

COHABITATION AND THE  
EVOLVING NATURE OF INTIMATE  
AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

# CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES IN FAMILY RESEARCH

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RESEARCH VOLUME 24

**COHABITATION AND THE  
EVOLVING NATURE OF INTIMATE  
AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

EDITED BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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## FOREWORD

Around the globe, there are a multitude of relationships formed by partners who wish to be together. In the most traditional regard, marriage, with all of its social, legal, and economic linkages, has long been viewed as the most appropriate form of a lasting relationship between two partners. Cohabitation, on the other hand, has often been cast as a somehow “lesser” form of relationship, and cohabiting partners have, in many cultures, been viewed with scorn and derision, as the mere form of their relationship was not seen as proper or moral. While the larger cultural context of a society does, undoubtedly, affect the likelihood of partners choosing to cohabit, one simple fact is clear – cohabitation is increasingly becoming the choice of more and more couples.

The rise in cohabitation rates has been associated with many different factors, and many of these relate to relationship patterns within the familial context. Marriage rates, on the global scale, are decreasing. Young adults’ perceptions of marriage as a viable and lasting form of relationship have eroded, thus making marriage itself less desirable. For many, high rates of divorce represent an ominous possibility for their own marriages, should they go down that route. For those who may have experienced a parental divorce, the experiences of watching their own mothers and fathers going through a divorce often include emotional trauma, anxiety, and numerous other problems. Even in the most pragmatic regard, traditional marriage binds partners within a legal agreement, and divorce proceedings are often long, painful, and costly. Increasingly, many young adults are opting for singlehood, and avoid the complications of marriage by simply living alone. Quite obviously, though, many individuals want to be in a relationship which, while similar to marriage, does not carry all of the legal entanglements of traditional marriage.

Whereas partners typically enter into traditional marriage with a singular purpose, cohabitators have a multitude of rationales and reasons for choosing to cohabit. In many countries, the vast majority of couples will cohabit, often for an extended period of time, before entering into marriage. As such, cohabitation may represent a “trial marriage,” wherein the partners can better assess what their lives would be like, should they eventually opt to marry. For others, cohabitation represents a relatively carefree form of relationship, where the individuals can enjoy the intimacy, both emotional and physical, and do so with no intention of pursuing a long-term relationship. In this form, cohabitation could be regarded as a relationship of convenience, and one which is focused upon personal satisfaction. For many, cohabitation is a relationship which provides security and financial stability. Individuals may seek to be in a cohabiting relationship because of their affection for their partner, but an underlying intention is to be with someone who can provide financial and instrumental support. Among elderly

cohabitators, the desire for these forms of support is often a central motivation to be in a cohabiting relationship. Indeed, many elderly cohabitators are those whose spouse has passed away, and they now seek a partner for more pragmatic reasons.

Cohabitation is often viewed as a sharply distinct form of relationship, which bears little resemblance to traditional marriage. However, this depiction of cohabitation is far from accurate, as many cohabiting households also contain children. In some instances, cohabitators may have children from a previous relationship (e.g., a marriage which resulted in divorce), while many cohabitators have children, together. In either case, the resulting households are comprised of two adults, functioning as both partners and parents, with children present in the home. Quite obviously, the difference between cohabitators with children and married spouses with children is a very fine line, indeed. The growing prominence of cohabiting households with children does underscore both its popularity and the need for research.

Cohabiting partners come in all ages, with varied reasons for choosing cohabitation, and with a wide array of objectives for their choice of relationship. Like so many aspects of intimate relationships and household structures, cohabitation is an ever-evolving entity, and one which absolutely warrants greater examination and study. In this volume of *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research*, a collection of researchers from around the globe examine the numerous dimensions of cohabitation, including the factors leading to cohabitation, the relationships within, and the consequences, thereof.

In **“Individual and Relationship Determinants of Sexual Non-Exclusivity: Comparing Cohabiting, Dating, and Married Emerging Adults,”** Angela M. Kaufman-Parks, Monica A. Longmore, Wendy D. Manning, and Peggy C. Giordano use data from the fifth wave of data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study, and examine why levels of sexual non-exclusivity differ by union status. They find that higher levels of sexual non-exclusivity in cohabiting relationships are affected by intimate relationship characteristics and sexual histories, as opposed to sociodemographic factors, partner heterogamy, or partner- and couple-level drug use. Their work serves to demonstrate the unique and intricate nature of cohabitation and cohabiting relationships.

Cohabitation is, of course, only one possible form of relationship, particularly when considered across the life course. In **“Family Life Course Trajectories and Union Dissolution in Middle and Later Life,”** Grace Li and Margaret J. Penning use data from the Canadian General Social Survey to examine how the various relationship pathways through which people navigate their early lives may have implications for relationship dissolution in later life. They find that there is a complex interweave of union form and the presence (or absence) of children, as it pertains to possible relationship dissolution, later in life. Being married with children does not necessarily guarantee stability, nor does cohabiting with children necessarily lead to a higher risk of dissolution. The variety of possible relationship trajectories, along with the potential effects thereof, is shown to be quite complicated.

Cassie Mead examines one of the more pivotal issues within relationships – the division of household labor. In **“All is Not Fair in Love and Housework: Perceptions**

**of Household Labor and Relationship Attitudes in Cohabiting and Married Couples,**" she utilizes data from the National Survey of Families and Households to examine how perceptions concerning the fairness in the division of housework may affect relationship quality in different manners across cohabiting and married couples. Interestingly, it appears that perceptions of fairness are similar among married and cohabiting individuals, and the impact of such perceptions yields similar effects upon their levels of relationship happiness and chance of separation. In this regard, at least, it appears that the similarities between cohabitation and marriage are quite striking.

Cohabitation often involves the sharing of economic resources and responsibilities, albeit in a relationship which does not provide all of the legal ties of traditional marriage. In "**Protective Function of Cohabitation against Economic Worries,**" Daniel Baron and Ingmar Rapp examine the extent to which the transition into cohabitation affects the economic worries of women and men. Among women, they find that, particularly during times of economic recession, the transition into retirement tends to alleviate economic worries. Among men, on the other hand, cohabitation is associated with less economic worries when they or their partner have substantial financial resources. Their findings suggest that men in precarious economic situations may regard the traditional expectation of being the breadwinner as an undesirable role.

As a relationship form, cohabitation has often provided couples who have historically been marginalized by society to nonetheless pursue lasting and meaningful relationships. In "**Parental Role Construction among LGBTQ Parents in the Post-Equality Era,**" Allison Jendry James conducted a series of interviews with LGBTQ parents, in order to learn how they navigate parenting and parental roles, while doing so within a culture that still promotes heteronormative views of parenthood. The legalization of same-sex marriage, while welcomed and applauded, still left many with a variety of social and legal issues with which to contend. Changes in legislation have not necessarily led to changes in norms and the larger cultural perceptions of what constitutes a family.

As previously noted, cohabitation rates are rising around the globe. Hence, the nature of cohabitation and all of its inherent complexities, need to be understood within the given cultural and societal contexts in which it occurs. In "**Partnered, Cohabiting, or Married: Childbearing and Mothers' Mid-Life Health in the US, UK, and Norway,**" Sharon Sassler, Fenaba Rena Addo, Brienna Perelli-Harris, Trude Lappegård, and Stefanie Hoherz examine how different dimensions of partnership status at the time of a child's birth may be associated with better self-assessed health later in mid-life. Using data from Norway, the UK, and the US, they find that women who had a partner at the time of birth reported higher levels of health in mid-life. Among women in the UK and the US, being married at the time of birth was shown to be more beneficial to their later health, as compared to those who were cohabiting. Among women in Norway, though, there was no significant difference shown in terms of the impact of cohabitation versus marriage. Their research underscores not only the differences in cultural perceptions of marriage and cohabitation, but also the very impactful influence which these may have upon health and well-being.

In **“Convergence or Divergence? The Unfolding of Cohabitation in France, Germany, Italy, and Norway,”** Okka Zimmermann and Dirk Konietzka focus upon how the nature of cohabitation has undergone change across Europe. Using data from the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) and the Generation and Gender Survey (GGS), they use sequence methodology to analyze cohort-specific family trajectories in France, western Germany, Norway, and Italy. They find that, while increases in cohabitation have followed similar patterns across Europe, there are distinct factors within each country affecting cohabitation. The institutional frameworks of each nation, and possibly the cultural context within each, play a significant role in the increasing prominence of non-marital cohabitation.

Cohabiting relationships sometimes contain many of the problems found within marital relationships, and most notable among these is the problem of intimate partner violence. In **“Intimate Partner Violence in Cohabiting Relationships: Young Women’s Voices from Rural Vhembe District, South Africa,”** Matamela Makongoza, Peace Kiguwa, and Simangele Mayisela utilize a qualitative constructivism paradigm to examine IPV within cohabiting relationships. Their work draws upon interviews with individuals who are participating in the Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Programme, in Vhembe District in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The cultural importance of Ubuntu (African communal justice and fairness) and also economic factors (e.g., women’s financial independence) are shown to play important roles in women’s cohabitation experiences, as well as their likelihood of being victimized by a cohabiting partner. Their work demonstrates the need to view cohabitation through a lens which fully comprehends the larger cultural context in which cohabitation takes place.

The evolving nature of cohabitation, relative to marriage, also requires a consideration of its legal attributes. In **“Marriage by Cohabitation (Common Law Marriage) in Seychelles: Emerging Issues,”** Jamil Ddamulira Mujuzi examines the legal aspects of common law marriages in the island nation of Seychelles, located off the eastern coast of Africa. He focuses upon how many of the traditional legal rights, such as the right to form a family, are not always granted to those in cohabiting unions. Being granted recognition as a married couple, via the demonstration of a common law marriage, is not as easy as it may first seem, and cohabiting couples sometimes find their rights, in this regard, to be challenged by the complex nature of stated rights and their interpretations by government officials, as well as by the courts. There are ways in which the rights of cohabiting partners could be better protected and enforced, and these are addressed by the author.

Rosemary Obeng-Hinneh provides further explanation of the complex nature of cohabitation in her chapter, **“Defining Cohabitation in the Ghanaian Context: Some Historical and Contemporary Perspectives.”** The mixture of both traditional social practices and current legal definitions can often lead to a challenging situation for those seeking to cohabit. Depending upon the situation, some cohabiting couples may be regarded as being legally married, per the constraints of Ghana’s legal framework, yet other cohabiting couples may be viewed, rather subjectively, as mere cohabitators. The author calls into question the oversimplified interpretations of cohabitation, wherein cohabitation and marriage are viewed as two

dichotomous forms, and examines the need for recognition of the more fluid and continuous nature of these relationship forms.

In **“Cohabitation in the Southern Cone: Recent Evolution, Associated Factors and Convergence,”** Carla Arévalo and Jorge Paz examine the increase in cohabitation in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay), with a particular focus upon why people choose cohabitation, instead of marriage. While a variety of sociodemographic factors, such as educational attainment, are shown to be influential in the choice between the two relationship forms, there are also variations across social groups within the countries. In addition, the tendency to view cohabitation as a precursor to marriage is shown to be lessening, and cohabitation is increasingly viewed as an acceptable alternative form of family organization.

This volume of *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research* proposed a closer examination of cohabitation. It is undeniable that cohabitation, as a chosen form of relationship and household structure, is increasing in prominence, around the globe. As noted by the exceptional work of the researchers included in this volume, the growing appeal of cohabitation is a clear sign that it is no longer merely a temporary or transitory form. Instead, cohabitation is increasingly viewed as the final form for both couples and families. The studies included in this volume also demonstrate the complicated nature of cohabitation, as prevailing legal codes and traditional cultural norms often make life decidedly more challenging for those who do cohabit. No matter these challenges, it is readily apparent that cohabitation will continue to increase, and researchers across all disciplines should continue to examine its growth and evolution.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INDIVIDUAL AND RELATIONSHIP DETERMINANTS OF SEXUAL NON-EXCLUSIVITY: COMPARING COHABITING, DATING, AND MARRIED EMERGING ADULTS

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### ABSTRACT

*The majority of emerging adults in the United States spend time in cohabiting unions. Prior research has suggested that higher levels of sexual non-exclusivity may exist among those in cohabiting relationships compared to marital unions. Although these basic patterns have been explored in prior work, research examining the potential reasons why levels of sexual non-exclusivity differ by union status has been limited. Drawing on a relational perspective and using the fifth wave of data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), the present study found that higher levels of sexual non-exclusivity in cohabiting relationships were explained by intimate relationship characteristics and sexual histories rather than sociodemographic factors, partner heterogamy, or partner- and couple-level drug use. These findings highlighted that understanding the higher rates of sexually non-exclusive experiences in cohabiting relationships,*

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*compared to marital relationships, requires attention to specific dynamics of the intimate partnership and prior relational experiences of both partners. The study concluded that cohabitation has a unique place in emerging adults' relationship landscape and may set the groundwork for future relationship functioning.*

**Keywords:** Cohabitation; dating; intimacy; relationships; sexual history; sexual non-exclusivity

## INTRODUCTION

Promises of sexual exclusivity are included in most traditional wedding vows, but expectations for sexual exclusivity are not limited to marriage. Emerging adults, defined as individuals between the age 18 through the mid- to late-20s (Arnett, 2000; Arnett et al., 2014) in nonmarital dating and cohabiting relationships also often expect sexual exclusivity; and non-exclusivity may be viewed as a relationship dealbreaker (Konstam et al., 2019; Warren et al., 2012; Wenger & Frisco, 2021). As more emerging adults delay marriage to later ages, and given that cohabitation is the most common union status during emerging adulthood (Manning, 2020a), understanding sexual non-exclusivity across types of relationships (e.g., dating, cohabiting, and marital) is important, as rates of non-exclusivity appear to be higher in dating and cohabiting relationships compared to marital unions (Frisco et al., 2017; Joyner et al., 2019).

It is likewise noteworthy that emerging adulthood is a stage in the life course often characterized by high levels of sexual non-exclusivity. Analysis based on recent nationally representative data indicated that about 3 in 10 (31%) young adults in different-gender dating or cohabiting relationships reported that they were in a relationship that was not sexually exclusive (Joyner et al., 2019). Similarly, studies of young adult different-gender couples have found that although over half of these couples have explicit monogamy agreements, many violate these agreements or have agreements that still permit high-risk sexual behavior (Rios-Spicer et al., 2019; Warren et al., 2012). Despite the commonality of sexual non-exclusivity in emerging adulthood, these experiences may increase individuals' risk of sexually transmitted infections and can disrupt the intimate relationship, resulting in potential conflict, loss of trust, feelings of inadequacy, and jealousy (Eyre et al., 2012; Frisco et al., 2017; Giordano et al., 2021; Warren et al., 2012; Weitzman et al., 2019). Importantly, sexual non-exclusivity, jealousy, and mistrust are also associated with depressive symptoms (Longmore et al., 2014), relationship churning (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013), break-ups (Negash et al., 2014), and intimate partner violence (Kaufman-Parks et al., 2019; Longmore et al., 2016).

Although the basic contours of sexual non-exclusivity are established according to relationship type, little is known about how characteristics of relationships or individuals' prior experiences might explain the associations between sexual non-exclusivity and union status among emerging adults. Exploring

these potential mediating variables may expand our understanding of relationship functioning, including dissatisfaction and dissolution, and may enhance emerging adults' physical and emotional well-being. To accomplish this goal, we drew on the fifth wave of a longitudinal data collection, the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), to assess both individual and couple-level correlates of sexual non-exclusivity among a sample of emerging adults reporting on a current or recent different-gender relationship ( $n = 761$ ). Due to data limitations, we only examined individuals reporting on different-gender relationships. Our study provides a comprehensive approach in assessing risk for sexual non-exclusivity in cohabiting, dating, and marital unions by including sociodemographic characteristics of each partner, measures of dyadic heterogamy, partner-level and couple-level drug use, relationship indicators (e.g., duration and stability), and both partners' sexual histories. This work provides new insights into cohabitation among a contemporary sample of emerging adults.

#### *A Relational Perspective on Sexual Non-Exclusivity*

Terms used to describe sexual non-exclusivity in prior research have utilized a marriage-centric focus, including adultery (e.g., Nock, 1998), infidelity (e.g., Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Eyre et al., 2012; Fincham & May, 2017), cheating (e.g., Feldman & Cauffman, 1999; Knopp et al., 2017), and extramarital relationships (Dawson et al., 2019; DeMaris, 2009). Other terms often appear to have a public health focus, including concurrent (Adimora et al., 2007; Weitzman et al., 2019) and sexually non-exclusive (Wagner, 2019) relationships. Yet other terms have more of a relational focus, including open (e.g., Fairbrother et al., 2019) and extradyadic relationships (e.g., Frisco et al., 2017; Maddox Shaw et al., 2013; Selterman et al., 2017; Treas & Giesen, 2000). Some studies with a public health emphasis have focused on concurrent sexual partnerships and do not account for the relationship context of sexual behavior (Adimora et al., 2007; Weitzman et al., 2019). We adopted a relational lens and focus on sexual non-exclusivity among young adults in dating, cohabiting, and marital relationships. The levels of sexual non-exclusivity among young adults have ranged from 14% to 31% (e.g., Joyner et al., 2019; Maddox Shaw et al., 2013; Wenger & Frisco, 2021). In the present study, we used the term sexual non-exclusivity to refer to sexual involvement by a respondent or partner with someone outside the relationship, where openness to outside sexual partners was not an agreed upon arrangement and thus violated expectations.

Our approach to assessing sexual non-exclusivity in a population-based sample of dating, cohabiting, and married emerging adults is based on a relational perspective that highlights that behaviors are situated within social relationships. In other words, while it is inappropriate to blame an individual for a partner's sexually non-exclusive behaviors, a relational perspective acknowledges that both partners may play a role in creating the dynamics that potentially increase the risk of engaging in sexual non-exclusivity for one or both partners. For instance, intrapersonal characteristics that each partner brings into the relationship, such as negative communication styles, prior infidelity, discomfort with emotional

closeness, and poor mental health were found to influence the likelihood of sexual infidelity in a current intimate relationship (Allen et al., 2008; Gordon et al., 2004). Differences in partners' sociodemographic characteristics also have been found to influence relationship outcomes, where partners who are more homogenous in age and education experience less sexual non-exclusivity than partners who are more heterogenous (Forste & Tanfer, 1996).

Although individual characteristics are important to account for when assessing sexual non-exclusivity, characteristics unique to the intimate dyad, such as the perceived quality of the relationship and high levels of conflict, which both partners likely contribute to, are correlated with the risk of sexually non-exclusive behaviors (Allen et al., 2008; Gordon et al., 2004). Similarly, when partners have experienced prior infidelity in a former or current relationship, they may develop an expectation that sexual non-exclusivity is both common and acceptable, increasing their chances of not only partnering with others who may be sexually non-exclusive, but also increasing their own risk of engaging in sexually non-exclusive behaviors (Glass & Wright, 1992; Kaufman-Parks et al., 2022).

As such, in the present study, we measured sexual non-exclusivity at the relationship-level by assessing non-exclusive behaviors by one or both partners. Consistent with prior literature, we expected that cohabiting couples in young adulthood would report higher levels of sexual non-exclusivity than their married counterparts and lower or similar levels as dating young adults. However, attention to union status alone will not provide a comprehensive account of decision-making about sexual non-exclusivity (i.e., it is wrong if married, but okay if cohabiting). Thus, we move beyond prior work by not only considering the role of different types of union statuses, especially cohabitation, but also considering a multidimensional set of factors that may explain associations between union status and sexual non-exclusivity, including each partners' demographic factors and partner asymmetries within those factors, social determinants of sexual health (e.g., drug use and previous number of sex partners for both partners) and relationship characteristics specific to the romantic dyad. Our goal was to provide new insights into ways in which cohabitation fits into the young adult relationship landscape.

### *Sexual Non-Exclusivity and Union Status in Emerging Adulthood*

Examining sexual non-exclusivity among emerging adults requires an understanding of the social, structural, and cultural contexts in which relationships are embedded. The age of first marriage is at a historic high point (28.6 for women and 30.4 for men) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), and cohabitation has usurped marriage among emerging adults, with nearly two-thirds of 25–29-year-olds having ever cohabited, in contrast to two-fifths of 25–29-year-olds having ever married (Manning et al., 2021). Given that cohabitation is so common in young adulthood, more attention to this relationship experience is needed. Sexual exclusivity is lower among cohabiting than married couples, perhaps due in part to the explicit marital vows that include fidelity (e.g., Adimora et al., 2007; Frisco et al., 2017; Wagner, 2019; Wenger & Frisco, 2021). This suggests that many emerging adults

today experience nonmarital relationships that may include greater exposure to sexual non-exclusivity. Thus, to best analyze sexual non-exclusivity among emerging adults, it is necessary to center our focus on cohabiting relationships.

For emerging adults in particular, cohabiting relationships are viewed more as a precursor to marriage rather than an alternative to it in order to better ensure partner compatibility. Cohabitation is a pathway into marriage, with nearly three out of four married couples living together before they married (Manning & Carlson, 2021). Furthermore, about 70% of single women who expect to marry also expect to cohabit with their future husband (Manning et al., 2019). Some prior research does suggest that in young adulthood cohabiting relationships are a prelude to marriage and more similar to dating relationships than marital unions (King & Scott, 2005). However, recent evidence has indicated that young adult cohabiting individuals report greater sexual exclusivity than dating couples (e.g., Joyner et al., 2019). These differences may be a result of higher levels of commitment (dedication and love) among cohabiting than dating couples and the simple fact that cohabiting couples are sharing a residence and resources (Manning et al., 2018; Negash et al., 2019; Rhoades et al., 2010).

A somewhat unique and common feature of emerging adulthood is the choice to participate in casual sex and other romantic encounters over-committed intimate partnerships (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013; Kaufman-Parks et al., 2022; Lyons et al., 2013, 2014). Casual sex relationships are particularly normative in the college atmosphere (Pham, 2020; Wade, 2017), as well as among young adults who are not in college (Lyons et al., 2014), and are often actively encouraged by similarly aged peers (Kaufman-Parks et al., 2022; Lyons et al., 2014). Most commonly, preferences for casual sex relationships among emerging adults occur as a result of focusing on identity exploration, feeling too busy with other life course events and circumstances to forge a committed relationship, geographic mobility due to enrollment in school, moves for jobs and careers, and feeling too young to be tied down (Lyons et al., 2014). In this context of a preference for casual sex over committed partnerships, emerging adults may engage in sexual intercourse to initiate a romantic relationship rather than to indicate a more solidified or long-term commitment to a partner (Fincham, 2012; Khan & Halpern, 2018). Moreover, many young compared to older adults have growing interests in open relationships, defined as those relationships where both partners agree on the acceptability of having emotional, sexual, and romantic interactions with others outside the primary relationship (Fairbrother et al., 2019). Finally, although many emerging adults view monogamy as an essential feature of a committed relationship, they often fail to discuss with partners what commitment means to them and to set clear expectations surrounding commitment generally and monogamy specifically (Konstam et al., 2019). Thus, this increasing complexity and uncertainty regarding the meaning of sexual intercourse may in turn increase the risk for sexual non-exclusivity when emerging adults do become involved in committed partnerships if expectations regarding exclusivity are not clear.

Another feature of emerging adulthood relationships is relationship churning, characterized as individuals breaking up and getting back together, often multiple times, and which often involves having sex with ex-partners during the

breakup period (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013; Weitzman et al., 2019). For example, more than 4 in 10 emerging adults have experienced relationship churning (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013); and prior work has demonstrated that churning is associated with sexual non-exclusivity (Longmore et al., 2016). From developmental (Arnett, 2000), life course (Elder & Shanahan, 2006), and social psychological (Sevareid et al., forthcoming) perspectives, such instability within emerging adults' romantic relationships is expected and normative as individuals explore their identities and consider what they want and need from partners and relationships. Furthermore, scholars have argued that a key developmental task during emerging adulthood is to address the question: Given who I am, whom do I want as a partner? Yet, researchers have shown that relationships characterized by churning and multiple break-ups are at risk for lower levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment, and higher levels of conflict and intimate partner aggression (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013; Longmore et al., 2016; Vennum et al., 2015), each of which may also increase the risk for sexual non-exclusivity. Researchers have also found that partners' experiences of break-ups defined by churning patterns are often ambiguous, with one or both partners being unsure as to whether the relationship has been permanently dissolved (Washburn-Busk et al., 2020) and whether they are required to continue to be sexually exclusive. Thus, the risk for sexual non-exclusivity by one or both partners may increase when the status of the relationship is unclear.

Additionally, current emerging adults may experience more relationship instability than baby boomers. Eickmeyer (2019) found among women born between 1985 and 1989 who ever married or cohabited, 44% experienced a breakup; and these levels are higher than that of earlier birth cohorts. Furthermore, emerging adults more often cohabited with more than one partner during their twenties (Eickmeyer & Manning, 2018); thus, the rise in cohabitation may explain the increasing likelihood of experiencing a breakup. Finally, reported reasons for marriage and cohabitation break-ups often include infidelity. Among 706 men and 1,254 women reporting a breakup in the past five years, 18% of men and 24% of women reported sexual non-exclusivity as a primary reason, irrespective of union type (Gravningen et al., 2017).

#### *Sociodemographic Correlates of Sexual Non-Exclusivity*

Prior research has demonstrated an inconsistent association between individuals' sociodemographic characteristics and risk for sexual non-exclusivity. Some researchers have suggested that there is a gender difference in the likelihood of being sexually non-exclusive, with men compared with women reporting more non-exclusivity (e.g., Fincham & May, 2017; Gravningen et al., 2017; Martins et al., 2011), while other researchers have found no difference (e.g., Maddox Shaw et al., 2013; Mark et al., 2011). Part of this variability may be due to how sexual non-exclusivity is measured and who is defined as the population of interest. It has been suggested that gender differences may be attenuated when sexual behaviors other than just intercourse are assessed and when younger, versus middle- and older-aged adults, are sampled (Brand et al., 2007).

Findings have likewise been mixed regarding the effects of education and employment on the odds of being sexually non-exclusive. For instance, while [Treas and Giesen \(2000\)](#) found that education had a positive effect on the likelihood of sexual non-exclusivity, [Knopp et al. \(2017\)](#) found that those with higher levels of education were less likely to report being sexually unfaithful. Conversely, [Maddox Shaw et al. \(2013\)](#) offered findings suggesting that educational level may not be a significant predictor of the sexual non-exclusivity net of other control variables. Findings regarding employment and sexual non-exclusivity are as equally complex. It is often posited that employment is positively associated with sexual non-exclusivity as it provides the opportunity to meet potential sex partners ([Mark et al., 2011](#)); yet others have found that employment is only positively related to men's risk for sexual non-exclusivity and is negatively related to women's risk ([Munsch, 2015](#)). Finally, the associations between race/ethnicity and sexual non-exclusivity, and age and sexual non-exclusivity are similarly unclear. Some researchers have found Black individuals are more likely to report being sexual non-exclusive than are other racial/ethnic groups (e.g., [Arnett, 2018](#); [DeMaris, 2009](#); [Negash et al., 2019](#); [Whisman & Snyder, 2007](#)), while others have found no significant differences in sexual non-exclusivity by race or ethnicity (e.g., [Campbell et al., 2012](#)). Additionally, a consistent pattern between age and sexual non-exclusivity has not emerged in previous studies (e.g., [Fincham & May, 2017](#)).

Beyond individual-level sociodemographic characteristics, it may be important to consider the influence of partner homogamy and heterogamy on the risk of sexual non-exclusivity. Broadly, greater degrees of partner asymmetry (i.e., heterogamy) have been associated with several problematic relationship characteristics, including greater levels of conflict and intimate partner violence ([Cooper et al., 2021](#); [Martin et al., 2013](#); [Zhang & Van Hook, 2009](#)), lower levels of relationship satisfaction ([Schwartz, 2013](#)), and a greater likelihood of sexual non-exclusivity ([Forste & Tanfer, 1996](#)). Regarding sexual non-exclusivity specifically, education is positively associated with women's sexual non-exclusivity in relationships in which women are more educated than male partners, but negatively associated when women are less educated than male partners. Relatedly, men are at an increased risk of being sexually non-exclusive when their income relative to that of their female partners' income is greater; but that women's risk of sexual non-exclusivity increases as their relative earnings decrease compared to that of their male partners' income ([Munsch, 2015](#)). Thus, considering individuals' own sociodemographic characteristics and how these relate to those of their romantic partner may prove especially useful in understanding dating, cohabiting, and marital relationships characterized by sexual non-exclusivity.

### *Drug Use and Sexual Behavior*

Substance use often is associated with sexual non-exclusivity and other potentially risky sexual behaviors among both adolescents and young adults ([Adimora et al., 2007](#); [Maddox Shaw et al., 2013](#); [Ritchwood et al., 2015](#); [Selterman et al., 2017](#); [Shorey et al., 2019](#)). As many as one in five adolescents report engaging in substance use during their most recent sexual encounter, and substance-using

adolescents are more likely to become sexually active at an earlier age, have more sexual partners, and to have unprotected sex (Gillman et al., 2018; Ritchwood et al., 2015). Importantly, substance-using adolescents typically continue to use substances during emerging adulthood (Palmer et al., 2009). In a study of sexual non-exclusivity among emerging adults, one of the eight most commonly cited reasons as motivation for their non-exclusivity was being intoxicated and “not thinking clearly” (Selterman et al., 2017). Similarly, several studies of sexual non-exclusivity among emerging adults found that both drug and alcohol use were primary reasons for not resisting a sexual situation with someone other than their primary partner (Haseli et al., 2019; Leone et al., 2020).

In attempting to explain the relationship between substance use and sexual non-exclusivity, it has been posited that substance use contributes to reductions in both rationalization and self-control, leading individuals to engage in behaviors they may not engage in if sober. Substance use is also linked to impulsivity through sensation-seeking behaviors, increasing the risk of sexual non-exclusivity that is engaged in without forethought (e.g., Selterman et al., 2017, 2021). Yet, despite a considerable body of evidence suggesting an association between substance use and sexual non-exclusivity and other risky sexual behaviors, it is also important to note these relationships are not definitive. For instance, a meta-analysis of risky sexual behavior and substance use among adolescents found that the relationship between substance use and risky sexual behavior was generally stronger for women than men, stronger for older than younger individuals, and weaker for Black youth, compared to youth of other races and ethnicities (Gillman et al., 2018; Ritchwood et al., 2015). Accordingly, it is important to consider both sociodemographic characteristics and other key social determinants, in addition to substance using behavior, to assess the full potential for sexual non-exclusivity.

#### *Relationship Correlates of Sexual Non-Exclusivity*

Poor relationship quality and relationship dissatisfaction are often associated with a greater likelihood of sexual non-exclusivity (Maddox Shaw et al., 2013; Wenger & Frisco, 2021). Following the notion of a deficit model, relational deficits are thought to promote extradyadic sex. Yet, poor relationship quality is not a universal predictor of sexual non-exclusivity. For instance, DeMaris (2009) found no significant effect of marital satisfaction on partners' sexual non-exclusivity, although other key elements of relationship quality, including the presence of spousal violence, past marital separation, and spending little time together, were predictive of extra-marital sex. However, related to DeMaris's (2009) finding that both past marital separation and spousal violence are associated with sexual non-exclusivity, other research indicates that relationships characterized by breaking up and getting back together (e.g., churning) are characterized by lower levels of satisfaction and commitment, and higher levels of depression, conflict and aggression (e.g., Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013; Longmore et al., 2016; Vennum et al., 2015), each of which may increase the risk for sexual non-exclusivity. Finally, research indicates that a lack of love for and low commitment to a partner is associated with an increased risk for sexual non-exclusivity (Selterman et al., 2017); and cohabiting relationships