

INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS AND
SOCIAL CHANGE:
THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF
DATING, MATING, AND COUPLING

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES IN FAMILY RESEARCH

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VOLUME 11

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2017

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78714-610-5 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-78714-609-9 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-78714-994-6 (Epub)

ISSN: 1530-3535 (Series)



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ISO 14001:2004.

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FOREWORD

Across generations and culture, humans spend a significant part of their lives in a relationship with a romantic partner, also known as coupling. Physical appearance and sexual desire may be the focus of initial coupling selection, especially among adolescents and young adults who are often eager to explore their sexuality with a romantic partner. While sexual coupling may provide reinforcement of sexual appeal, desirability, and attractiveness in its earliest stages, shared values and goals are typically more important factors in establishing successful long-term relationships. Marriage offers many individuals committed companionship, financial stability, and the prospect of conceiving children, which may be even more salient motivations for those with less education and financial security. Religious faith may also promote marriage as the primary outcome in coupling; however, each subsequent generation has become increasingly more accepting of cohabitation either prior to or in place of marriage. Traditional gender roles from breadwinning to childcare are continually challenged and redefined globally as more women pursue higher education and financial autonomy. Understanding the complex dynamic nature of intimate relationships and social change is the focus of the 11th volume of *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research*. Contributions from researchers from eight countries explore the process of initiating, maintaining, and strengthening long-term and marriage relationships.

From their earliest memories of childhood, most individuals have witnessed coupling through parents, grandparents, and members of the community. These early memories shape how relationships are defined and understood in adulthood. In many cultures, relationships are formed through arranged marriages, where parents and trusted family members are responsible for choosing a suitable spouse. In “*Enjoy the Heat of a Log, and Heed the Advice of the Elders*”: *Religious, Educational, and Neighborhood Determinants of Parental Influence on Spousal Choice in Nepal*, Emily McKendry-Smith examines the importance that young adults in Nepal place on religious faith and their decision to enter an arranged marriage or choose their own life partner. She concludes that as Nepalis become more educated, the effect of their neighbors’ religious faith is reduced and they are more likely to gain greater autonomy from their families when choosing a spouse.

In order to better understand the salient factors in mate selection from the initial dating period to marriage, Olufemi Adeniyi Fawole and Olasunkanmi Adebisi Osho sampled 19 married couples who had courted for at least seven

years before marriage and had been married for no less than ten years. Although shared values and core beliefs are typically considered to be essential components in romantic relationships, Fawole and Osho's chapter, "*And Here We Are...*": *Influencing Factors of Intimate Partner Preference among Married Couples in Nigeria*, noted that ethnic and educational backgrounds were not significant factors in intimate partner preference in their sample. Through a series of focus groups investigating couples' choice of partner, how they met, and length of dating and courtship, Fawole and Osho suggest that the couples' personality traits and family of origin may be more important factors in coupling formation.

Family dynamics may have a direct impact upon relationship formation and specifically one's choice of partner as explored in the chapter, *Intergenerational Conflicts and Resistance of Daughters in Suburban Turkey* by Aylin Akpınar. Raised by dominant fathers and subordinate mothers, the coupling experiences of three young women are examined from the formation of the arranged marriages, to the decision to divorce or separate as a means of individuation. Using a narrative approach, Akpınar examines the cultural standard of the "virgin bride" in suburban regions of Turkey, as a patriarchal means of oppressing women's sexuality and its effects on young women across generations.

Established gender roles continue to be challenged across the globe, as seen in Kadri Raid and Kairi Kasearu's chapter, *Changing Gender Role Expectations in the Family Formation Process through the Lens of Ambivalence*. Interviews with both married and cohabitating couples revealed that while most couples openly embrace egalitarian values, traditional gender role expectations are pervasive throughout Estonian culture. Since 1998, more than half of children in Estonia, a former socialist country, have been born outside of marriage, suggesting a more accepting and open approach to coupling. Despite the changing family structure, Raid and Kasearu suggest that gender norms persist, making family life in Estonia more diverse, but also more uncertain.

Traditional gender roles continue to be questioned in *Educational Assortative Mating and Female Breadwinning Trajectories: A Group-Based Trajectory Analysis* by Yue Qian. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1979), she suggests that the gender gap in education in the United States may have a direct impact on marriage and family life. Women with considerably more education than their male partners reported a continuously higher probability of being the primary breadwinners and were more likely to become the primary earners, even if they were not initially. Qian proposes that education may place women in a "wife advantaged" position of providing for their families notwithstanding traditional gender role expectations.

Despite higher education and a greater acceptance of egalitarian values with each new generation, an acceptance of traditional gender roles can be predictive of healthy versus unhealthy relationships. For adolescents, who are first exploring dating and coupling, gender roles may provide some structure and guidance in what to expect in a new relationship, but they may also impact the dynamic

of power between individuals. Giovanna Giancesini proposes a theoretical model which evaluates the dynamic of power within the dyad and predicts healthy versus unhealthy relationship outcomes, in her chapter *Dating & Mating in Adolescence: A Model to Predict Pathways of Relationship Outcomes*. A greater self-awareness of power in a relationship and its link to dating and partner violence has not only clinical applications, but Giancesini suggests that her model was also intended to become a mobile app for adolescents to evaluate their own relationships.

With each subsequent generation, marriage has been progressively delayed in favor of cohabitation. Couples may choose to live together out of financial necessity or simply to better evaluate the compatibility and longevity of their relationship before committing to marriage. In *The Transition to Adulthood in Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures: Prevalence and Timing of Premarital Cohabitation and Direct Marriage in Germany and China*, Barbara E. Fulda explores national differences in the timing and prevalence of premarital cohabitation and direct marriage. In addition to factors such as wealth, economic modernization, and education, Fulda offers insight into cohabitation preferences in China and Germany and between collectivistic and individualistic cultures.

Expanding the research on cohabitation and marriage preferences across the globe, Ana Josefina Cuevas details her findings in *Marriage and Cohabitation among Rural and Urban Women in Western Mexico*. Based on 48 qualitative interviews, her findings suggest that two-thirds of women chose a civil or religious marriage in order to start a family. Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those with less education may have felt that marriage was their only option. In contrast, women living in permanent or alternate cohabitation were more likely to avoid marriage. Narrative responses suggest that attitudes toward premarital sex and the definitions of family are changing especially with each subsequent generation of women.

As attitudes surrounding gender roles and marriage continue to broaden, some partners may choose to establish non-marital committed relationships in separate households. Defining these relationships as “live-apart-together” (LAT), Jacquelyn Benson, Steffany Kerr, and Ashley Ermer, conducted a grounded theory study of 22 older adults in *Living Apart Together Relationships in Later Life: Constructing an Account of Relational Maintenance*. Choosing to live independently from each other, the participants emphasized the importance of protecting their autonomy and remaining flexible about the expectations of time spent in the physical presence of their partner. While LAT relationships might be temporary for younger adults, who may be separated by the demands of their careers or financial considerations, Benson, Kerr, and Ermer examine the factors involved in choosing a more permanent LAT relationship in older adulthood and the impact living apart may have on the stability of these relationships.

Technology has directly impacted the frequency and nature of communication across most relationships, especially for young adults. From online dating, to tweets and texts, the Millennial generation has never known a world without the Internet. In *Technology Use and Its Association with Romantic Relationships*, Lacey A. Bagley and Claire Kimberly investigate how interpersonal relationships are directly affected by the Internet. Their findings suggest that men may be more likely to utilize technology to search for a partner, flirt, and maintain a long-distance relationship, than women. Furthermore, as compared with Caucasians, African American participants may view the Internet as negatively impacting the quality of a relationship.

Coupling requires compromise, communication, and commitment, but sometimes partnerships reach a natural conclusion. Whether it is due to irreconcilable differences or infidelity, couples become individuals again. Therefore, learning how to identify unhealthy relationships and end them successfully is a critical lesson, especially in emerging adulthood. Jerika C. Norona and Spencer B. Olmstead conducted article searches on 18- to 29-year olds in *The Aftermath of Dating Relationship Dissolution in Emerging Adulthood: A Review* to better understand the ramifications of relationship dissolution. Ranging from physical and emotional abuse to self-discovery and growth, young adults experienced a wide range of emotional reactions at the end of their relationships. Norona and Olmstead examine the developmental needs within romantic relationships and how educational programs might encourage healthier relationships in young adults.

Methodologically and geographically diverse, 11 chapters have explored the cultural and generational challenges of intimate relationships across all phases of coupling behavior. From Mexico to Nigeria, this volume has examined the strength of family and cultural influence, traditional gender norms, education and socioeconomic status in mate selection across eight countries. Although a large body of research exists about romantic relationships in Western societies, particularly in the United States, additional research is essential to better understand this dynamic from a global perspective. Expanding the empirical research and theoretical frameworks through a cross-cultural lens is essential to better understanding the complex nature of coupling behaviors. This volume is one step toward that goal and we wish to thank all the authors who provided important contributions to this volume, and all the anonymous reviewers who provided thoughtful and detailed reviews.

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