early childhood carry over to those in adult intimate relationships [24]. Three participants’ traumatic experience and unfinished business in their family-of-origin had influenced their

relationships with partners unconsciously. Unfinished business in family-of-origin reenacted in cohabitation triggered their negative emotions. Unfinished business and emotional wounds from family-of-origin have affected women with insecure attachment’s relationships and their interaction with partners

unconsciously.

TABLE III
 REACTIONS TO UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF FAMILY-OF-ORIGIN IN COHABITATION

Participant	Experience in Family-of-Origin	Reacting Unfinished Business of Family-of-Origin in Cohabitation
P	My parents divorced a long time ago. My father had a mistress while my mother had a bad temper.... I still remember my parents fighting... My mother was an addictive gambler.	I have no idea of the role of father or husband. Moreover, I want to leave my family and develop my own family sooner. It is not necessary a real family, but I want to have my personal space. I did not think much about cohabitation and marriage when I started cohabiting. I did not even think too much when I bought the house with my boyfriend. It was emotionally driven because I felt that we got all along quite well.
K	After my father passed away, I found that my mother was very lonely. I will be alone if I continue to avoid intimate relationships.	I started thinking whether there were other options in life. I wanted to find a partner when I saw my mother being alone. I realized that I need a companion.
W	My family has made me feel ashamed. I feel like I cannot do anything right.	In fact, I feel inferior and useless in front of him. I do not know why he is with me. I feel that I am not worthy of him. My low self-esteem has influenced me, including the relationship with him.

G.Theme 7: Needs of Women with Insecure Attachment in Cohabitation

Most participants realized that their attachment problems could be repaired though cohabitation. Women with insecure attachment understood that to repair their attachment problems, they had to take responsibility for their negative emotions and perceptions and improve their relationship with their parents. Also, their partners becoming their safe haven could repair their attachment problems.

Two participants (Participant P and K) had the insight that they needed to learn to manage their negative feelings and thoughts rather than trying to change others. Self-awareness could allow them to prevent their own insecurities from affecting their partners. Broadening the horizons and changing the perspectives could help them to understand their partners and get rid of their negative perceptions.

‘I do not think he will change. Therefore, it all depends on how I handle, accept, and interpret it. I prefer to use new coping methods to deal with something he never changes. Sometimes, I have to take the responsibility to deal with my feelings. Even if he tries to do something or apologize, my feelings will not fade away. So, I think I need to find some ways to deal with my discomfort, like talking to a counselor. Certainly, he can do something to increase my sense of security. Nonetheless, he cannot help me to deal with my feelings related to my past.’ (Participant P).

‘Now, I always remind myself to hold back and avoid being controlling.’ (Participant K)

Individual’s first attachment is usually with their primary caregivers, often parents. Therefore, improving the relationship with parents can repair the traumatized attachment [36]. Two participants (Participant W and P) revealed their relationship with their parents improved through their partners.

‘My parents like him a lot. My mother treated him as a counselor and shared her feelings to him. We argue less when we meet. That’s pretty good.’ (Participant W)

‘I really appreciate that he treats my family very well. He accompanies me to visit my mother.’ (Participant P).

Receiving constant love and care from partners can repair the attachment problems [37]. Most participants experienced a sense of security from their partners in daily life. Their partners

were aware of their needs and responded appropriately. Partner’s constant responding allowed them to feel more comfortable to express their feelings and thoughts with them.

‘He is very honest and reliable, not frivolous. I feel safe with him. Although he may not be aware of the trivial matters, he is always there for me at the critical moment every time.’ (Participant D)

‘Sometimes he does not talk much, but he accompanies me when I experience very difficult moments.’ (Participant K)

‘He is 16 years older than me. He is reliable, honest, and sincere.’ (Participant W)

‘I am not a person who is very good at expressing. I feel fearful sometimes. Nonetheless, he makes me feel comfortable to express myself. In fact, he gives a great sense of security. It might be because I know when he throws a tantrum. And from the bottom of his heart, he cares about me.’ (Participant P)

V. STRUGGLES AND COPINGS WHEN EXPERIENCING PARTNER’S INFIDELITY

Attachment styles affect individuals’ emotions, behaviors, and attitudes in relationships [38]. Participant P and Participant S both experienced partners’ infidelity in cohabitation. Their stories revealed their struggles and coping methods.

Before cohabitation, participant P checked her partner’s phone once due to the feelings of insecurity. She discovered her partner used dating apps to date other girls, which made her feel very upset. Her partner apologized and tried to remedy his mistake. Nonetheless, participant P still could not get over the pain of infidelity. Although participant P felt that her partner became more stable and reliable after cohabitation, her distrust towards her partner was unchanged. She continued to check her partner’s phone. From the story of participant P, it clearly revealed that for individuals with insecure attachment, partners’ infidelity could reduce their sense of security and trust of others, which would affect their interaction with partners.

Although participant P disagreed with her partner’s unfaithful behavior and stress relief method, she realized her insecurity made her partner feel stressful and her partner had put effort into developing this relationship. She realized that she had to be responsible for her insecurity. Therefore, she planned

to seek help from a counselor. An anxiety-attached individual, like participant P, usually has a low level of self-differentiation [41]. Nonetheless, her self-awareness helped her to improve her

self-differentiation. Her emotions would not be affected and stimulated easily, and she could be more rational, so that she could enjoy autonomy and connection with her partner [40].

TABLE IV
 PARTICIPANT P: FROM FORGIVENESS TO SELF-TRANSFORMATION AFTER EXPERIENCING PAIN FROM PARTNER'S INFIDELITY

Main parts of Labov's model	Details
Abstract	Be responsible for our own feelings.
Orientation	P discovered her partner was using dating apps to date other girls before cohabitation.
Complicated Actions	The partner noticed that P was upset. → The partner apologized and explained it was just for stress relief and he had no plans to develop relationships with other girls. → The partner found P still upset. He explored methods of compensation and promised to share his location proactively. → After cohabitation, although P felt that partner became more mature and stable, she still did not trust her partner and secretly checked his phone.
Evaluation	1. P disagreed with her partner's stress coping method. Nonetheless, she understood her anxiety stressed her partner and having no personal space. 2. P still felt insecure even after confirming her partner changed after cohabitation.
Result	3. P thought that if she did not let go of the past, her relationship with partner would end. 1. P did not want to break up. She decided to forgive her partner. She used an alternative perspective to understand her partner's experience. 2. P noted that although her partner had tried to make her feel more secure, her insecurity had been dealt by herself. 3. P recognized that her partner had put effort into the relationship. 4. P planned to seek counseling service to manage her insecurity.

TABLE V
 PARTICIPANT S: STORY OF A SUSTAINING, BUT UNSATISFYING COHABITATING RELATIONSHIP

Main parts of Labov's model	Details
Abstract	From partner's infidelity to a conditional cohabiting relationship
Orientation	Before cohabitation, S discovered her partner got into contact again with his ex-girlfriend via Facebook.
Complicated Actions	S questioned her partner about the issue. → S always had conflicts with her partner due to this issue. Her partner promised that he would let her know if he contacted his ex-girlfriend. → After cohabitation, the partner did not keep the promise with the reason of avoiding hurting her. → S left to stay at her mother's place for few days and then she moved back to her partner's house. → S continued to blame her partner about this issue. → The partner gave her the silent treatment in response. → S kept checking her partner's phone without him knowing.
Evaluation	1. Although S rationalized her partner's unfaithful behavior, she still felt disappointed towards her partner and lost trust in him. 2. As S is 38 years old, she worried that she would not meet another partner in the future if she broke up with her current partner. 3. When S faced her partner's unfaithful behavior, she felt angry and disappointed with her decision.
Result	4. S was unable to receive emotional or psychological support from her partner. She did not think her partner would change for her. 1. Her love for her partner faded. She had struggled whether to maintain the cohabitating relationship or break up with her partner. 2. S decided to stay in the cohabiting relationship after considering her age and life stability. 3. S shifted her focus to her work to avoid the relationship problem.
Coda	Sustaining the unsatisfying cohabiting relationship

Participant S's trust of her partner had sharply declined after she discovered her partner met his ex-girlfriend secretly before cohabitation. Since then, they always argued over this issue. Participant S believed that although her partner promised her to let her know if they contacted each other again, it failed to repair her trust towards him, and regain the security of the relationship. After they cohabited, participant S discovered her partner contacted his ex-girlfriend again without notifying her, which made her feel outraged and betrayed.

Participant S stated that she would rationalize her partner's behavior to suppress her negative emotions. She would always bring the issue up to blame her partner and keep checking his phone because of her feelings of insecurity. Yet, her partner's silent treatment made her feel even worse. A pursuer-distancer dynamic was gradually developed and their relationship became more distant.

In the face of her partner's infidelity, participant S had difficulty rebuilding trust of her partner. Her love for her partner faded. She had struggled whether to maintain the cohabitating relationship or break up with her partner. After considering her age and life stability, she was not confident in meeting another partner in the future and was afraid to become single again.

Nonetheless, when confronted with her partner's unfaithful behavior, she felt angry and disappointed with her decision. She shifted her focus to her work to avoid the problematic relationship and maintained the unsatisfactory cohabitation relationship.

Participants P and S both experienced partner's infidelity. Nonetheless, their situations were different, with age a significant factor. Participant P was aged 29 while participant S was aged 38. As the Chinese social milieu describes being single females at the age of 38 years as "leftover women" [40], when facing her partner's infidelity, participant S was hesitant about whether to end the cohabiting relationship, since she was afraid of being abandoned at any time due to her age in the cohabiting relationship. Furthermore, as trust problems among the couple had never been dealt with, the partner's infidelity had affected the relationship, the elephant in the room. Participant S was unable to face the problem positively because of her low confidence in herself, her partner, and the relationship. As a result, she used negative ways to cope with it, such as continuing to criticize her partner expressly or implicitly, which worsened the relationship and made them feel unsatisfied in the relationship. Eventually, a vicious circle was formed.

VI. DISCUSSION

A. Relationship between Insecure Attachment and Formation of Cohabitation

Most of the previous literature explored the causes of cohabitation from the perspective of individual needs and social context [13] and the meaning of cohabiting relationships [14], [41]. There was limited qualitative research discussing the formation of cohabitation from the perspective of attachment [17], [43], [44]. There was little qualitative research to deeply explore how attachment styles affects the formation of cohabitation.

The finding of this research shows that most cohabitation started without any plans and the couples usually slid into the cohabitation. From the stories of the participants, we found that the couples seldom considered cohabitation as a way of testing the relationship [13]. Instead, financial condition is an important factor leading to cohabitation [45]. Participant C decided to live with her partner to reduce the cost of living. Besides, the formation of cohabitation was unintentional, without a discussion among the couple and a gradual process [44], [46], [47]. Participants did not consider the meaning of cohabitation and communicate with their partner to reach a consensus of living together. They shook off the shackles of Chinese traditional culture, social disclosure, the concept of marriage and morality constraints. Nonetheless, potential problems occurred as their partner was unprepared or did not want to cohabit. From the experience of participant D, she gradually moved and lived at her partner's house while her partner was not prepared for cohabitation. Eventually, the couple always had conflicts due to the unexpected cohabitation. Participant D's insecurity increased because of frequent arguments and the unstable relationship.

Only inertia theory and commitment theory were applied to explain the phenomenon of sliding from cohabitation to marriage [46]. No theories were applied to explain the phenomenon of sliding from a dating relationship to a cohabiting relationship, in which potential problems may appear as mentioned above. The finding of this research highlights the relation between attachment styles and formation of cohabitation are related. According to attachment theory, adults and their partners form very similar patterns of emotional bonding and attachment with infants and their caregivers [24]. Individuals are eager to develop a close and attached relationship with their partner to receive support and fulfill their attachment needs. Attachment styles affect individuals' behavior, emotion, and cognition. When individuals perceive a threat, their attachment behavioral system is activated, and they feel uneasy [36]. From the experience of participants S and D, when they felt insecure or threatened, their attachment behavioral system was activated with an influence of childhood and personal experience, prompting them to present attachment behaviors to seek proximity from their partners and leading them to slide into a cohabiting relationship unconsciously and without a discussion with their partners.

B. Needs of Women with Insecure Attachment in Cohabitation

In a cohabiting relationship, the emotional connection between the couple and the attachment towards the partner increases with an increase of the time spent together. The feeling of anxiety also appears, which is normal for couples with any different attachment styles, just varying degrees [33]. Previous research has only focused on the relationship between attachment styles and intimate relationships. There is very little literature on the relationship between attachment styles and cohabiting relationships [17], [48]. From the experience of participants, different styles of insecure attachment affect the interaction with their partners differently in cohabitation. With an increased understanding of the attachment styles and repeated patterns, it helps to enhance participants' self-awareness and their partner's empathy and understanding of their needs for them [17], [48].

The findings of the research show that women with insecure attachment looked forward to receiving the feeling of security and stability from cohabitation [49]. Nonetheless, the state of "continuing to develop, but uncertainty" in cohabitation made them feel anxious and emotionally disturbed. Individuals with higher levels of insecurity are more afraid of intimacy, more worried about being abandoned and more restless [13]. Participant S described cohabitation as giving her "a sense of stability, but not security". The sense of stability was from following the same routine every day. Her sense of insecurity was not increased by living together with her partner. Participant P shared that her sense of security in the relationship was from purchasing a home together, rather than cohabitation.

Individuals with insecure attachment styles usually use emotional cutoff or emotional avoidance to cope with relationship anxiety [39]. Participants had very similar emotional responses of the character of insecure attachment styles when they experienced anxiety and discomfort in the relationship. Participants with a preoccupied attachment style tended to use physical and/or psychological distance unconsciously to alleviate anxiety when they faced relationship stressors in their cohabiting relationship. They were more likely to experience fear of rejection and abandonment, and tended to feel anxious, become easily overwhelmed, and doubt themselves, even in trivial situations. Participant C with fearful-avoidant attachment adapted maladaptive defense during the interview. She avoided responding to the in-depth questions about her cohabiting relationship and denied the importance of the relationship. She longed for private time to relieve her anxiety and stress when facing her partner's emotional needs. Participant W with dismissive-avoidant attachment was very sensitive to her partner's reaction. She always feared being abandoned and longed for intimacy with her partner. Moreover, she needed personal space. Her emotions were unstable in cohabitation.

The characteristics of insecure attachment and the characteristics of cohabitation have influenced the dynamic and interaction between the couples [49]. Participants became more emotionally unstable, and they had more conflict with their partner after cohabitation.

C. Relationship between Insecure Attachment and Commitment in Cohabitation

Previous studies have focused on the comparison between cohabitation relationship and marriage relationship, such as psychological quality [51], satisfaction of cohabiting couples in marriage [52], [53], premarital effects of cohabitation [54], and commitment in relationships [55]. Nonetheless, there is only limited research on commitment in cohabitation relationships [56], and they have not discussed the commitment in cohabitation relationships from an attachment perspective. Besides, previous studies emphasized that commitment plays an important role in establishing a secure attachment in a relationship [57] and suggested individuals consider their expectation and commitment of marriage before living together [45], [58].

From the experience of participants, it shows that although their partner did not make a marriage-like commitment, the insecure attachment of participants could be repaired if their partners discussed the future of the relationship after cohabitation and made them feel that they were trustworthy and gave them constant love and care. There is not only the commitment of marriage that can make women with insecure attachment feel safe in cohabitation and repair their attachment problems. Partners can help women with insecure attachment to feel safer and loved by becoming more securely attached and creating a safe haven in the relationship [59]. Building an interdependent relationship and putting effort in a relationship together can stabilize the relationship [60], [61]. The awareness of their partners' needs, and timely, appropriate, and consistent responses allow women with insecure attachment to express their emotions and thoughts freely in front of their partners who are their safe haven. As a trustworthy relationship develops, they become more open and more willing to disclose themselves, allowing their partners to have a deeper level of understanding of them [62]. Meanwhile, individuals with fearful-avoidant attachment tend to fear the commitment of marriage and not want to be bound by responsibilities as marriage brings enormous pressure to them [63]. Participant C who has been fearful-avoidant attachment preferred to stay in cohabitation rather than marriage.

D. Relationship between Family-of-Origin and Cohabitation

Previous studies have focused on the impact of cohabitation on marriage [64], [65], and there are only limited studies on the relationship between family-of-origin and cohabitation [11]. Nevertheless, the finding of this research shows that cohabitants have a poorer relationship with their parents. From the experience of participants, exposure to trauma involving family-of-origin in childhood, such as domestic violence, parents' divorce, parental conflict, and parents with gambling addiction, have a significant effect on the cause of cohabitation and the interaction among the couples.

Attachment styles developed in early childhood can affect relationships in adulthood [24]. From the experience of the participants, traumatic experience and unfinished business that happened in family-of-origin would repeat in cohabitation unconsciously, triggering their pain. Their unhealed experience

and wounds fostered them to slide into cohabitation and affect their relationship with their partners in cohabitation. Participant P's parents divorced when she was very young, and her mother was a gambler. She had always longed to have her own family. Although participant P and her partner slid into cohabitation with consent, she did not think carefully about the meaning of cohabitation or discuss the expectation of cohabitation with her partner. This pattern reappeared when the couple bought a house together. Participant P's attachment needs and unresolved problems in her childhood led her to buy a house with her partner without serious consideration.

Moreover, this study found that the interaction pattern between participants with insecure attachment and their partners had a similar interaction pattern between participants and their family-of-origin. An internal working model is formed through a child's early experience and relationship with their primary caregiver. It constructs a template to allow individuals to predict and interpret other's behavior, and have unconscious responses [36]. The experience in family-of-origin and interaction with parents had influenced all participants' interactions with their partners in cohabitation. For example, Participant W witnessed domestic violence between parents and mother's emotional outbursts. She shared that she needed to control her emotions and behavior when she had a dispute with her partner. Nonetheless, she would throw things during periods when she was particularly agitated. Therefore, it is seen that the effects of experience from the family-of-origin on women with insecure attachment start from entering cohabitation to the interaction with their partners. Women with insecure attachment have a strong desire for family, marriage and to be loved, which causes them to make decisions without careful consideration or even unconsciously.

In addition, a finding of this study shows that women with insecure attachment receive limited support from family-of-origin when they have disputes or break-ups in cohabitation. Most participants with insecure attachment had poor relationships with family-of-origin [11]. Besides, financial problems and social pressure (i.e. family's expectation) are other factors making the cohabitants being difficult to break up [46]. Participant C experienced break up in a cohabitation. Nonetheless, having a poor relationship with her family-of-origin, her parents were not her safe haven and participant C did not receive any emotional support from them. She had to face her negative emotions alone. Therefore, she decided to continue to live with her partner even though they had broken up.

E. Differentiation among Women with Insecure Attachment and Cohabitation

Many studies have discussed the differentiation of self in relation to Bowen's family theory and its impact on intimate relationships [66]. Nonetheless, studies on the differentiation of self on women with insecure attachment and in cohabiting relationships have been ignored.

The findings of this study confirm that participants had a lower level of differentiation of self [39] and a lower level of emotional management [39], [67]-[69]. As participants had a lower level of the differentiation of self, they were easily

overwhelmed by negative emotions [70], which made them unable to communicate and express their needs to their partners calmly and frankly. They tended to depend heavily on their partners to fulfill their self-worthiness and absence of security. Nevertheless, from the experience of participants, their partners mostly responded by giving them the silent treatment, forming a demand-withdraw interaction pattern. With repeating negative interaction patterns and the influence of negative emotions caused by insecurity, participants felt more insecure and presented anxious behaviors. Their relationship with their partners became more tense.

Attachment theory and differential of self in Bowen's theory are both developmental theories. These two theories are important for intimate relationships. Attachment theory emphasizes on a partner being becoming an individual's safe haven and safe base. A partner's response and an individual receiving psychological intervention on childhood trauma can facilitate an individual to develop self-regulation and assist an individual in pursuing meaningful goals within and outside of relationships. Differentiation is a result of secure attachment [71]. Differentiation of self helps an individual to balance the attachment needs and the need for autonomy [70].

Differentiation of self plays an important role in cohabitation. Impacted by strong insecurity, participants lost their autonomy and independence. Participants slid into cohabitation because of their strong and insecure attachment needs. Also, the findings of study show that participants had a low level of differentiation of self with their family-of-origin, which led to conflict in cohabitation. Participants brought unfinished business from family-of-origin into cohabitation unconsciously. The unfinished business from family-of-origin became the problems in cohabitation quickly and affected participants' role positioning in cohabitation. Hence, the level of differentiation of self affects the quality of cohabitation. This suggests that individuals with insecure attachment have the need to increase the level of differentiation of self.

Moreover, from the experience of participants, the attachment wounds could be repaired when participants were able to be emotionally responsible and their partner became their safe haven. Self-awareness and self-motivation are required to develop a healthier differentiation of self. An individual usually has an insight when they have conflict with others. From the perspective of differentiation of self, individuals can boost their differentiation of self independently [70]. In face of her partner's betrayal, participant P realized that she had to deal with her anxiety, insecurity, and distrust towards her partners by herself; otherwise, they would break up eventually. Nonetheless, this incident was an opportunity for participant P to grow and develop a stronger self-identity. Participant P and her partner learnt to develop a more appropriate boundary and a more positive interaction pattern. With the increased self-awareness of her insecure and anxious emotions and insecure attachment style, the healthier differentiation of self helped her access both autonomy and intimacy in her relationship.

F. Life Stage and Cohabitation

Studies about the quality of cohabitation and the understanding of cohabitation mainly focused on young people [72]-[75], university students [76], middle-aged adults [77] and old people [78]. There was no study about the experience of cohabitation among women at different life stages. The result of this study shows that women with insecure attachment at different life stages had different perspectives, expectations and needs in cohabitation, which affected their adaptation and interaction with their partners in cohabitation. The women aged in their 20s, like participant C, need a longer time to adapt to life in cohabitation, such as the changes in roles and responsibilities. They do not have much concern on the meaning of cohabitation and marriage. For those women closer to 30 years of age, like participants P, D and W, although they did not have a deliberate consideration before cohabitation, the relationship goal had become more important with increased age. Nonetheless, with the influence of insecure attachment, participants felt more anxious and insecure in cohabitation, which made them be more eager to get married. Those women aged around 40 years, like participant S, do not care about the social stigma of cohabitation. Rather than being a leftover woman, they choose to continue to stay in cohabitation even in the face of their partner's infidelity. Turning 50 is the beginning of a new life stage. Participant K, who was divorced and a cancer survivor, preferred to pursue a quality of life with her partner rather than the meaning of cohabitation or marriage.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTION

From the stories of participants, it was observed that participants experienced trauma in childhood, which formed their insecure attachment. They slid into cohabitation due to the insecure attachment needs. Nonetheless, their attachment needs had not been fulfilled and the trauma resurfaced. The more attachment desires went unfulfilled, the more participants would exhibit their desire through regressed behavior, and even violent behaviors [59]. The results of the study provide an insight that professional intervention should not only focus on dealing with the problems in cohabitation. Indeed, an effective professional intervention should start before cohabitation. Therefore, a comprehensive intervention model of relationship enrichment should be advocated to meet the needs from diverse family structure and to provide all-rounded support for enhancing the wellbeing of individuals, cohabitants, and couples.

A. Personal Growth Intervention

It is very common for women with insecure attachment in cohabitation to complain about their partners in therapy, but these complaints may not necessarily be the root cause of their problems. Nonetheless, from the stories of participants, it could be observed that most of the problems occurring in cohabitation were related to attachment problems. Therefore, therapists should assist women with insecure attachment in cohabitation to repair their attachment problems on both their personal and relational levels.

Self-awareness and being emotionally responsible are the

keys to an effective and successful intervention to repair attachment problems and deal with relationship problems. It is important that women with insecure attachment in cohabitation understand that they cannot change their partners, only themselves. They can also help their partners to feel more secure if they develop a more secure attachment style [36]. Therefore, family-of-origin exploration, mind-body intervention, reparenting and reviewing negative and unhealthy interaction patterns in relationships with the women can facilitate them to identify their roles and responsibilities, increase self-awareness and self-understanding, develop a healthier self-identity, and improve emotional self-regulation skills. With the increased sense of security and healthier differentiation of self, the women can maintain individuality and togetherness in cohabitation. Besides, during the intervention, therapists can be the women's safe haven temporarily. With the establishment of safe haven, they will be less dependent on therapists and able to develop independently [36].

B. Relationship Enrichment

Couples usually enter cohabitation unconsciously and without discussing the meaning of cohabitation. Therefore, early intervention, relationship enrichment and crisis intervention play indispensable roles in intimate relationship counseling. Couples should receive relationship enrichment intervention once they plan to develop a stable intimate relationship.

There are two aspects in relationship enrichment intervention: relationship enrichment and relationship growth. The two aspects of intervention can be conducted through individual or group sessions. The intervention goals are to enhance the intimacy of the relationship, the mutual sense of security, the emotional capacity of the couple and the ability to carry each other's emotions, as well as foster personal growth in intimate relationships. From the interviews, it is noted that their partners are not used to expressing their emotions and thoughts and have low motivation to receive intimate relationship counseling. A possible intervention method for therapists would be relationship enrichment activities. The form of activities can be very diverse, and it is recommended to use mind-body intervention, which can improve relationship satisfaction and deal with potential conflict and attachment anxiety effectively [79], [80]. For relationship growth, therapists can apply emotional-focused therapy for couples to examine their current interaction patterns and cope with current relationship problems. Couples can understand each other's life stories, and understand how childhood trauma affects one's attachment styles, behaviors, emotions, and cognition. In addition, couples can learn to deal with emotional problems in the relationship as the first step to resolve problems, as well as the importance of body contact and sex in the relationship. Dealing with infidelity and breakup is unavoidable in cohabitation sometimes. The therapists can accompany the couples to experience the process of forgiveness and reconciliation, handle breakup properly and transform the experience into an opportunity to grow in crisis intervention.

C. Community Education

Insecure attachment is one of dominant factors that prompts "sliding, not deciding" cohabitation and negative interaction patterns in cohabitation. Therefore, an early intervention of developing self-awareness is paramount. Schools (from elementary school to university) should not only focus on and discuss views on cohabitation and marriage and sex education but should focus on enhancing students' self-awareness and educating them basic knowledge of attachment, which is a long journey and requires higher level cognitive processing. The therapists can use various activities to facilitate students to review their love experience. Following the increase of self-awareness, individuals can use a healthier method to enhance their sense of security and have better emotional regulation as well as interpersonal relationships. In addition, parents play an important role in children's attachment development. Personal growth intervention, relationship counseling and psychoeducation should be rendered to parents to enhance their self-awareness and their knowledge of attachment. Parents then can facilitate their children to develop a healthier attachment.

Furthermore, social norms and stigma against premarital cohabitation persist, which have made women with insecure attachment in cohabitation hesitate to seek help when they encounter relationship problems. Community education services should be advocated to allow the inner world of the women to be heard locally and internationally. People have more understanding of their needs and struggles. The social support for cohabitants can be increased.

VIII. CONCLUSION

There are limitations in this study. Only six women with insecure attachment in cohabitation participated in this study. Nonetheless, more empirical evidence was obtained [81] and more in-depth research could be conducted with limited samples [82]. Another limitation of the study is the heterogeneity of the participants, who may have different insecure attachment styles, age groups, life stages, and cohabitation situations, making it difficult to generalize the findings to a broader population. Moreover, this study only interviewed women with insecure attachment, so it is difficult to fully understand the situation of cohabitation. To improve the validity and reliability of the study, triangulation, using multiple data sources, was used to reduce bias [83]. We encountered difficulty in collecting comprehensive information from all participants as they all had insecure attachment styles and were evasive when discussing more in-depth topics. As a result, we had to ask questions in different ways and re-interview participants multiple times to gather more comprehensive information.

This study advances our understanding and knowledge of women with insecure attachment by exploring the experience of cohabitation. The results offer valuable insights into the specific needs of women with insecure attachment styles in cohabiting relationships. These findings can be used to develop a comprehensive intervention model for relationship enrichment that caters to the needs of individuals, couples, and

families from diverse backgrounds and family structures. By providing all-rounded support, this model can help enhance the overall well-being of cohabitants and couples, and promote healthier, more fulfilling relationships.

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