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Relationship Churning in Emerging Adulthood: On/Off Relationships and Sex with an Ex

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Abstract

We build on the emerging adulthood and marital reconciliation literatures to examine two forms of relationship instability: reconciliations and sex with an ex. Analyzing recent data on young adult daters and cohabitators ($n = 792$), we find that nearly half report a reconciliation (breakup followed by reunion) and over half of those who break up continue a sexual relationship (sex with an ex). In this young adult sample, cohabitators experience greater relationship churning than daters. We describe individual demographic, social psychological, and relationship factors associated with reconciliations and sex with an ex. These findings showcase that young adult relationships are characterized by considerable volatility and add to our theoretical and empirical understanding of stability in intimate relationships in emerging adulthood.

Family researchers typically conceive of “relationship instability” in terms of individuals transitioning from being in a relationship to not being in one. This conceptualization downplays the notion that some relationships are more aptly described as “not together, but not completely broken up” -- a relationship status that is somewhat analogous to marital separations followed by reconciliations. This relationship status of separating and then reconciling is not uncommon among married individuals (Binstock & Thornton, 2003; Bumpass, Castro Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Wineberg, 1996a); due to the relative frequency of separations and reconciliations, Binstock and Thornton have emphasized that intimate unions are best conceived of as dynamic trajectories involving “a heterogeneous and multidirectional array of transitions” (2003: 432). Extending this view, we argue for a more nuanced portrait of young adults' *nonmarital* relationships, which includes two indicators of relationship churning: (1) breaking up and getting back together and (2) having a sexual relationship with an ex-boy/girlfriend.

With the average age of first marriage at an historical highpoint in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), individuals will likely experience a variety of romantic relationships during late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007a; Cherlin, 2009; Cohen & Manning, 2010; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008); most of these will result in breakups and therefore offer the possibility of reconciliations. However, little scholarship has examined breakups and reconciliations outside of the marital context. As such, we know surprisingly little about the prevalence and correlates of these experiences. Therefore, in this paper we focus on describing the features of these unstable relationships; this descriptive exploration is a necessary first step towards developing a theory of intimate relationship instability outside of the marriage context. Due to differences in commitment and investment levels,

we expect that reconciliations will be less common in dating and cohabiting, relative to marital, relationships. Furthermore, as the lines between breaking up and being in a relationship are blurred, sexual relationships may extend across relationship boundaries.

We focus on these issues in emerging adulthood because it is a life stage associated with exploring relationship possibilities (Arnett, 2000; Collins & van Dulmen, 2006) and learning about “role-taking, conflict resolution skills, and ways of viewing relationships” (Arnett, 2007b: 222); we use data from emerging adults to describe dating and cohabiting breakups and reunions. We refer to breaking up and getting back together as ‘reconciliations’ and recognize these reconciliations may be long-lasting or short-term. Additionally, we assess breakups in terms of whether they are followed by the former partners having sex (‘sex with an ex’). Collectively, we term these behaviors to be examples of relationship ‘churning,’ noting the inherent instability that these behaviors bring to romantic relationships. Those in romantic relationships characterized by churning may be having a distinct relational experience from those in more stable unions. Although we limit our examination to two forms of churning in this article (reconciliations and sex with an ex), it is quite possible that there are other behaviors that should also fall under this rubric for theoretical and empirical reasons; the identification and examination of additional churning behaviors, however, is beyond the scope of the present study.

This work contributes to an understanding of intimate relationships in early adulthood by examining the frequency of relationship disruptions as well as the nature of instability in dating and cohabiting relationships in emerging adulthood. Additionally, we explore the relationship correlates of reconciliations and sex with an ex. These findings are important as such forms of relationship churning may influence future relationship trajectories as well as potential exposure to sexual risks.

We determine (1) the prevalence of reconciliations following a break-up and the phenomenon of having sex with an ex and (2) subsequently document associations between demographic, social psychological, and relationship quality characteristics and these dimensions of relationship churning. We answer these questions using the unique set of data available in the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study, which includes information about on/off relationships as well as an extended set of individual and relationship characteristics; in all, our sample includes 792 young adults' reports of their current or most recent romantic relationship.

Background

Many dating relationships proceed in fits and starts, rather than following a linear path that leads to either a breakup or deeper commitment. This is commonly how we think about adolescent relationships. Arnett describes romantic relationships during the adolescent years as “tentative and transient” (Arnett, 2000: 473). Also, prior research has documented that when “casual sex” encounters happen during adolescence, they are likely to be between exes (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). However, we tend to assume that these relationship patterns change in emerging adulthood, becoming more stable as relationship commitment deepens with age.

Many studies examining the nature and progression of relationships among young adults stop observing respondents once they experience a breakup (see, for example, Arriaga, 2001; Sprecher, 1999). While these studies are instructive for conceptualizing the form and meaning of romantic relationships among young adults, they provide a limited lens on relationships. This is because the data are censored from further inclusion if the period of breakup spans a data collection point and excludes the possibility of observing the on-going relationship experiences of those who later reconcile.

Snyder states that “Learning how to form, maintain, and gracefully end romantic and sexual relationships with others is arguably one of the critical developmental tasks of adolescence and early adulthood” (2000: 161). It is during emerging adulthood that intimate relationships come to be one of the primary emotional supports and attachments in people's lives, joining or even supplanting relationships with parents and friends (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Meeus, Branje, van der Valk, & de Wied, 2007). By emerging adulthood, Arnett (2000) argues, people begin to look for a longer-term partner, rather than someone in whom they are only immediately interested. Issues of relationship disruptions and sex with an ex are essential to understand because they speak to the abilities of young adults to both “maintain” and “gracefully end” relationships (Snyder, 2000) and to undertake the roles and develop the skills (Arnett, 2007b) that are of increasing importance at this stage in the life course.

Understanding these relationship patterns is also important because they can affect relationship trajectories going forward. Young adults who reconcile may be prone to a behavior pattern that involves cycling through relationship formation and dissolution. For example, Wineberg (1999) reports that reconciliations in a first marriage are a factor hastening the pace of second marriages. Furthermore, having sex with an ex may be problematic because former partners can have difficulty moving on from an old relationship or building new romantic attachments while preoccupied by a connection with an ex (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Having sex with an ex also may be a risky sexual behavior because former partners may not take the STI and pregnancy precautions they would in other sexual encounters outside of a monogamous relationship because these encounters are occurring between intimately familiar partners. Thus disruptions and reconciliations, as well as having sex with an ex, are part of ongoing relationships, neither ended nor stable, but rather marked by churning.

Reconciliations

Much of what we know about relationship disruptions comes from studies of marital relationships. Estimates of reconciliations among married couples vary, and much of the literature is dated and may not reflect contemporary experiences. However, studies consistently demonstrate that reconciliations occur with some frequency across the population. Estimates of married couples who will experience at least one period of separation followed by reconciliation during the course of their relationship range from 10 to 17 percent (Kitson, 1985; Wineberg & McCarthy, 1994); and forty percent of separated married couples *attempt* reconciliation (Bumpass, Castro Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Wineberg, 1996a). In early work on this topic, Morgan (1988) reported that 15 percent of married couples remain reconciled three to four years later. Using more recently collected data, Wineberg (1994, 1996b) found that one year after reconciliation one-quarter of black women and one-third of white women remained with their spouses. Reconciliation attempts, however, are not randomly distributed across the population. Wineberg (1995) shows that older and more educated women and those with longer marriages were less likely to attempt a reconciliation when their first marriages ended. In addition, men and those whose partners initiated the separation were more likely to desire a reconciliation (Doherty, Willoughby, & Peterson, 2011). Although they receive relatively minimal research attention, marital reconciliation attempts are not rarities; the research that does exist gives us some basis for hypothesizing about the patterns we may see in the characteristics of those who reconcile in their nonmarital relationships.

Couples in less committed relationships may be less likely to reconcile following a breakup. Findings based on white respondents who were young adults in the 1980s indicate that cohabiting couples are less likely to reconcile than married couples (Binstock & Thornton, 2003). Following this logic, daters, relative to cohabitators, should be even less likely to

reconcile after breaking up, given that they have invested less (not having a shared living space) and are potentially less committed than cohabitators. However, there is no recent study of a racially diverse, young adult sample and none that specifically compares cohabiting and dating relationships with respect to the incidence of reconciliations.

Studies that consider relationship disruptions among college student samples tend to be limited in generalizability, but do document the fluidity of young adult dating relationships (e.g., Bevan, Cameron, & Dillow, 2003; Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009; Dillow, Morse, & Afifi, 2008). Dailey et al. (2009) studied college students who were in on/off relationships, finding that they were together for longer than those who simply broke up and that the disruptions in their relationships typically lasted one to two months. As couples experienced more disruptions, they were likely to report less satisfaction, lower commitment, lower passion, more uncertainty about the relationship, more ineffective conflict, and greater aggression toward partners. Yet qualitative evidence suggests that the reasons on/off daters give for their temporary breakups are comparable to those reasons provided by individuals who break up without reconciling, namely lower relationship satisfaction and problems with conflict (Dailey, Rossetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2009). Many, however, describe on-going contact with their exes after breaking up and report being uncertain of the status of their relationships. Dailey et al. speculate that it is these post-breakup features of the relationship that may lead to reconciling rather than remaining broken up; questions remain, however, about why couples whose relationships are as marked by negativity as Dailey and colleagues find would be drawn back to the relationship – asking whether positive qualities of these unstable unions lead some couples to reunite is therefore important. For example, the partners may have reached a level of familiarity and comfort with one another that would be difficult to replicate with new partners with whom they come in contact.

Unfortunately, these studies are not generalizable to the general population, as Dailey and colleagues note (Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009: 27), since their college student sample is not representative of the broader emerging adult population; in 2008, for example, only 41% of 18-24 year olds were enrolled in college (“State of Metropolitan America,” 2010). Further, these studies do not give us a complete picture of relationship churning, as they focus exclusively on reconciliations and do not account for sexual encounters between exes (that is, a former couple may have sex, but not officially get back together, therefore they have reunited, but not reconciled). Nonetheless, these studies of on/off relationships among college students do give us a basis for hypothesizing about the factors that may be associated with reconciliations in young adult romantic relationships.

Current Investigation

In this paper we focus on two relationship behaviors that exemplify relationship churning. These are relationship reconciliations and a couple having sex after formally ending their dating relationship. We refer to reconciliations and having sex with an ex as relationship churning because these are experiences in which a couple is neither stably together nor stably broken up. We focus on nonmarital relationships, in part, because a key distinction between nonmarital relationships (dating and cohabitation) and marriage is that marriage is a contract governed by default exit rules (that is, a legal divorce) (Nock, 2009) and typically carries with it greater structural commitments that can impede dissolution (Cherlin, 2009). We observe the frequencies of these relationship churning behaviors among young adults and describe the demographic, social psychological, and relationship characteristics that are associated with each. Relatively little is known about these behaviors in a nonmarital context, therefore gaining a descriptive understanding of the nature of relationship churning and those who engage in these behaviors is essential. In particular, knowledge is quite

limited on (1) how common or normative these behaviors are during this period, and (2) what correlates are associated with variability in these behaviors.

Prior work has shown racial differences in marital reconciliation behaviors. Wineberg and his colleagues have found that while black women are more likely to experience a marital reconciliation, these are less likely to last, compared with those of white women (Wineberg, 1994, 1996b; Wineberg & McCarthy, 1994). We expect that black young adults may, therefore, be more likely to experience reconciliations in their dating and cohabiting relationships. Two aspects of family background may also contribute to young adults' relationship stability: natal family structure and socioeconomic status. Those raised outside two-parent households and those from more socioeconomically disadvantaged families may be more prone to experiencing relationship instability (McLanahan, 2004; Teachman, 2002).

Research on social psychological indicators finds that those with low levels of self-efficacy or sense of control are more likely to be in and remain in poor quality marriages (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991; Waite et al., 2002); similarly, they may be more likely to unsuccessfully end dating or cohabiting relationships. We expect that respondents with a greater sense of control may tend to be more definitive in their relationship choices, and thus may be less likely to experience a reconciliation or to have sex with an ex.

The most proximate set of factors associated with relationship churning is relationship characteristics. Couples with longer lasting relationships may more often experience relationship churning. While duration is a relatively objective measure, we recognize that those with relationship churning may face more challenges in responding to questions about duration; we explore the association between duration and churning while being mindful that churning may create difficulties for both couples and researchers in defining and measuring relationship length.

Previous qualitative research on disrupted relationships has found that the predominant reason couples give for breaking up is that they were arguing or fighting a lot (Dailey, Rossetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2009). Additionally, those in disrupted relationships report receiving less validation from their partners (Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009). Simpson (1987) finds that closeness between partners is predictive of stability in dating relationships and of greater emotional distress following breakup. Greater intimacy may therefore be associated with a higher likelihood of couples reuniting, drawn back together by their closeness and to ward off their distress following the breakup; this may be the type of positive relationship quality that can help us to understand couples' decisions to reunite despite other negative relationship characteristics. Finally, Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck, and Clark (2009) find that those with lasting dating relationships show higher levels of commitment than those who experience disruptions. Therefore, we expect that those with higher levels of conflict, less validation, greater intimacy, and less commitment will be more likely to experience relationship churning. In sum, we examine the strength of associations between relationship churning behaviors and demographic, social psychological, and relationship quality characteristics.

Data and Methods

The Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS) is based on a stratified, random sample of 1,321 students registered for the 7th, 9th, and 11th grades in Lucas County, Ohio, an urban, metropolitan area largely consisting of the city of Toledo. Incorporating over-samples of black and Hispanic youths, the initial sample was devised by the National Opinion Research Center and was drawn from the enrollment records of 62 schools from seven school districts. Respondents completed interview questionnaires at home using laptop computers, and school attendance was not a requirement for inclusion in the sample. Census data indicate

that this sample shares similar socio-demographic characteristics with the Toledo MSA in terms of education, median family income, marital status, and racial distribution. In the present study, we rely on the data from Wave 4 respondents who were interviewed in 2006 when they were 17-24 years old. These data are well suited for these analyses because the respondents were recently interviewed and the TARS is one of the few data sources which includes information on reconciliations and sexual behavior with exes. Our data are cross-sectional; as such, our goal is not to predict breakups or having sex with an ex, but rather to provide a descriptive portrait of relationship churning.

The initial analytic sample is comprised of those who are currently or have recently (within the last two years) been in a dating or cohabiting relationship ($n = 792$) for a total of 594 daters and 198 cohabitators.ⁱ That is, those who have not dated anyone in the past two years (or not dated anyone seriously) and are therefore *not at risk* for breaking up and getting back together are excluded. Respondents report on their current or most recent focal relationship. We choose to include both those reporting on current and previous relationships because prior research has shown that the boundaries defining the end of a relationship are quite fluid. For example, among adolescents who report having had sex outside a romantic relationship, nearly two-thirds say they did so with an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006).

Respondents are directly asked about having had sex with an ex with regard to their current or most recent relationship; that is, have they experienced a breakup and, if so, did they have sex with their ex. In examining having sex with an ex, only those who report ever having had sexⁱⁱ and who have broken up with someone in the past two years are included in the sample ($n = 427$); those who report never having had sex and who have not dated or who are stably dating one partner are excluded. Someone who has not dated in the past two years or who is currently dating could still have sex with an ex (by sleeping with an ex from more than two years ago or cheating, respectively); however, we do not examine these alternative forms of having sex with an ex in the present analyses. We examine more current relationship experiences and sex with an ex that occurs after a breakup or during a disruption in that relationship. This is a total of 322 daters and 105 cohabitators.

Measures

Dependent variables—We rely on two indicators of relationship churning, reconciliations and sex with an ex. For respondents who are reporting on a current relationship, those who report having experienced a breakup in the past with their current partner are coded as having a *reconciliation* (that is, a disruption followed by a reunion). For those who are reporting on a previous relationship, we code respondents as having experienced a reconciliation if they report having broken up with their ex more than once. Respondents who indicate they have broken up in their focal relationship at least one time are asked if they ever had sex with this ex-partner while broken up (0 = no, 1 = yes); this is our measure of having *sex with an ex*.

Independent variables—The individual indicators include gender (*male* = 1), respondent's *age*, and race/ethnicity (*white*, *black*, *Hispanic*, and *other/mixed* race). The

ⁱWe exclude the 59 married couples from this sample for two reasons. First, they are representative only of couples who marry early, as all have married before the national average age at first marriage; consequently results could not be generalized to all married couples or compared against results from previous studies of married couples that used older samples. Second, this is a fairly small sample of married couples, making it difficult to detect the association between various factors and their breakup behaviors.

ⁱⁱRespondents are considered to have ever had sex if they report ever having had oral, vaginal, or anal sex. We use the most expansion definition of sex here because when respondents report whether or not they ever had sex with their ex, the type of sex is not defined in the question. Therefore, those who have never had vaginal sex (i.e., who are 'virgins') might still report having had sex with an ex if their definition of sex includes oral or anal sex. 92.8% of respondents overall report having had sex under this definition.

family structure the respondent lived in as a teenager, at Wave 1, is based on a four category measure (*two-parent, single-parent, stepparent, or an alternative arrangement with no parents*). Because many young adults have not completed their educations or launched their careers, we use the respondent's parent's level of education as a proxy for family socioeconomic status (parents are classified as having *less than a high school degree, a high school degree, some college, or a college degree*); this was measured by parental self-reports at Wave 1 when respondents were 12-19 years old.

We use the respondent's report of the length of the romantic relationship as a measure of duration; responses range from 1-8, from less than a week to a year or more. The primary relationship status measure indicates whether the respondent is in a cohabiting or dating relationship. We also include a dummy variable indicating whether the focal relationship is ongoing (current) or ended.

We include a measure of a respondent's *sense of control*, which is constructed following Mirowsky and Ross' (1990) formulation.ⁱⁱⁱ Respondents rate their agreement (strongly disagree to strongly agree) to the following items: I can do just about anything I really set my mind to; I have little control over the bad things that happen to me; My misfortunes are the result of mistakes I have made; I am responsible for my failures; The really good things that happen to me are mostly luck; There's no sense in planning a lot – if something good is going to happen it will; Most of my problems are due to bad breaks; and, I am responsible for my own success. A higher score is indicative of a higher sense of personal control over successes and failures.

We examine both negative and positive aspects of the relationship. We measure *relationship conflict* using a scale of how often (never to very often) the respondent reports she and her partner: have disagreements or arguments, and yell or shout at each other (alpha = .83); a higher score indicates more conflict. Receiving *validation* from a partner is captured by a scale of two items: partner makes me feel attractive and partner makes me feel good about myself (alpha = .81); a higher score indicates receiving more validation. *Intimate self-disclosure* is measured by how often (never to very often) the respondent reports talking about the following topics with her partner: something really bad that happened; her home life and family; her private thoughts and feelings; and, her future (alpha = .91); a higher score indicates more frequent disclosure. *Commitment* is measured by how strongly on a five-point scale the respondent agrees that she “may not want to be with [partner] a few years from now” for those currently in a relationship or that she “didn't want to be with [partner] long term” for those reporting on an ended relationship; we code the variable so that a higher score indicates stronger commitment.

Analysis

We present bivariate distributions of both types of relationship churning for key independent variables. We next estimate a series of multivariate models that control for basic demographic characteristics and include relationship duration.^{iv} The analysis of both churning behaviors relies on logistic regression models and we present odds ratios and standard errors. The last table presents the relationship between the churning behaviors and sense of control as well as the various relationship characteristics. We follow this strategy because the data are cross-sectional and we showcase how the relationship qualities are related to relationship churning but recognize we are not able to estimate predictive models.^v

ⁱⁱⁱThis formulation is not a simple scale, therefore no alpha value is available (see Mirowsky & Ross, 1990, for further information on the construction of the variable).

^{iv}The associations between the demographic variables and relationship churning are similar with and without duration in the model.

Results

Table 1 displays the descriptive characteristics for the overall sample, for those who report ever reconciling with their current or most recent partner, and for those who report having had sex with their current or most recent partner during a breakup. The majority of this sample is white, and the sample is fairly evenly divided between male and female respondents. Just less than half of respondents lived in two-parent households, a quarter in single-parent households, a fifth in stepparent households, and only five percent lived in other living arrangements as adolescents. Twelve percent of respondents have a parent with less than a high school education, while just under a third of the sample has a parent with a high school diploma, another third has a parent with some education beyond high school, and just under a quarter has a parent with a college degree. The average length of a romantic relationship is in the six to twelve months category.

Across the sample, the average number of relationship reconciliations is 1.096 (SD = 1.907). Among young adults who experienced at least one disruption the average number was 2.445 (SD = 2.195), demonstrating that for those who do experience a reconciliation, this is not usually a one-time event. Table 1 shows that approximately 45 percent of young adults experience a relationship reconciliation, indicating this is a common experience. Reconciliations are more common in all non-white groups; those who reconcile are more likely to be black and to have been raised outside a two-parent family, and less likely to have a parent who graduated college than those who have not broken up and gotten back together. The relationships of those who reconcile are longer than those who have not.

Similar proportions of men and women have had sex with an ex. Those who have had sex with an ex are more likely to be older, black, and from a stepfamily, and less likely to be from a two-parent family and have a parent with a college degree than those who have not. The relationships of young adults who had sex with an ex are longer than those who have not.

More than half (57 percent) of those who experience reconciliations also report having had sex with this ex; likewise, 88 percent of those who report having had sex with their ex also say they have broken up and reconciled with this partner. Taken together 48 percent have experienced some form of relationship ‘churning,’ while 24 percent have experienced both forms. Overall the findings indicate that relationship churning is a common occurrence among young adults, with some subgroups experiencing this back and forth dynamic more often than others.^{vi}

Table 2 displays the results of logistic regression multivariate models for relationship reconciliations and sex with an ex. Gender, age, and parental education are not associated with relationship reconciliations. Black young adults are significantly more likely to experience relationship reconciliations than whites. Two of the family background variables are significantly associated with relationship reconciliations, with young adults from stepfamilies and ‘other’ families having higher odds of experiencing reconciliations. The duration of the relationship is positively associated with higher odds of experiencing reconciliations.

^vBecause the social psychological and relationship characteristics are measured concurrently to relationship churning, we have a potential endogeneity problem. We are not able to use Wave 3 relationship characteristics to predict Wave 4 relationship outcomes due to the time that has elapsed between waves (two to three years) and the relatively short duration of young adults' romantic relationships.

^{vi}Additional results (not shown) demonstrate that the majority of cohabitators and of young adults who are black or Hispanic have had sex with their ex during a breakup.

The second column in Table 2 presents the odds ratios of having sex with an ex. Male and female respondents share similar odds of having sex with an ex. Older respondents are more likely to have sex with an ex. Whites, blacks, and Hispanics share similar odds of experiencing sex with an ex. Young adults raised in stepparent families are significantly more likely to report having sex with an ex than those raised by two parents. Longer relationship duration is associated with greater odds of sex with an ex. Finally, having experienced a reconciliation in the relationship is related to greater odds of sex with an ex.

Table 3 presents the associations between relationship churning (reconciliations and sex with an ex) and relationship status, relationship type, sense of control, and specific relationship qualities, respectively. These are presented as associations because we recognize potential issues with the time-ordering of our observations of relationship qualities and churning; we use t-tests to test for significant differences between categories. Descriptively, those who are currently in a relationship compose nearly three-quarters of our sample, compared to those who are reporting on ended relationships. Daters make up three-quarters and cohabitators compose one-quarter of the sample.

Examining the characteristics of those who reconcile, there are no significant differences by current relationship status or sense of control. However, those who have reconciled, compared with those who have not, are more likely to be cohabitators. The relationship factors are also associated with reconciliations. Respondents who report more relationship conflict, lower validation in the relationship, more frequent intimate self-disclosure, and less commitment to their relationships experience reconciliations more often.

Having sex with an ex is significantly more common among those who are currently in a relationship and among cohabitators. Sense of control is not associated with sex with an ex, however other relationship factors appear to be associated with having this experience. Those who have had sex with an ex, compared with those who have not, report significantly more relationship conflict, frequent intimate self-disclosure, and greater relationship commitment.

Taken together we find that living in a cohabiting relationship, higher levels of conflict, and more frequent intimate self-disclosure are associated with both types of relationship churning, as are being raised in a stepfamily and having a longer duration relationship. The commonalities in the factors associated with reconciliations and sex with an ex, as well as the overlap in the groups who experience reconciliations and sex with an ex, support the idea that these behaviors represent a common type of relationship pattern: churning.

Discussion

Relationship churning appears to be a common part of the romantic relationship experience in emerging adulthood. About half of the young adults in this sample have experienced at least one reconciliation in their present or most recent relationship (and just under one-quarter have experienced more than one reconciliation). Half of cohabitators and the majority of young adults who are black, Hispanic, or of other/mixed race have experienced at least one disruption in their present or most recent relationship. Likewise, just over half (57%) of the young adults who have ever reconciled with their focal partner report having had sex with this ex. In fact, the majority of cohabitators and young adults who are black or Hispanic have had sex with their ex during a breakup.

In contrast with expectations based on previous research, the frequency of reconciliations among these young adult daters and cohabitators is much higher than that observed among married couples in other studies (Binstock & Thornton, 2003; Bumpass, Castro Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Wineberg, 1996a); the nature of these dating and cohabiting relationships may

mean these partners are more willing to break up under less extreme circumstances, making the possibility of reconciliation more likely.

Generally, these breakup behaviors are common among all young adults; although certain sociodemographic groups are disproportionately represented among those who experience churning, reconciliations and sex with an ex are not exclusive to any one subgroup. In line with expectations from previous research, racial minorities are more likely to experience churning, and those who reconcile are more likely to report higher conflict relationships, less validation, and lower levels of commitment; the hypothesis that greater self-control would be associated with a lower likelihood of churning was not confirmed, however, which suggests this pattern of relationship behavior may derive more from features of the relationship, rather than individual social psychological characteristics. We gain some insight into why these couples may be drawn back together, despite the negative qualities of their relationship; those who experience churning report a greater frequency of the positive characteristic of intimate self-disclosure in their relationships. While Dailey, Pfiester, et al. (2009) suggest it is the characteristics of the breakup that lead some couples to reconcile, we see here that the positive qualities of the relationship may play a role in drawing people back together.

Because our analyses only use data on respondents' focal relationships (present or most recent relationships), we are likely under-representing the likelihood of young adults having *ever* experienced a reconciliation or had sex with an ex. Furthermore, given the relatively brief duration of these relationships (less than a year long, on average), the widespread nature of relationship churning indicates that these are not experiences that accumulate over a long period of time, but rather happen fairly rapidly in the relationship.

The likelihood of cohabitators who break up having sex with an ex is much higher than that of daters, which may be related to them sharing a common living space (proximity may equal opportunity) or may be representative of relatively greater levels of enmeshment. Additionally, those who experience reconciliations are more likely to have sex with an ex. They may break up, but continue having sex, and then get back together. This relationship churning appears to be driven, in part, by both negative and positive aspects of the relationship. Those who reconcile are experiencing more relationship conflict, which may be why they break up in the first place, however they also report more intimate self-disclosure, which may prevent them from wanting to fully sever ties.

Although we use a larger and more representative sample than many previous studies (which focus on convenience samples of college students), we are also limited in the generalizations about young adults' relationship reconciliations that we can make based on TARS data. First, because the data are drawn exclusively from one area of the country, we must be cautious about generalizing to other regions. Second, we rely on cross-sectional reports, which does not allow us to run complete multivariate models with controls for social psychological and relationship characteristics. Therefore, we are limited to offering a portrait of the descriptive differences between these relationship experiences. A future study with shorter intervals between data collection waves could allow for the testing of causal models that face fewer potential endogeneity problems, showing how personal and relationship qualities at Time 1 affect the likelihood of reconciliation or sex with an ex at Time 2. Third, because we only have data from one member of a couple, we are only capturing one person's perspective on the positive and negative aspects of the relationship and only one person's personal and social psychological characteristics, which may impact the relationship and its outcome. The insights the study provides are still useful, however, particularly because Sprecher (1994) finds that there are high levels of couple agreement

over who was responsible for and who had control over a breakup, as well as the reasons for the breakup.

That black young adults are more likely to experience reconciliations may be in line with relationship behaviors later in life. Cohabiting and married black couples break up at higher rates than do whites (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Brown, 2000; Manning & Smock, 1995). Future research using contemporary samples should examine whether black cohabitators (in later adult life) and spouses are more likely to attempt reconciliations following separations compared with other racial groups. Also, we should ask if the higher likelihood of relationship disruptions followed by reconciliations among black young adults is similar to the greater likelihood of black married couples to separate but not divorce (within three years of separating, 55 percent of blacks have divorced compared to 91 percent of whites (Cherlin, 1998; see also McAdoo & Young, 2008; Raley & Bumpass, 2003)). That is, to what extent is separation without divorce a continuation of a relationship pattern of churning established in emerging adulthood?

In his studies of marital reconciliations, Wineberg (1994, 1996a, 1996b, 1999) suggests that the women who attempt reconciliations may do so because they are less advantaged and therefore more in need of support from a husband. However, we see frequent reconciliations in our sample of young adult daters, who are presumably less likely than married adults to be staying in or ending relationships for economic reasons. This indicates that other factors beyond economic need may well be at play in people's decisions to pursue reconciliations, whether in a marital or dating relationship. Arnett (2007b) points out that it is during this period of emerging adulthood that people are learning the roles and skills they will employ in their lives going forward. Therefore, it is also possible that those who attempt marital reconciliations are following a relational pattern established in earlier life that involved churning in dating and cohabiting relationships.

Even though churning is a common experience in young adult relationships, there may be risks associated with it. Having sex with an ex could put young adults in a position of technically being broken up, but still emotionally connected. Those who stay in contact following a breakup continue to feel the pain of the breakup more intensely and may have more difficulty moving on (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Previous research on college students' relationships post-breakup finds that those who have sex with their ex mostly described this as a "difficult or negative event" (Koenig Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008: 43). Although sex with an ex is a fairly typical part of the breakup process, it may have negative emotional impacts.

Having sex with an ex may constitute a health risk if the couple maintains their contraceptive practices from their romantic relationship during the time they are broken up and having sex. Previous research has found that condom use is high at the beginning of relationships and drops over time, as partners begin to feel they know each other well and trust each other, and as they switch to using oral contraceptives (Civic, 2000; Gold, Karmiloff-Smith, Skinner, & Morton, 1992; Hammer, Fisher, Fitzgerald, & Fisher, 1996; Keller, 1993; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). These factors of knowing a partner well and having available oral contraceptives may not change when a couple breaks up. Therefore, a couple who relies solely on oral contraceptives when they are monogamous (and therefore seemingly at less risk of sharing an STI) may still do so during their sexual encounters while they are technically broken up. However, because they are technically broken up, one or both may also be having sex with someone else during the disruption. In fact, in our sample only 37.0% of those who had sex with an ex *did not* have sex with someone else and/or report their partner had sex with someone else during the breakup (results not shown); the majority of sex with ex experiences do not appear to be

monogamous. Having multiple sexual partners is associated with an increased STI risk as well as poorer mental health (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994).

These potentially risky sexual behaviors are occurring in the context of an on-going relationship for those who have sex during a breakup, which means we as researchers must rethink our understanding of “casual” sex. Although sex is taking place outside of a romantic relationship, it is certainly far from what we might think of as “casual.” Part of the reason this sexual behavior may be particularly risky is because it is not casual, meaning that people may be less likely to take the precautions they would with a less familiar partner. Future studies of sexual behavior and risk-taking must closely examine the relationship context of “casual” sex.

Previous research has shown that people who experience multiple relationship transitions, like serial cohabitators and those in higher-order marriages, are more likely to see their subsequent relationships end (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Kreider, 2005; Lichter & Qian, 2008; Teachman, 2003). On one hand, if it is the experience of relationship instability that makes these negative outcomes more likely, then relationship churning in young adulthood may also be positively associated with ending a dating relationship, cohabiting union, or marriage in later life. On the other hand, however, if it is the fact that serial cohabitation or marriage normalizes the experience of relationship dissolution, then relationship disruptions may not have a similar effect because those who experience reconciliations, as opposed to actual breakups, are not necessarily coming to see that everything is alright and that they can successfully move on after a relationship ends (that is, they are not similarly “desensitized” to breakups). Future research should explore whether those who experience relationship churning in emerging adulthood are more prone to such instability in subsequent dating, cohabiting, or marriage relationships.

The common nature of these relationship churning behaviors serves as an important reminder that the definitions we as researchers impose on the relationships we study may not be entirely accurate. Given the likelihood of couples going through periods of disruption, during which they may continue having sex, our narrow categories (e.g., together or not, exact start and end dates of relationships, etc.) may not be reflective of the reality of many young adults' relationship experiences. It appears that, for many, relationships may go through periods of being undefined or much more fluid than our survey data would typically lead us to believe.

Future research should explore how couples who reconcile and those whose breakups include sexual encounters think about the length of their relationship. For example, do they start counting again from zero after every disruption? The ways respondents report the length of their relationships should influence how we think about and interpret duration measures.

Lastly, we should continue to explore the frequency of reconciliations, and related sexual behavior, across the life course among those who are dating, cohabiting, or married. These examinations should make use of recent samples of adults that include multiple racial groups. This study indicates that this research attention may benefit from a focus on the influence of both positive and negative relationship characteristics on relationship churning. We can see if the patterns of disruption found in the present study are unique to dating and cohabiting relationships in emerging adulthood or, rather, are a defining feature of all romantic relationships for at least a portion of the population across the life course.

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Table 1
Descriptive characteristics by reconciliation and sex with ex status

	Overall (n=792)		Reconciliations (n=792)		Sex with Ex (n=427)	
	Yes (n=437)	No (n=355)	Yes (n=216)	No (n=211)	Yes (n=216)	No (n=211)
Male	47.1%	48.1%	46.3%	51.7%		
Female	52.9%	52.0%	53.7%	48.3%		
Age	20.364 (1.760)	20.302 (1.748)	20.648 (1.714)	20.142 (1.729)		
White	63.6%	71.2%	55.1%	62.6%		
Black	24.5%	18.5%	33.8%	25.6%		
Hispanic	5.9%	6.8%	6.0%	5.2%		
Other/mixed race	5.8%	5.0%	5.1%	6.2%		
Lived with two parents	49.0%	40.3%	36.6%	50.2%		
Lived with single parent	26.4%	29.6%	31.5%	27.5%		
Lived with stepparent	18.3%	21.1%	22.7%	15.2%		
Other living arrangement	5.1%	7.9%	7.9%	6.2%		
Parent – no HS degree	12.1%	13.8%	15.3%	10.9%		
Parent – HS degree	31.3%	31.0%	32.4%	28.4%		
Parent – some college	32.8%	34.7%	33.3%	34.6%		
Parent – college	22.2%	17.5%	16.2%	23.7%		
Relationship duration	6.779 (1.650)	7.245 (1.394)	7.259 (1.336)	6.578 (1.612)		
Reconciliation experience [^]	44.8%		88.4%	68.7%		
Sex with ex experience [*]	28.0%	57.4%	29.0%			

[^] Respondent reports ever having broken up and gotten back together in this relationship.

^{*} Respondent reports ever having sex with an ex in this relationship.

Table 2
Logistic regressions predicting ever experiencing a reconciliation or ever having sex with an ex, in the current or most recent relationship

	Disruption (n=792) O.R. SE	Sex with Ex (n=427) O.R. SE
Male	1.142 (0.177)	0.946 (0.197)
Age	0.992 (0.044)	1.149* (0.070)
Black	1.843** (0.360)	1.086 (0.280)
Hispanic	1.586 (0.528)	0.866 (0.394)
Other race	1.834 [†] (0.603)	0.753 (0.343)
Lived with single parent	1.429 [†] (0.278)	1.402 (0.369)
Lived with stepparent	1.542* (0.318)	1.810* (0.526)
Other living arrangement	2.835** (1.100)	1.278 (0.561)
Parent – no HS degree	0.999 (0.259)	1.187 (0.410)
Parent – some college	0.972 (0.182)	0.846 (0.212)
Parent – college degree	0.768 (0.165)	0.739 (0.222)
Relationship duration	1.435*** (0.077)	1.194* (0.092)
Reconciliation experience		2.182** (0.649)
Pseudo R-squared	0.087	0.077

[†] p < .10,

* p < .05,

** p < .01,

*** p < .001; reference category: gender (female), race (white), family living arrangement (two-parent family), parental education (high school degree), and relationship status (broken up, dating)

O.R. = odds ratio; S. E. = standard error

Table 3
Descriptive relationship characteristics by reconciliation and sex with ex status

	Overall (n=792)	Reconciliation (n=792)		Sex with Ex (n=427)	
		Yes (n=437)	No (n=355)	Yes (n=216)	No (n=211)
Currently in relationship	72.0%	69.3%	74.1%	58.8% ^a	50.7%
Currently broken up	28.0%	30.7%	25.9%	41.2% ^a	49.3%
Dating	75.0%	72.1% ^a	77.4%	64.8% ^a	86.3%
Cohabiting	25.0%	27.9% ^a	22.7%	35.2% ^a	13.7%
Sense of control	0.646 (0.421)	0.623 (0.430)	0.666 (0.412)	0.616 (0.440)	0.657 (0.411)
Conflict frequency	5.062 (1.887)	5.792 ^a (1.915)	4.469 (1.643)	5.894 ^a (1.891)	5.213 (1.927)
Validation	8.044 (1.558)	7.896 ^a (1.565)	8.165 (1.543)	7.792 (1.549)	7.943 (1.545)
Intimate self-disclosure	15.692 (3.647)	15.983 ^a (3.447)	15.456 (3.790)	16.181 ^a (3.183)	15.128 (3.907)
Commitment	3.663 (1.184)	3.549 ^a (1.210)	3.755 (1.156)	3.593 ^a (1.201)	3.351 (1.242)

^aSignificantly different than those who did not experience any disruptions/have sex with their ex at or above the 0.05 level.