

COHABITATION AND THE EVOLVING NATURE OF INTIMATE AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Edited by Sampson Lee Blair
and Yongjun Zhang

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES
IN FAMILY RESEARCH

VOLUME 24

COHABITATION AND THE
EVOLVING NATURE OF INTIMATE
AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES IN FAMILY RESEARCH

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RESEARCH VOLUME 24

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AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

EDITED BY

SAMPSON LEE BLAIR

The State University of New York (Buffalo), USA

and

YONGJUN ZHANG

The State University of New York (Stony Brook), USA



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Fenaba Rena Addo, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Public Policy at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, where she is also an Adjunct Associate Professor of Sociology and African, African American, and Diaspora Studies and a Faculty Affiliate of the Carolina Population Center. Her research program examines the causes and consequences of debt and wealth inequality with a focus on higher education and family and relationships. She recently coauthored with sociologist Jason Houle, *A Dream Defaulted: The Student Debt Crisis Among Black Borrowers* (Harvard Education Press, 2022) that centers the stories of black young adults within the broader student loan debt landscape and addresses policy solutions which can address racial disparities in student loan debt. She received her PhD in Policy Analysis and Management from Cornell University, holds a BS in Economics from Duke University, and was a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health and Society Postdoctoral Scholar.

Carla Arévalo is an Assistant Researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), the main government agency that fosters the development of science and technology in Argentina. She holds a PhD degree in Demography and MSc in Economics. She is also the Director of the Institute of Labor Studies and Economic Development (IELDE, UNSa) and the Foundress and Coordinator of the Master Program in Development Economy at the National University of Salta. Her research interests are in the field of human development, specially about gender and economic inequalities.

Daniel Baron is currently Research Fellow at the Institute of Sociology, Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg. He holds a PhD in Political Sciences from RWTH Aachen University. In his research, he focuses on family and life-course sociology as well as electoral studies and sampling methods. His most recent publications in the field of family sociology are: *Befristete Beschäftigungsverhältnisse junger Erwachsener. Folgen für Partnerschaft und private Zukunftsgestaltung* [Fixed-term Employment among Young Adults. Effects on Intimate Relationships and Private Life-planning] (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2023). Does fixed-term employment delay important partnership events? Comparing transitions into cohabitation, marriage, parenthood and home ownership among young adults in Germany. *Journal of Family Research*, 31(2019), 1, S. 40–57 (together with Ingmar Rapp).

Peggy C. Giordano received her PhD in Sociology from the University of Minnesota in 1974. She is currently a Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus of Sociology in the Department of Sociology at Bowling Green State University. Much of her work explores adolescent and young adult problem

behaviors, particularly juvenile delinquency and intimate partner violence. She is also the principal investigator of the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), a 24-year longitudinal panel study that follows adolescents as they transition to adulthood. The TARS focuses on the character and dynamics of dating and sexual relationships and how variations in these relationship experiences influence such outcome measures as delinquency involvement, intimate partner violence, sexual behaviors, and physical- and mental-health indicators.

Stefanie Hoherz is a Research Fellow at the Federal Institute for Population Research in Wiesbaden, Germany. With a background in family and labor market research, she specializes in examining how work demands impact the family lives of young parents. Stefanie's recent work has focused on investigating various factors that affect people's wellbeing. To conduct her research, Stefanie employs advanced methods for analyzing large-scale, longitudinal data sets.

Allison Jendry James is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Sociology in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Albion College in Albion, Michigan. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Women and Gender Studies at the University of Michigan-Flint, her Master of Arts in Sociology at Eastern Michigan University, and her PhD in Sociology from Wayne State University. Her research primarily focuses on the social construction of parenthood and more specifically, the experiences of LGBTQ parents. She has published research in journals such as *Michigan Family Review* and *Sociation*. Currently, Allison is working on an upcoming co-authored Families chapter in the 4th edition of *Investigating Social Problems*. Allison teaches courses on race, class, and gender inequalities, families, qualitative research methods, and quantitative research methods. She lives in Brighton, Michigan with her spouse, two dogs, and a slew of other pets. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her spouse and pets, and being outside.

Angela M. Kaufman-Parks received her PhD in Sociology from Bowling Green State University in 2014. She is currently an Associate Professor of Criminology in the Department of Sociology and Criminology at Assumption University in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her research focuses broadly on the correlates and consequences of interpersonal relationship functioning. She has published on such topics as the parent-child relationship and experiences of relational quality and intrafamilial aggression, intimate partner violence victimization and perpetration in adolescent and emerging adult romantic relationships, and emerging adults' sexual experiences and behaviors as influenced by their parents, peers, and partners.

Peace Kiguwa, PhD, is Associate Professor in Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. She works within the rubric of critical psychology, affective politics of gender and sexuality, racism and racialization and the nuances of teaching and learning.

Dirk Konietzka is Professor of Sociology at the Institute of Sociology at the Technische Universität of Braunschweig, Germany, where he holds the Chair of Social Structure and Empirical Research Methods. His research focuses on life course analysis, social demography, and social stratification. In particular, he has published on family diversity, transition to adulthood, educational and occupational inequalities, cohort dynamics and social change, and recently spatial aspects of social inequality. His works have appeared in, among others, *European Sociological Review*, *Population*, *European Journal of Population*, *Work, Employment & Society*, *Journal of Youth Studies*, *European Transport Research Review*, and the leading German language journals *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* and *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*. He has also co-edited (with Michaela Kreyenfeld) the volume *Childlessness in Europe. Contexts, Causes, and Consequences* (Springer 2017). Since 2011, Dirk Konietzka has been a member of the board of the section *Social Inequality and the Study of Social Structure* of the German Sociological Association. He graduated from Hamburg University in 1993 and received his Doctoral degree in Sociology from FU Berlin in 1997. Before joining TU Braunschweig in 2009, he worked as a Researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development Berlin, at Rostock University and the Max Planck Institute for Demography Rostock.

Trude Lappegård is a Professor in Sociology at the University of Oslo. She received her PhD in Sociology from the University of Oslo in 2006, and served as a Senior Researcher and Head of Research at Statistics Norway until 2016. Her main research interests are family demography, fertility, and gender equality, and she has been awarded several major research grants from the Norwegian Research Council to study fertility dynamics in Norway and other industrialized countries. Her published work has appeared in journals such as *Demography*, *Population and Development Review*, *Social Forces*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, and *Population Studies*. In 2020, she was awarded the European Association for Population Studies (EAPS) Jan M. Hoem Award for Social Policy and Family Demography. She currently serves as the Editor-in-Chief for the *European Journal of Population*.

Grace Li is currently pursuing a Doctoral degree in Sociology at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Her research interests include demography and quantitative methodologies.

Monica A. Longmore received her PhD in Sociology from Washington State University in 1991. She is currently a Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology at Bowling Green State University. Her research examines how individuals define themselves in terms of various identities, attitudes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences, along with self-evaluations of these personality components. Specifically, her present research examines adolescents' self-conceptions, heterosexual relationships, and sexual behavior. She has also previously published on such topics as deviance, crime, and violence, as they occur in a variety of broader and multifaceted social contexts.

Matamela Makongoza is a final year PhD candidate and holds a Master's degree in Research Psychology from the University of the Witwatersrand. Matamela has 13 years of Social Science research experience and her research interests are in sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender and gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS. She was part of the WITSIE (Women Intellectuals Transforming Scholarship in Education) research team at WITS University. The research team empowered young women through research skills such, to conduct scientific research and publications. Currently, Matamela is part of the collaboration (University of the Witwatersrand and University of South Africa) research team working on gender-based violence and femicide research entitled: *Understanding Gender-Based Violence and Femicide in South Africa: Voices of Communities and Activists*. She has co-authored six peer-reviewed journal articles, two media articles, and one book chapter and has presented at local and international conferences.

Wendy D. Manning received her PhD in Sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1992. She is the Dr Howard E. Aldrich and Penny Daum Aldrich Distinguished Professor in the Department of Sociology at Bowling Green State University. She is also the Co-Director for the National Center for Family & Marriage Research. She is a family demographer, and her research examines how family members define and understand their obligations to each other in an era of increasingly diverse and complex family relationships. With a specific focus on cohabiting unions, she has published work on the measurement of cohabitation, fertility in cohabiting unions, the stability of cohabiting unions, and the implications of cohabitation for adult and child wellbeing.

Simangele Mayisela is the Educational Psychologist at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). Her primary research interest is understanding intrapsychological functions from a cultural-historical activity (CHAT) perspective – a multidisciplinary paradigm. She was the NRF – Innovation grant holder and the Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa Fellow – an SSRC research fellowship for her Doctoral study on Socio-historical and transgenerational psychological processes involved in the persistent use of corporal punishment in education in the post-colonial era. She is the founding member of the CHAT-Africa, founded at UCT in 2013.

Cassie Mead is a PhD Student at Indiana University, where she completed her Master's degree in the Spring of 2023. Broadly, her research interests include gender, work, and family, including interests in cohabitation, marriage, and the division of household labor.

Jamil Ddamulira Mujuzi is a Professor in the Faculty of Law, University of the Western Cape (UWC). He is the former Deputy Dean of Research, Faculty of Law, UWC and the former Co-Director of the South African-German Centre for Transnational Criminal Justice. Prof Mujuzi is an experienced researcher. His research interests include family law, international co-operation in criminal matters, criminal procedure, law of evidence and human rights generally (especially

from an African perspective). He is an author of over 200 (two hundred) articles and chapters in books on various aspects of criminal law, criminal justice, prevention of corruption, family law and human rights which have been published in some of the most prestigious peer-reviewed law journals in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. Some of his articles have been cited by the South African Constitutional Court, Supreme Court of Appeal and High Courts of Uganda and South Africa. His publications have also been cited by scholars in books, articles or reports published in languages such as English, French, Italian, and Spanish. His article was also cited in the 2010 *United Nations Secretary General's Report on the Death Penalty*, that is, the “eighth quinquennial report [which] reviews the use of and trends in capital punishment, including the implementation of the safeguards during the period 2004–2008.” E/2010/10, 18 December 2009. He is rated as an established researcher by the South African National Research Foundation. He has presented papers at several conferences and workshops in many countries. He has successfully supervised and continues to supervise LLB, LLM, and LLD/PhD students. He has been an external examiner (LLB, LLM, and PhD) for many universities. He has been a visiting academic (in different capacities) at many universities in Europe and Africa.

Rosemary Obeng-Hinneh, holds a PhD in Sociology with specialization in the Sociology of the family, from the University of Ghana, Legon. She is a Lecturer in the Department of Integrated Social Sciences at the University of Media, Arts and Communication – Ghana Institute of Journalism Campus (UniMAC – GIJ), Accra. Her research interest is in the areas of intimate partnerships and family systems. In the last few years, her research has focused on cohabitation in Ghana’s urban spaces. Dr Obeng-Hinneh is currently conducting a study on the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and the upsurge in cases of intimate partner abuse in some selected African countries.

Jorge Paz is a Principal Researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) and Professor in the Department of Economics at University of Salta. He is the Academic Coordinator at the Institute of Labor Studies and Economic Development (IELDE), and the Director of the Master of Science in Economic Development at the University of Salta (UNSA in Spanish). He is a Fellow at the Center of Studies for Human Development (CEDH) at the University of San Andrés, and Member of the research project International National Transfer Accounts (NTA) in the Center for the Economics and Demography of Aging at the University of California at Berkeley. His research areas include labor economics and development.

Margaret J. Penning is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Sociology and long-term research affiliate of the Institute on Aging & Lifelong Health, Population Research Group, and Social Dimensions of Health programs at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Her research interests include aging, health, and health care with a focus on marriage, cohabitation, and family life; social support and caregiving; social isolation, loneliness and mental health;

and health care service utilization and reform. Her current research focuses on issues of age and vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic; the implications of divorce in middle and later life; and inequities in health and well-being in middle and later life. She is a Fellow of the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences and the Gerontological Society of America. She is also the recipient of the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for Contributions to Gerontology and the Distinguished Member Award for Lifetime Achievement in Research from the Canadian Association on Gerontology.

Brienna Perelli-Harris is Professor of Demography at the University of Southampton. She received her PhD in Sociology from the University of Michigan in 2006, held a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the University of Wisconsin, and was a Research Scientist at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock, Germany. Dr Perelli-Harris studies changes in the family in comparative perspective, working with researchers across Europe, the USA, and Australia. Her research uses demographic techniques, advanced quantitative methods, in-depth qualitative approaches, and policy analysis to explore the underlying reasons for the development of new family formation behaviors. In 2011, she received a European Research Council Starting Grant and moved to the University of Southampton. The aim of the ERC grant was to understand the increase in childbearing within cohabitation in industrialized countries using cross-national focus groups and analysis of complex survey data. Currently, she holds an ESRC-funded grant to conduct the Generations and Gender Survey in the UK, including advancing online survey methodology and studying changes in partnership formation in the UK. She also studies demographic change in Ukraine, using survey data to examine subjective well-being among Internally Displaced Persons and qualitative methods to explore perceptions of depopulation and fertility decline in Eastern Ukraine. In 2016, the European Association for Population Studies awarded her the Dirk van de Kaa Award for Social Demography. She also serves as an Associate Editor for *Population Studies*, Family Topic Champion for the UK Household Longitudinal Survey, a member of the Generations and Gender Programme Consortium Board, and a Board Member of the European Consortium for Sociological Research.

Ingmar Rapp is a Research Associate at the Faculty of Social Science at the University of Kaiserslautern-Landau and holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Heidelberg. In his research, he focuses on family sociology, the sociology of health, social inequality, and computational social science. Recent publications in the field of family sociology are: “Mental and physical health in couple relationships: Is it better to live together?” *European Sociological Review*, 36(2020), 303–316 (together with Johannes Stauder). “Partnership Formation in Young and Older Age”, *Journal of Family Issues*, 39 (2018), 3363–3390.

Sharon Sassler received her PhD in Sociology from Brown University in 1995, and joined the Faculty at Cornell University in 2005. She currently serves as the

Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy and is a Professor in the Department of Sociology. A social demographer, Sassler's research examines factors shaping the activities of young adults and their life course transitions into school and work, relationships, and parenthood, and how these transitions vary by gender, race/ethnicity, and social class. Her published research explores various facets of contemporary relationships, including union formation (marriage, cohabitation, and sexual relationships) and transitions into parenthood, and how these are associated with health and emotional well-being, occupational attainment, and wealth. Her 2017 book, *Cohabitation Nation: Gender, Class, and the Remaking of Relationships* (co-authored with Amanda Miller, University of California Press) was the 2018 winner of the Goode Book Award from the American Sociological Association. A second stream of her work examines the retention and advancement of women and underrepresented minorities in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) occupations. She utilizes both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore these topics. Sassler has held leadership positions in the American Sociological Association, the Population Association of America, and is on the board of the Council on Contemporary Families (CCF). She has also served as a Deputy Editor for *The Journal of Marriage and Family* and is a frequent reviewer for a wide range of journals.

Okka Zimmermann is a Professor for Social Work at IU International University in Braunschweig. In parallel, she continues working as a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Institute of Sociology at Technische Universität Braunschweig. Since she started working there in 2010, she has conducted more than 70 classes in the field of Sociology and Social Work. In July 2017, she received her doctorate “with distinction (summa cum laude)” with a thesis on “Dimensions of destandardization.” For her paper “Temporary destandardization of partnership formation and continuous standardization of fertility in three GGS countries” she was awarded the prize for the best PhD paper at the annual conference of the Research Network 13 “Sociology of Families and Intimate Lives” of the European Sociological Association (ESA). Okka Zimmermann has published in several renowned international journal, e.g., *European Sociological Review*, *Advances in Life Course Research*, and *Journal of Family Issues*. A great part of her research focuses on family-related biographies, which she examines using sequence analysis methods (in a comparative perspective and with a special focus on her home country Germany). She has also published several papers on different aspects of motherhood roles and reconciliation of work and family, which are mainly based on qualitative research results. Furthermore, she has contributed to the progress of family research within the German context by providing articles for anthologies and critical reviews of current literature. Before she joined academia, Okka Zimmermann had worked as a project manager for international market research at GfK in Nuremberg and as a development worker for German Development Service in Zambia.

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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-Hinne 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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Sampson Lee Blair
Yongjun Zhang