Close relationships and placemaking: Do objects in a couple’s home reflect couplehood?

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Abstract
The domain of couple closeness extends well beyond the individual couple members themselves. Current research suggests that there are also indicators of couple closeness, functioning, and commitment that reside in the couple’s physical environment. Two community samples of adults in marital or cohabitating romantic relationships (N = 110) completed a questionnaire that tapped several relationship qualities and that asked them to indicate (a) the objects in their home that they most wanted visitors to notice and (b) their favorite objects. We examined couple displays (the percentage of objects they wanted a visitor to notice that were jointly acquired, as opposed to individually acquired), and couple markers (the percentage of favorite objects that were jointly acquired). Consistent with hypotheses, relationship qualities (closeness, dyadic adjustment, and commitment) were positively associated with reporting a relatively high proportion of (a) jointly acquired objects among those they wanted visitors to notice and (b) jointly acquired favorite objects. We discuss these results in the context of couple placemaking—the physical and symbolic creation of a home as represented operationally in the acquisition and placement of relationship-relevant objects.

The domain of couple closeness extends well beyond the individual couple members themselves. Although couple members’ cognitions and feelings about each other comprise important indicators of closeness, the current research suggests that there are also indicators that reside in the couple’s physical environment. Research in the area of environmental psychology describes the symbolic nature of objects, noting that objects in the home represent to others (such as guests) one’s values and characteristics (e.g., Werner, 1987). Moreover, recent theorizing on the situated nature of cognition suggests that the arrangement of spatial environment is a fundamental medium for bringing about behavioral goals (Kirsh, 1995). The current research applies these ideas in an interpersonal context to suggest that couple members place relationship-relevant objects in their home environment to reflect and maintain their relationship goals. Indeed, we suggest that Lewin’s (1935) adage that behavior is a function of the person and environment could be extended to also state that the environment is a function of the person and interpersonal behavior.

Specifically, this study advances the notion that key relationship features, namely relationship closeness, dyadic functioning, and relationship commitment, are manifested in the couple’s environment through the placement of and preference for home objects that are jointly acquired.
We suggest that jointly acquired objects in a couple’s home may reflect various aspects of a couple’s relationship. In particular, we examine a process that Altman and colleagues have referred to as *placemaking*—the physical and symbolic creation of a home as represented operationally in the acquisition and placement of shared objects (Altman, Brown, Staples, & Werner, 1992).

We did not seek to identify the exact causal direction between object placement and relationship qualities. Instead, we adopted a correlational approach to test whether key relationship features relate to the placement of and preference for objects, but also to allow for the more intriguing possibility that the arrangement of objects in a couple’s home environment may shape key relationship features. Together, both processes may functionally serve to maintain a relationship. Without implying any hierarchy among the functional qualities of the objects, we begin by examining the purposes served by the careful placement of meaningful objects. We then focus on how objects may be manipulated to promote relationships, followed by analysis of the links between relationship qualities and home objects.

The functional value of placemaking

Objects in the physical environment serve many purposes. In public spaces, personal objects may indicate that a particular area is claimed (Brown, 1987), as when a jacket is left on a chair to mark temporary "ownership." In private spaces, such as one’s home, objects take on symbolic value by reflecting aspects of one’s personal identity as well as marital and family associations (Altman, 1975; Altman & Ginat, 1996; Brown, 1987). In the specific context of intimate relationships, objects can serve several functions, which we describe below.

**Couple displays.** A central idea of this research is that object arrangements and preferences have, to some degree, a functional purpose. One important function served by the careful placement of meaningful home objects is to communicate to others something about the inhabitants (Brown, 1987). In short, placemaking involves the placement of items and furnishings that serve symbolic uses. For example, family heirlooms may be placed in a central location of a home for the expressed purpose of evoking particular cognitions or emotions that reflect pride in one’s lineage to those who visit one's home; prominently placed religious icons serve to identify membership with a specific religious community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986); objects such as expensive art can reflect how one wishes to represent his or her status to others (Amaturo, Costagliola, & Ragone, 1987); objects may even act as symbols of social integration, as exemplified by the number of homes that display the U.S. flag on Independence Day (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Thus, objects have symbolic value, reflecting qualities of the owner to the outside world.

We suggest that the purposeful placement of home objects to communicate values applies to the domain of intimate relationships. For instance, couple members may exhibit wedding pictures or other sentimental objects symbolizing their relationship to communicate to others that they are a unit. We make the assumption that objects couple members acquire together reflect their couple identity more than do objects that they acquire individually. Thus, objects that couple members acquire together and that are placed in prominent locations in their home act as symbolic markers to others; these are *couple displays*, reflecting qualities of the couple. In short, couple members who wish to communicate their “couplehood” to others place objects that reflect their couple identity in prominent places for visitors to notice. Couple members who are not necessarily as eager to communicate their joint identity make other choices for the objects they put in prominent places; they may opt to display objects that are not relationship-centric (such as objects that they acquire individually).
**Couple markers.** Although objects may be owned and displayed primarily for their symbolic value to others, the objects may also serve as cues to couple members themselves of their relationship-relevant cognitions, emotions, and behaviors. Following reasoning described in recent writings on situated cognition (Kirsh, 1995; Smith & Semin, 2003; Thompson & Fine, 1999), we suggest that prominently placed home objects may direct a couple member's thoughts, feelings, and actions. In their description of socially situated cognition, Smith and Semin (2003) posit that cognition has evolved for the purpose of directing adaptive behaviors. Similarly, the environment may cue personal goals—in this case, couple-relevant cognitions—in ways that become automatic after repeated activation (Bargh, 1990). To be adaptive, behaviors must be “tuned to the immediate environment and therefore situated” (Smith & Semin, 2003). Thus, cognition incorporates and reflects constraints and contingencies in the environment.

A major theme of situation cognition is that individuals manipulate their environment for the sake of facilitating their goals. For example, Kirsh (1995) describes how individuals are inclined to manage the space around them in order to operate more efficiently in those environments. One approach is to manipulate the environment so that a person is automatically directed toward certain behaviors over others, thus simplifying his or her behavioral choices. Individuals also manage their environments by organizing objects to facilitate the perceptual task of finding relevant items for a current activity.

Just as there are ways of arranging items to informationally cue behaviors (i.e., “jiggling” the environment, according to Kirsh, 1995), there are ways that couple members may arrange the physical environment of their home to cue their couple identity. For most couples members, the home comprises the primary physical environment in which their lives as a couple unfold. When couple members in American culture first move into a shared physical environment, typically the objects that both partners owned prior to the relationship integrate into a mixture of objects that furnish the home (Altman et al., 1992). However, over time, couple members acquire objects together that are then placed in their home. Thus, it comes as no surprise that studies describe homes as more than mere dwellings: Insofar as “home” reflects one's identity and prompts feelings of “belonging” (Altman et al., 1992; Cooper, 1974; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Proshansky, Abbe, & Kaminoff, 1983; Sixsmith, 1986), “home” may also prompt thoughts of one's couplehood. As such, over time the tangible objects that comprise a couple’s physical dwelling (e.g., brick walls, rooms, possessions) transform into a space commemorating the couple members' joint identities.

However, not all couple members infuse special meaning into the objects they have acquired together. Some couple members may reside in homes that are filled with jointly acquired prominent objects, yet their favorite objects may be ones that were not acquired together. Although they may be surrounded by objects that reflect their couplehood, they prefer their individually acquired objects that serve as cues of individuality-oriented cognitions over relationship-oriented cognitions. Other couple members may take a strong liking to those objects they have acquired together. These objects cue more relationship-oriented cognitions, suggesting greater cognitive interdependence between partners (cf. Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998).

We suggest that prominently placed objects that were jointly acquired may be a concrete, visual way for partners to display this perceived collectivity to both other people and each other. Thus, _couple markers_ are those jointly acquired objects that have become the favorite objects of a couple member. Given that prominent objects cue the appropriate thoughts, emotions, and behaviors for a given environment, it stands to reason that couple markers cue a favorable relationship focus or orientation.
Preferred objects that are individually acquired are less likely to cue a strong relationship orientation. Of course, a dialectical perspective might suggest that couple members alternate between an individual versus couple orientation (Altman, 1975). However, we were interested in general tendencies among couple members rather than within-person variations over time.

Summary. Objects that are prominently placed in one’s home communicate information to visitors as well as to the couple members themselves. Objects that couple members acquire together reflect couplehood more than objects that they acquire individually. As such, jointly acquired objects that are placed for visitors to notice are couple displays that symbolize to others the couple member’s strong sense of couple identity. On the other hand, couple markers, or jointly acquired objects that are among a couple member’s favorite objects, direct the couple members themselves toward favorable relationship thoughts, feelings, and actions. Both couple displays and couple markers are presumed to communicate key relationship qualities.

Placemaking as a reflection of specific relationship qualities

A number of relationship qualities may be manifested in couple markers and displays. Specifically, we suggest that three qualities of particular relevance to placemaking are relationship closeness, dyadic adjustment, and commitment. Closeness between couple members has been suggested to reflect communality in the relationship—the degree to which the couple possesses an identity of “we-ness.” Usually described as a perception of “overlapping” or “collective” selves, the principle of closeness is theorized to lead one to act as if some or all aspects of one’s partner are included in one’s own identity (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Given that a home incorporates the identity of its residents, it naturally follows that the objects furnishing a couple’s home may also reflect their joint identity. Therefore, we suggest that the greater the number of couple markers and displays found in the home, the more likely one should find residents possessing a couple identity in terms of perceived closeness.

Dyadic adjustment refers to how well couple members get along, whether they are able to navigate conflicts in their relationship without experiencing substantial distress (Spanier, 1976). There are many facets to effective couple functioning, such as generally finding points of emotional support from one’s partner, agreement with one’s partner, and cohesion with one’s partner (Busby, Crane, Larson, & Christensen, 1995). Given that jointly acquired objects are more likely to reflect the tastes and preference of both partners than are individually acquired objects, couples may be more likely to agree on the prominent placement of jointly acquired objects and less likely to agree on the placement of individually acquired objects. Thus, it follows that meaningful placement of jointly acquired objects should be correlated with having a well-functioning relationship. Moreover, as an indicator of relationship distress (Busby et al., 1995), low levels of dyadic adjustment may characterize couple members who wish to avoid reminders of each other or past relationship events that reflect “better times.” Alternatively, nondistressed couple members (high in dyadic adjustment) might enjoy these cues of positivity. Therefore, level of dyadic adjustment should be related to object placement in the home to reflect these orientations.

Relationships that are characterized by high levels of closeness and dyadic adjustment are more likely to last than those in which these key qualities are absent (Aron & Aron, 1997; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Busby et al., 1995; Crane, Allgood, Larson, & Griffin, 1990). Given that commitment is a proximal indicator of relationship stability (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Rusbult, 1983), we suggest that couple displays and couple markers should also reflect levels of commitment. Commitment to a relationship has been characterized by
feeling attached or linked to one’s partner, imagining being with one’s partner in the long-term future, and a strong personal intention to continue the relationship (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Thus, commitment reflects a decision to remain in the relationship indefinitely. Partners who are highly committed to each other may arrange the objects in their environment to reflect their plans to remain in the relationship “for the long haul.” They may organize their environment to bring to mind their high level of connectedness to one another and their long-term intentions for remaining a couple. Moreover, partners may attempt to display their long-term intentions to visitors via placemaking as a way to reaffirm their commitment to each other. On the basis of this reasoning, the following hypotheses were advanced:

**H1:** A greater prevalence of couple displays should be associated with higher levels of (a) closeness, (b) dyadic adjustment, and (c) commitment.

**H2:** A greater prevalence of couple markers should be associated with higher levels of (a) closeness, (b) dyadic adjustment, and (c) commitment.

**Current research**

The current research provided an initial test of these hypotheses. We were interested in couple members who had lived together for some time. Thus, we deliberately recruited participants from community samples so as to test these ideas among an adult population; we deemed this to be a more appropriate population than college students given the relatively high mobility of college students and relatively lower stability of their relationships. Because we were interested in home objects, we asked participants to complete our measures in their own homes.

**Method**

**Participants and recruitment**

Participants were recruited from university campuses, office areas, local businesses, and shopping centers in a small-sized Midwestern city and in the Southern California area. Potential participants were approached by trained research assistants, asked if they were interested in hearing about a survey that does not take long to complete, and screened for participation. To qualify for the study, participants had to be at least 18 years of age and they had to be in a romantic relationship with someone with whom they had been living for at least one year, a period during which couple members would have the opportunity to acquire objects mutually. Sixty-four individuals from the Midwest and 46 individuals from the Southern California area agreed to participate. Thus, 110 individuals (49 men, 61 women) comprised this convenience sample. In total, 3 eligible participants who were initially approached refused to participate, and among those who took a questionnaire the response rates were 80% and 50% for the Midwest and Southern California sub-samples, respectively, for a total response rate of 64%.

Three percent of participants were age 55 or older, 25% were age 40 to 54, 55% were age 25 to 39, and 16% were age 24 or less. The mean relationship duration was 10 years and 4 months; 79% were married and the other 21% were in nonmarital cohabitating relationships. Participants had lived together an average of 9 years and 4 months.

**Procedure**

After participants signed a consent form, they were given a packet that included the questionnaire along with a preaddressed and stamped envelope. Packets distributed in the Midwest also included a $5 bill to provide an incentive for completing the questionnaire. Participants were specifically instructed to complete the questionnaire at home, when they had few distractions. They
were also told that their responses would be completely anonymous. Finally, they were instructed to mail the questionnaire in the envelope provided to them upon completing the questionnaire. The cover of the questionnaire asked participants to complete the questionnaire in their home and it provided the name and local telephone number of a contact person in the event the participant had any questions.

Measures

Participants completed measures designed to tap constructs outlined in the hypotheses, along with measures tapping organizational commitment and employment status for purposes beyond the current research.

Relationship qualities. To measure closeness, individuals completed the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale (Aron et al., 1992). This measure consists of seven Venn diagrams representing varying degrees of overlapping circles; one circle is labeled the “self” and the other is labeled the “other.” Participants were instructed to select the diagram that “best describes your relationship with your partner.” Diagrams ranged from completely separate circles (1) to almost completely overlapping circles (7). The IOS has been validated as a measure of closeness (cf. Aron & Fraley, 1999).

To measure dyadic adjustment, individuals completed a modified 9-item version of Spanier’s (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale (α = .83). Three items measured emotional support (e.g., “I receive considerable emotional support from my partner”) using a 7-point response scale (1 = do not agree at all, 7 = agree completely). Four items measured agreement with partner (e.g., “How much do you agree about religious matters”) using a 6-point response scale (1 = always agree, 6 = always disagree). Two items using a 6-point response scale (1 = never, 6 = all the time) measured cohesion (e.g., “How often do you and your partner ’get on each other’s nerves?’”). The agreement and cohesion items were reverse-scored, and all 9 items were summed to obtain an overall indicator of dyadic adjustment.

The measure of relationship commitment was derived from fifteen items (α = .86), each with a 7-point response scale (1 = do not agree at all, 7 = agree completely). These reflected general aspects of commitment as well as specific components (cf. Arriaga and Agnew, 2001), including psychological attachment (3 items, α = .62; e.g., “I feel emotionally attached to our relationship—very strongly connected to my partner”), long-term orientation (3 items, α = .66; e.g., “When I make plans about future events in my life, I implicitly assume that I will be in this relationship”), and intention to persist (3 items, α = .90; e.g., “I intend to stay in this relationship”). The measure of relationship commitment was based on the average of the 15 items.

As is the case with many indicators of close relationships, there were positive intercorrelations among these three relationships measures: closeness and dyadic adjustment, r(109) = .50, p < .01; dyadic adjustment and relationship commitment, r(109) = .63, p < .01; closeness and relationship commitment, r(109) = .58, p < .01.

Couple markers and couple displays. The indicators of couple markers and couple displays involved having participants list items in their home, complete a distraction task, and then indicate who acquired the object (self, partner, or self and partner together). Importantly, in an effort to reduce the possibility of self-presentational biases on the part of participants, measures were taken to ensure that participants did not change the objects that they listed once they were asked to indicate how the object was acquired.

The questionnaire instructed participants to make themselves comfortable in the room of their home where they were most likely to entertain guests. They were asked to indicate which room they were in (e.g., living room, family room, kitchen). They then read the following instructions:
We are interested in how much you like (or don’t like) things in your home. Please look around this room and note the objects or things that you see. Do not consider qualities of the room, such as the size. Instead, consider objects in the room, such as a table, or a decorative object. Which things do you particularly like? Please list the five objects or things you like most in this room.

Participants listed five objects under the heading of “Most Favorite Objects”.

On the following page, participants were asked to list objects that they most wanted a visitor to notice. Specifically, participants read the following instructions:

Now look around with another question in mind. What are the objects that you would most like a visitor to notice? For example, if we had come to your house to administer this survey and we were sitting in this room, what objects would you want us to notice? Please list the five objects you would most want a visitor to notice. These can be some of the same objects you listed earlier, or they can be different objects.

Participants listed five objects under the heading of “Objects You Want a Visitor to Notice.” They then completed several other measures for purposes beyond the current research, which served to draw their attention away from the object-listing instrument. After completing several additional pages of the questionnaire, participants turned to a page with a large picture of a stop sign and the following statement: “Do not continue until you have answered all the previous questions. Once you have answered all the previous questions, please turn to the next page.” Upon turning the page, participants were instructed to once again list the five most favorite objects that they had previously listed (the page number for the previous list was provided). Importantly, participants read: “PLEASE DO NOT CHANGE WHAT YOU WROTE DOWN [EARLIER].” No participants listed new objects that had not appeared earlier. After relisting the relevant objects, participants were asked to label each object as being acquired by them (e.g., purchased by them, heirloom of their family), by the partner, or by both of them. Participants were instructed to list objects as jointly acquired if they and their partner “purchased the object together, if someone gave [them both] the objects as a gift, or if [they and their partner] came across the object while the two of [them] were together.” The participants were further instructed to contact one of the researchers via e-mail or telephone should they be unsure how to categorize an object. No participants contacted the researchers.

The measure of couple markers was based on the percentage of favorite objects that were jointly acquired (e.g., a person who indicated that 4 of the 5 favorite objects listed were jointly acquired would obtain a score of .80).

On the next page, participants were instructed to once again list the five objects that they had previously listed as those they most wanted a visitor to notice, without making any changes to this list. Then, participants were asked to label each object as being acquired by them, by the partner, or by both of them. The measure of couple displays was based on the percentage of objects they want a visitor to notice that were jointly acquired.

Results

Descriptive analyses

Most respondents completed the survey in their living rooms (74%); others used their family room (16%), kitchen (4%), “great”

1. A maximum of five objects was used based on the findings of a pilot study examining this research question. As participants selected more objects, the degree to which they liked the object dropped. In a pilot study, 10% of the respondents did not list even five objects, and another 68% had objects that were only marginally liked. Based on these findings, we felt that requesting participants to list up to five objects would be sufficient for the purposes of the study.
room (3%), dining room (3%), or an enclosed porch (1%). Participants varied in the extent to which they listed the same objects as favorite objects and as those they most wanted a visitor to notice; 9% had no item overlap across both categories, 16% had one object in both categories, 24% had two objects, 24% had three objects, 22% had four objects, and 6% listed five identical objects in both categories. Thus, approximately half of the participants listed many of the objects (three or more) in both categories, and half were more likely to list distinct items in each category.

For descriptive purposes, the objects listed by respondents were coded into nine categories: furniture, photos (e.g., of the couple, of the family), electronics (e.g., television, stereo), house structure (e.g., fireplace, flooring), plants, knickknacks (e.g., various collections), art, child-related (e.g., art, toys), and miscellaneous (e.g., musical instruments, aquariums, exercise equipment). Objects in these categories were listed as favorite objects or objects the participant most wanted a visitor to notice such that there existed little difference for the following five categories: plants (4% and 5% respectively), house structure (14% and 15%, respectively), art (7% for both categories), child-related (less than 1% for both categories), and miscellaneous (4% and 5% respectively). However, there were notable differences such that furnishings and electronics comprised a greater proportion of favorite objects as compared to “visitor” objects (40% vs. 30% for furnishings, and 15% vs. 11% for electronics, respectively). Conversely, photos and knickknacks comprised a lower proportion of favorite objects than visitor objects (7% vs. 13% for photos, and 8% vs. 14% for knickknacks, respectively).

There were no gender differences in the kinds of objects that participants listed.

For each of the two sets of objects listed by participants (favorite objects and visitor-related objects), proportions were calculated to indicate how many of the objects were jointly acquired. Couple displays comprised 54% of the listed visitor-related objects, and couple markers comprised 49% of the listed favorite objects; couple displays and couple markers were positively correlated: $r(105) = .76, p < .001$.

The proportion of couple displays varied by relationship duration. Compared to individuals in relationships that were relatively shorter in duration, those in longer relationships reported a significantly greater proportion of jointly acquired objects among those they wanted others to notice: $r(101) = .29, p < .004$. However, relationship duration was not significantly correlated with proportion of jointly acquired favorite objects: $r(100) = .16, p < .103$.

The overall sample consisted of individuals who were relatively close ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.67$, on a scale ranging from 1 to 7), in relatively well-functioning relationships as indicated by their dyadic adjustment scores ($M = 44.65$, $SD = 6.75$, on a scale ranging from 9 to 57), and moderately to highly committed ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 0.91$, on a scale ranging from 1 to 7). As might be expected, level of commitment also varied by relationship type: Married individuals were more committed ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 0.83$) than cohabitating individuals ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.06$, $F(1, 108) = 8.88$, $p < .004$). Levels of the relationship variables varied in the two subsamples: Compared to individuals from the Southern California sample, those from the Midwest sample felt marginally closer to their partners ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.47$ versus $M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.87$, $F(1, 108) = 3.20$, $p < .076$), had significantly better functioning relationships ($M = 45.81$, $SD = 5.84$ versus $M = 43.04$, $SD = 7.61$, $F(1, 109) = 4.66$, $p < .033$), and were significantly more committed ($M = 6.09$, $SD = 0.79$ versus $M = 5.62$, $SD = 1.00$, $F(1, 109) = 7.76$, $p < .006$). These two subsamples also differed in the relationship type: A significantly larger proportion of the Midwest sample consisted of married individuals (88% married; 12% cohabitating) than in the Southern California sample (67% married; 33% cohabitating, $\chi^2(1,110) = 6.54$, $p < .011$). However, the two groups did not differ in relationship duration ($F(1,101) = 1.27$, $p < .263$).
Because relationship duration and subsample were significantly associated with several of the main variables (i.e., couple markers or couple displays, relationship qualities), all subsequent analyses controlled for these two variables. There were no gender differences in levels of the main variables, nor did gender moderate any of the hypothesized associations. There were also no gender differences in the reported degree to which couple members participated in the arrangement of their home, although both genders reported modest levels of mutual participation (“To what degree have you and your partner worked together in the arrangement of your home”; 1 = a great degree, 5 = no degree; for men, $M = 2.18, SD = 1.25$; for women, $M = 2.47, SD = 1.36$). Thus, gender was not included in any additional analyses.

**Hypothesis tests**

Hypothesis 1 states that a greater prevalence of couple displays should be associated with higher levels of (a) closeness, (b) dyadic adjustment, and (c) relationship commitment. To test this hypothesis, we calculated correlations that partialled out the effects of relationship duration and subsample. As can be seen in the partial correlations of Table 1, couple displays were significantly positively correlated with closeness and dyadic adjustment; the correlation with relationship commitment was marginal [$p < .057$; the simple correlation between couple displays and commitment was significant, $r(107) = .20, p < .043$]. In a multiple regression analysis, closeness, dyadic adjustment, and commitment (controlling for duration and subsample) accounted for 14% of the variance in couple displays, $R^2 = .14, p < .013$. Thus, compared to individuals who indicated a relatively lower proportion of jointly acquired objects as the objects they most wanted others to notice, those who indicated a higher proportion of visitor-relevant jointly acquired objects felt closer to their partner and had better functioning relationships. They also were relatively more committed, although this association was less reliable than the other two associations.

Given this weaker association, we were compelled to further explore possible links between couple displays and commitment by examining the correlations with the individual components of commitment: psychological attachment, long-term orientation, and intent to persist. As can be seen in the bottom half of Table 1, the associations of couple displays with long-term orientation and intention to persist were significant, but the correlation with psychological attachment was not. Thus, a higher proportion of visitor-relevant jointly acquired objects was associated with imagining being with the partner in the distant future and having a strong immediate intention to persist in the relationship.

Hypothesis 2 states that a greater prevalence of couple markers should be associated with higher levels of (a) closeness, (b) dyadic adjustment, and (c) commitment. Again, we calculated partial correlations controlling for relationship duration and subsample. These correlations are displayed in the second column of Table 1. The positive correlations with closeness and dyadic adjustment were significant, and the positive correlation of couple markers with commitment level was marginal [$p < .067$; the simple correlation between commitment and couple markers was significant, $r(108) = .26, p < .007$]. In a multiple regression analysis, closeness, dyadic adjustment, and commitment (controlling for duration and subsample) accounted for 16% of the variance in couple markers, $R^2 = .16, p < .006$. Thus, compared to individuals who indicated a relatively lower proportion of jointly acquired objects as their favorite objects, those who indicated a higher proportion of jointly acquired favorite objects felt closer to their partner and had better functioning relationships. They also were relatively more committed, although this association was less reliable than the other two associations.

2. Although commitment level varied by relationship type, including relationship type as a third control variable in analyses involving commitment yielded virtually identical results.
When we explored the links between couple markers and the three components of commitment, the results were similar to those for couple displays: As can be seen in Table 1, although couple markers and psychological attachment were not significantly correlated ($p < .187$), the correlations with the other two components were significant. Thus, a higher proportion of favorite jointly acquired objects was associated with imagining being with the partner in the distant future and having a strong immediate intention to persist in the relationship, but it was not associated with feeling attached to the partner.

### Discussion

#### Summary of results

Overall, the results provided strong support for each hypothesis. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, having more couple displays was significantly associated with higher closeness and dyadic adjustment, and marginally associated with higher commitment. Further exploration of the association with commitment revealed that couple displays were reliably associated with seeing oneself with the partner in the long-term future and having an immediate motivation to continue in the relationship. Thus, the more participants perceived their relationship to be close, well-functioning, likely to continue, and long-lasting, the more they wanted visitors to notice furnishings that were mutually acquired by the couple. These findings suggest a strategic and functional placement and use of home furnishings to convey the characteristics of the relationship to others outside the family.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, having more couple markers was significantly associated with higher closeness and dyadic adjustment, and marginally associated with higher commitment. As was the case with couple displays, further exploration of the association with commitment revealed significant associations with long-term orientation and intent to persist. Thus, the more participants perceived their relationships to be close, well-functioning, likely to continue, and long-lasting, the more their list of most preferred objects included objects that were jointly acquired. These findings suggest that home furnishings cue relationship characteristics to the couple members themselves.

Interestingly, neither couple displays nor couple markers were significantly correlated with feeling psychologically attached to the partner, possibly because items tapping psychological attachment did not exhibit high internal consistency.

Couple displays and couple markers were significantly positively correlated, suggesting that when one type of object was jointly acquired there was also a tendency

### Table 1. Correlations of relationship variables and commitment components with couple displays and couple markers

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*Note. Table values are partial correlations, controlling for relationship duration and subsample.*

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. 

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for the other type of object to be jointly acquired. Part of the positive correlation can be explained by the overlap in items that were listed for each type: Roughly 50% of participants listed some of the same objects for both categories. This is not surprising given that objects one wants visitors to notice may be those that are also special in some way, and special objects are likely to have qualities that would make them preferred objects. Consistent with previous research (cf., Brown, 1987; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981), certain objects become highly meaningful objects and serve several functions at once.

**Broader implications and directions for future research**

This research suggests that the environment in which much of a couple’s joint life unfolds—their home—is imbued with their couple identity. A major assumption of the literature on situated cognition and on environmental psychology is that aspects of an individual’s physical environment shape that individual’s behavior. Similarly, this study suggests that a couple’s home environment may shape the behaviors that form a basis of levels of closeness, dyadic adjustment, and commitment. A second assumption of situation cognition and environmental psychology is that individuals organize their immediate environments to facilitate their goals. Similarly, this study suggests that couple members may organize the objects in their home environments to facilitate their relationship goals. If their relationship goals are to sustain a close, well-functioning, committed relationship, then the objects they place most prominently are those that reflect something about them as a couple rather than something about them individually.

The idea that couple members affect and are affected by their environment suggests a bidirectional association between couple members and the environment that was not directly examined in the current research. We adopted a correlational approach, which can only provide evidence of an association but cannot clarify the nature of this association. Is it only the case that couple members arrange their home to reflect current relationship qualities? Or, could it also (or only) be the case that couple displays and couple markers cue relationship qualities to the couple members? Or, perhaps there is a third variable, such as couple member compatibility or similarity, which would account for the correlations found in this study. We found the possibility of preferred objects causing relationship qualities to be intriguing. This would undoubtedly entail a complex process whereby objects facilitate behaviors, and these behaviors bring about certain relationship qualities over others. That is, relationship-specific behaviors would mediate the association between preferred objects and relationship qualities. Such a process would have important practical implications, namely that changes in a couple’s home environment and furnishings could be used to increase their sense of closeness and commitment and their functioning. The exact direction of the correlations reported in this study remains to be examined in future research.

A related question that remains to be examined is the level of awareness in place-making processes. Do couple members deliberately arrange their environment with “coupleness” in mind or do they simply arrange objects so that their placement “feels” esthetically right? If objects shape couple behaviors and qualities, are couple members aware of these functional effects? The literature in socially situated action (Smith & Semin, 2003) suggests that the environment constrains our behaviors in many ways and leads to actions that can be relatively automatic. Even behaviors that are purposeful can become relatively automatic (Bargh, 1990).

One drawback of this research that also remains to be examined further concerns the limited conceptualization of “home.” These results capture some characteristics of homes in the Midwest and southern California (which is where the samples were taken). However, the concept of “home”
and its functions may not remain constant across cultures (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Not all cultures may prescribe the same symbolism to the home, and therefore the principle of analyzing the placemaking to assess the inhabitants’ intimate relationships may be dependent on cultural contexts. Future research will need to focus on the greater context of the home in all its variety, to expand beyond the one room used in this study, and to account for interdependent relationships beyond those of romantically involved couples. For example, furnishings may reflect relationships with more extended family as well (Altman et al., 1992; Werner, Brown, Altman, 1997). Similarly, future research might examine whether the identity of the person visiting (e.g., neighbor versus work supervisor) influences the specific objects one selects as those that a visitor should notice.

Another weakness of this study was that it did not draw from a random sample of the population, and hence the likelihood of a self-selection bias insofar that the couple members who completed the survey came from relatively close and well-functioning relationships. The question remains as to whether the preliminary findings of this research would apply to couples with significantly lower levels of relationship functioning, commitment, and closeness. The question of whether the findings would hold with a greater range of relationship-oriented scores remains to be tested in future research.

Conclusions

The results of this study provide a systematic examination of couple placemaking—the physical and symbolic creation of a home as represented operationally in the acquisition and placement of relationship-relevant objects. The current research revealed that relationship qualities are linked to the placement of and preference for objects in one’s home. We suggest directions for further study into the specific meanings, conscious or subconscious, of objects and their significance for close relationships.

References


and the behavioral sciences (pp. 130–146). Stroudsberg, PA: Dowden, Hutchinson, & Ross.