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Relationship Dissolution as a Life Stage Transition: Effects on Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors

In this paper, with the use of linear regressions to investigate how relationship dissolution affects sexual attitudes and behaviors, the authors address the stereotype that newly single people seek multiple sexual partners. Although the newly single people surveyed did obtain new sexual partners, the rate at which they acquired new partners did not support the stereotype. Specifically, men with custody of their children seemed oriented toward finding a steady partner. Additionally, men and women with low incomes reported relatively high rates of partner acquisition after relationship dissolution. The high rates reported by disadvantaged groups may be more directly related to familial instability accompanying poverty than to cultural characteristics associated with income or race. We argue that a life stage model with categorical stages in a rigid, anachronistic progression provides insufficient means to gain an understanding of newly single people.

Newly single people are often imagined to be wildly sexual, seeking multiple partners out of a sense of freedom or out of desperation for validation. This stereotype resonates in part because, of all dimensions of identity, sexual identity is one of the most extensively structured by life stage

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requirements (Bancroft, 2000; Simon, 1996). Life stage transitions such as divorce are increasingly common in contemporary America, as is the experience of being newly single after the dissolution of a nonmarital cohabitational relationship (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; Seltzer, 2000). Such transitions require adjustment to new (although sometimes familiar) identities and circumstances (Amato, 2000). Indeed, sexuality is a central component of the intimate relationship(s) involved in divorce and divorce adjustment. Ending a marriage or cohabitational relationship, therefore, should mean a transition to different evaluations and expressions of sexuality. Furthermore, because this is a transition process, one might expect distinct phases. Theoretically, such evidence could inform a life stage transition model.

Studies have carefully examined dating behavior and social participation after divorce; however, most of these studies have not investigated how relationship dissolution is related to specifically sexual attitudes and behaviors. We used a social constructionist theory of sexuality and a social structure theory of gender in which gender is an accomplishment, as opposed to a static trait (West & Fenstermaker, 1995), to explore how the dissolution of a cohabitational or marital relationship contributes to the permissiveness of sexual attitudes, the frequency of sex, and the acquisition of new sexual partners. These three standard sexual variables allow for meaningful comparisons with other research. Furthermore, they tap

into important dimensions of sexuality. First, an examination of sexual attitudes measures the extent to which a life stage transition is accompanied by changes in evaluative thinking about sexuality. Second, the frequency of sex and the rate of acquisition of new partners are suggestive of the nature of the relationship(s) the respondent is experiencing. A respondent with a large number of sexual partners and a low sexual frequency is unlikely to belong to a monogamous dating relationship. A respondent with a high sexual frequency but a low rate of acquisition of new sexual partners is likely to be in a monogamous dating relationship. A respondent for whom both measures are low will appear to be largely abstaining from sexual relationships. A respondent for whom both measures are high is perhaps maintaining one or more ongoing relationships and acquiring new sexual partners as well. In conjunction, the three dependent variables provide a broad picture of the sexuality of newly uncoupled people.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this project, we drew on the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective to understand the consequences of both marital and cohabitational dissolutions. According to this perspective, the end of a relationship is a process (as opposed to an event) characterized by continuous and intermittent stressors (Amato, 2000). The immediate crisis of separation is followed by a period of acute adjustment that is ultimately resolved. The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective contrasts with a selection perspective, whereby "... the adjustment problems frequently observed among the divorced might be present early in the marriage or might predate the marriage" (Amato, 2000, p. 1273) and whereby it is assumed that divorce results from the maladaptive characteristics of the people involved in a relationship. The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, although it acknowledges that nonacute consequences of divorce (such as economic instability) may linger, more precisely captures relationship dissolution as a life stage transition.

In most studies, divorce is framed as a social problem. This framing has driven empirical research to examine the divorce experience for negative consequences such as economic instability, poor parenting, and reduced mental and physical health. Because *divorced* is a categorical status, its negative consequences are considered to continue as long as an individual retains the status or

continues to reflect the maladaptive traits that led to divorce in the first place. We explicitly reframe divorce as a life stage transition that is temporary and may include positive and negative experiences and outcomes. Thus, we ask different kinds of questions. Although the social problem tradition suggests that a change in sexual attitudes or behavior is a symptom of a maladjusted person or period, we propose that the adjustment period represents an opening for change. Having access to partners and being sexually accessible may move people to think differently about themselves. The meanings of sex that are most salient to recently uncoupled individuals may be new to these individuals or, alternatively, ones that these individuals had previously not found useful or appealing. When familiar (marital) sexual attitudes and behaviors no longer apply, people have the need and opportunity to redefine appropriate sexual expression (Simon, 1996; Tiefer, 1995).

Network theory, with its emphasis on social support, has been used to understand the life stage transition of divorce. Relationship dissolution is often accompanied by network disruption (Kitson & Morgan, 1990; Rands, 1987). Therefore, the need to build a network is frequently a significant feature of the adjustment period (Amato, 2000; Gerstel, 1988; Milardo, 1987). A new network introduces a fresh context in which an individual must negotiate sexual opportunities arising from his or her emerging identity as a single person. The nature of this context is mediated by gender (Gerstel, 1988). For both men and women, increased age (Bumpass, Sweet, & Martin, 1990; Spanier & Glick, 1980), lower income (Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Milardo, 1987), and childrearing responsibilities (Bumpass et al., 1990; Munch, McPherson, & Smith-Lovin, 1997) impede network building. However, women often experience greater network disruption than men, because with marriage, women tend to withdraw more from friends (Gerstel, 1988; Milardo, 1987; Riessman, 1990), and joint friendships are often controlled by the husband (Gerstel, 1988). The greater network disruption experienced by women, the stronger devaluation resulting from women's increasing age (Michael, Laumann, & Kolata, 1994), women's typically lower income (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000), and the higher likelihood that women will have childrearing responsibilities (Spraggins, 2000) may make the transition more burdensome for women than it is for men.

The limited research on cohabitation suggests that cohabitants differ significantly from married

people (Lindsay, 2000; Nock, 1995). However, adjustment to the dissolution of cohabitational relationships has been virtually unstudied. In one study (Mika & Bloom, 1980), adjustment to the dissolution of a cohabitational relationship was examined through interviews with 15 men and 35 women who had recently left such a relationship. Cohabitants reported much lower levels of commitment upon entry into their relationships than divorced people (as represented in the literature) have reported upon entry into their marriages. However, the concerns articulated by cohabitants upon the dissolution of their relationships were quite similar to those described by divorcees. Among other things, respondents reported financial strain, a need for identity redefinition, loneliness, and the need to rebuild a network. Mika and Bloom's work suggests that the dissolution experiences of cohabitants and spouses are similar in many ways.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND OPERATIONALIZATION

Relationship Dissolution and Sexuality: Dependent Variables

To measure the influence of relationship dissolution on sexuality, our study included three dependent variables: (a) a sexual-attitudes index, (b) the frequency of sex per month in the past year, and (c) the number of new sexual partners per month in the last year or since the dissolution of the relationship. In this section, we review the literature on each of these variables and describe how they have been operationalized for this project. We used data (described in detail in the Methods section) collected by Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) through the National Health and Social Life Survey. Percentages or means and standard deviations for the three variables can be found in Table 1.

Sexual attitudes. Empirically, it has been observed that sexual attitudes are more permissive among divorced people than among single people who have never been married or among married people (Klassen, Williams, & Levitt, 1989; Smith, 1994). Given that divorced people are, on average, older than single people, this increase in liberal attitudes about sex among divorced people is not consistent with the finding that increased age is associated with a decrease in permissive sexual attitudes (Laumann et al., 1994). However, a decrease in permissive attitudes is not necessarily linear and

progressive. An event such as divorce may interrupt and reframe the way in which an individual conceives of sexuality, in part by changing what is in that person's self-interest. An individual who is newly single is suddenly in a position to take advantage of sexually permissive attitudes (Reiss & Miller, 1979; Smith, 1994). In a longitudinal study, Thomson (2001) found that levels of sexual permissiveness were significantly higher after separation than before separation, suggesting that relationship dissolution causes an increase in sexually permissive attitudes.

We designed a sexual-attitudes index to represent a latent variable pertaining to the permissiveness of sexual attitudes (as opposed to attitudes about one behavior or another). Several attitude variables (all assessed on the basis of a 4-point Likert scale) were analyzed. Principal components analysis detected one factor containing items that measured attitudes about abortion, extramarital sex, freely consented sex, homosexuality, pornography, premarital sex, and teen sex. For each respondent, scores for each of the seven items were summed and then divided by the number of items answered ($\alpha = 0.73$ for men and $\alpha = 0.72$ for women). The final variable was represented by a 4-point Likert scale with 1 representing *low attitudinal permissiveness* and 4 representing *high attitudinal permissiveness*.

The frequency of sex. Unlike married or cohabiting couples, single people have to exert significant effort to find (and keep) even one sex partner (Schwartz & Rutter, 2000). Married and cohabiting people have the highest frequencies of sex (Laumann et al., 1994; Quadagno, Sly, Harrison, Eberstein, & Stoler, 1998; Smith, 1991). Separated individuals report a higher frequency of sex than do divorced people (Leigh, Temple, & Trocki, 1993; Smith, 1991). Even when a single person has a committed dating partner, the frequency of sex for this person may be lower than the frequency among married or cohabiting couples because the less well coordinated lives of dating individuals make opportunities for sex more sporadic (Schwartz & Rutter, 2000). However, even when opportunities for sex do not come easily, entrance into a new dating relationship and the "honeymoon period" that often follows (Call, Sprecher, & Schwartz, 1995; Hawton & Gath, 1994) may account for an unexpectedly high frequency of sex among individuals who have made the transition out of a relationship.

Men report a higher frequency of sex than do

TABLE 1. VARIABLE STATISTICS AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Variable	Men	Women
Dependent variables		
Sexual-attitudes index (1-4), <i>M (SD)</i>	2.43 (0.66)	2.27 (0.65)
Mean rate of acquisition of new partners/month in last year, <i>M (SD)</i>	0.09 (0.16)	0.07 (0.10)
Frequency of sex in last year (midpoint per month), %		
Not at all (0.00)	7.8	11.6
Once or twice last year (0.125)	5.6	6.9
About once per month (1.00)	9.8	8.9
Two or three times per month (2.50)	16.1	18.2
About once per week (4.00)	18.9	18.7
Two or three times per week (10.00)	29.8	26.7
Four or more times per week (21.67)	12.0	8.9
Independent variables		
Mean age, years	35.62	36.27
Education (midpoint in years), %		
Less than grade 8 (7)	2.4	2.9
Some high school (10)	11.7	11.2
High school or equivalent (12)	28.4	28.9
Vocational/trade/business (13)	5.6	5.4
Some college or 2-year degree (14)	26.7	30.1
College graduate (16)	16.6	15.3
Masters or equivalent (18)	6.1	4.7
Other advanced degree (19)	2.4	1.4
Respondent's income (midpoint per group), %		
\$0 (0.00)	11.2	24.2
\$1-\$5,000 (0.25)	10.0	15.1
\$5,001-\$10,000 (0.75)	8.3	12.2
\$10,001-\$15,000 (1.25)	10.3	11.1
\$15,001-\$20,000 (1.75)	9.3	10.3
\$20,001-\$30,000 (2.50)	19.4	14.6
\$30,001-\$50,000 (4.00)	22.1	8.6
\$50,001-\$75,000 (6.25)	6.1	2.3
\$75,001+ (8.50)	3.3	1.7
Number of related children in the house, %		
0	59.5	47.4
1	19.6	21.1
2	15.2	22.2
≥3	5.7	9.2
Identification as African American, %	14.7	16.1
Religious beliefs guide sexual behavior, %		
Strongly disagree	14.0	9.2
Disagree	40.4	32.8
Agree	29.1	32.0
Strongly agree	16.5	26.1
Average number of sexual partners per year, <i>M (SD)</i>	0.55 (0.51)	0.30 (0.35)
Total number of relationship transitions, <i>M (SD)</i>	2.19 (2.61)	2.13 (2.17)
Current relationship status, %		
Respondent currently married or cohabiting	58.6	62.1
Single and 1 year or more postcohabitation	7.1	12.3
Single and 1 year or more postmarriage	8.1	6.5
Left a cohabitation last year	3.3	3.4
Left a marriage last year	1.5	1.5

women both in the general population (Hyde & Oliver, 2000; Rao & Demaris, 1995) and among divorced people (Spanier & Thompson, 1984), although the gender differences among divorced people are smaller than those among people who have never been married (Schwartz & Rutter,

2000). Schwartz and Rutter proposed that "... the difference in the gender gap ... suggests that experience and age reduce women's inhibitions regarding nonmarital sex" (p. 100). The frequencies of sex for divorced men and women may be more similar to each other than those of never-

married men and women. Specifically, divorced women may be less ambivalent about sex than women who have never been married (Schwartz & Rutter, 2000), and divorced men may be more attentive to relationships than are men who have never been married (Liazos, 1997; Riessman, 1990).

In our analysis, frequency of sex in the last year (unaltered from the original data of Laumann et al., 1994) was a categorical variable with values ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*4 or more times per week*). For regression, the variable was transformed such that each interval represented the number of times the respondent engaged in intercourse per month in the last year. The midpoint of each interval was then substituted for the values to preserve the irregularities in the intervals.

The rate of acquisition of new sexual partners. The acquisition of one or more sexual partners may (or may be believed to) fulfill a need for intimacy (Schwartz & Rutter, 2000; Tiefer, 1995) or revenge (Spanier & Thompson, 1984), be gender-affirming (Tiefer, 1995), or build self-esteem (Spanier & Thompson, 1984). As Schwartz and Rutter (2000) pointed out,

... a marriage gone wrong usually means a deteriorated sex life. Sometimes divorced [or otherwise uncoupled] people are in a hurry to rectify an emotionally painful period. They want some love—or even what might pass for love—soon after (or before) the breakup to reassure themselves that they are still desirable. (p. 100)

Indeed, one or more postdissolution sexual relationships appear to be helpful for adjustment (Wang & Amato, 2000). Divorced people appear to have larger numbers of partners than do people who have never been married (Laumann et al., 1994; Leigh et al., 1993; Seidman, Mosher, & Aral, 1992). In addition, the status of being separated but not yet divorced is associated with an even higher number of partners in the preceding year (Smith, 1991), suggesting that the recentness of relationship dissolution is a factor.

Gender differences exist for both premarital and postmarital sexual experience (Hyde & Oliver, 2000; Schwartz & Rutter, 2000), with men reporting more sexual partners than women (Stack & Gundlach, 1992). This may be because the way women experience sexual opportunity is different from the way men experience it (Schwartz & Rutter, 2000). Although both men and women emphasize freedom after divorce, men typically mean

sexual freedom but women do not (Riessman, 1990). Spanier and Thompson (1984) argued that “[w]omen cannot interpret readily the sexual consent of their partners as reassurance of their own worth and are more likely than men to feel undermined personally by their own sexual accessibility” (p. 195). Women may prefer a single stable new partner, whereas men may desire multiple partners.

In our study, we used the rate of acquisition of new sexual partners per month as a dependent variable. For individuals who had made the transition out of a relationship in the previous year, the number of new partners in the last year (unaltered from the original data of Laumann et al., 1994) was divided by the number of months these individuals had been single (measured by subtracting the month of the relationship dissolution from the month of the interview). For example, suppose a person separated from his or her partner 3 months before the survey. In the first 9 months of the last year, this person did not acquire any new sexual partners. However, in the past 3 months, this person has acquired three new sexual partners. We divide the number of new sexual partners by the number of months this person has been single, and the resulting rate is one per month. In calculating the rate of acquisition of sexual partners for an individual who has been single for 1–11 months, the use of the denominator that corresponds to the number of months this individual has been single allows the detection of real change (or lack thereof) in the rate of partner acquisition as a result of relationship dissolution. (The results of preliminary analysis suggest that it is unlikely that predissolution partners were categorized as postdissolution partners.)

For the remaining respondents, the variable indicating the number of new partners in the last year was divided by 12. Respondents who had made the transition into a relationship in the past year were included in this group on the assumption that individuals typically establish a stable relationship before marriage or cohabitation that changes little in terms of their agreement regarding monogamy when they actually move in together. The resulting variable indicated the number of new partners per month in the last year.

Other Factors Relevant to Sexuality: Independent Variables

Many other variables relevant to sexuality have been identified. For our purposes, the independent

variables of interest are grouped into demographic, attitudinal, relationship history, and relationship dissolution variables. Percentages or means and standard deviations for these variables can be found in Table 1. A discussion and description of the operationalization of each of these variables follows.

Demographic variables. Demographic variables include age, education level, income, the number of related children under the age of 18 in the household, and identification as African American.

Increasing age has been shown to be negatively associated with sexually permissive attitudes (Laumann et al., 1994), the frequency of sex (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Laumann et al., 1994; Leigh et al., 1993), and the rate of acquisition of new partners (Dolcini et al., 1993; Laumann et al., 1994; Leigh et al., 1993). Among divorced people, age has been shown to be negatively related to the frequency of sex and the rate of acquisition of new sexual partners (Stack & Gundlach, 1992). In our analysis, the variable indicating age ranged from 18 to 59 and was recoded in decades (by dividing by 10).

Socioeconomic status is often measured by education level and income. Sexually permissive attitudes are positively related to education level (Laumann et al., 1994; Smith, 1994). Study results differ as to whether the frequency of sex is significantly related to socioeconomic status (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). The acquisition of sexual partners is negatively related to income for both women (Kost & Forrest, 1992; Seidman et al., 1992) and men (Patterson, 1998) and positively related to education level for the general population (Laumann et al., 1994; Smith, 1991; Cubbins & Tanfer, 2000) and for divorced people (Stack & Gundlach, 1992). These complex and sometimes contradictory results suggest that the relationship between socioeconomic status and sexual behavior has yet to be fully understood. For our purposes, the variables pertaining to education level and income in the last year were each used to measure socioeconomic status. For both education and income, the midpoint of each interval was substituted for the values to preserve the irregularities in the intervals. Income was represented in tens of thousands.

People who have children are less sexually permissive, particularly when the children are teenagers (Reiss & Miller, 1979; Smith, 1994). Research results are inconclusive as to whether

children are an impediment to a high sexual frequency (Hawton & Gath, 1994; Rao & Demaris, 1995). A study of divorced individuals found the presence of children to be unrelated to the frequency of sex (Stack & Gundlach, 1992). An absence of children may allow more opportunity for the acquisition of new sexual partners (Stack & Gundlach, 1992), although this hypothesis is not always supported (Cubbins & Tanfer, 2000). We used a variable indicating the number of related children under the age of 18 living in the house with the respondent (0, 1, 2, or 3 or more).

Race is related to both attitudes and behavior. Whites have more permissive attitudes than do African Americans (Patterson, 1998), but African Americans report more lifetime sexual partners than do Whites (Kost & Forrest, 1992; Laumann et al., 1994), and divorced African Americans report more lifetime partners than do divorced Whites (Dolcini et al., 1993). In their review article, Christopher and Sprecher (2000) suggested that African American identity is not related to the frequency of sex. Given that African Americans are disproportionately represented in the lower economic classes (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000), socioeconomic factors are often confounded with identification as African American. In our study, a dummy variable indicated those who self-identified as African American.

Attitudinal variables. The attitudinal variables included religiosity and, for predicting the frequency of sex and the rate of acquisition of new partners, the sexual-attitudes index.

Individuals who attend church regularly or report high religiosity tend to have less permissive attitudes than those who do not (Jensen, Newell, & Holman, 1990; Smith, 1994; Weinberg, Lottes, & Shaver, 2000). A review by Christopher and Sprecher (2000) suggested that marital sexual frequency is unrelated to religiosity, and a study of divorced individuals resulted in a similar finding (Stack & Gundlach, 1992). However, other research has suggested that religiosity may be negatively related to the frequency of sex (Thornton & Camburn, 1989), especially for single people (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Jensen et al., 1990). Religiosity is negatively related to the lifetime acquisition of sexual partners for the general population (Cubbins & Tanfer, 2000; Thornton & Camburn, 1989) and for divorced people (Stack & Gundlach, 1992). Part of the difficulty involved in interpreting the significance of religion may be

attributable to the many different ways in which religiosity can be operationalized.

For our purposes, a variable assessing a component of religiosity was measured by asking individuals to respond on a 4-point Likert scale to the statement, "my religious beliefs have shaped and guided my sexual behavior." This variable identified the extent to which respondents reported themselves to be influenced by religion and was therefore described as reported religious influence. The sexual-attitudes index (entered into the regression as an independent variable for predicting the frequency of sex and the rate of acquisition of sexual partners) was operationalized as discussed above.

Relationship history variables. Relationship history variables were included as controls and for exploratory purposes. Relationship history variables included average number of sexual partners per year (to control for the selection theory-based possibility that individuals with a high number of partners over their lifetime are more likely to be in a postdissolution state and therefore in the relationship dissolution category), total number of relationship transitions (to control for the fact that frequent transitioners are more likely to be currently in a postdissolution state and therefore in the relationship dissolution category), and whether the respondent was currently married or cohabiting (to segregate never-married individuals for the reference group).

Total numbers of sexual partners ranged from 0 to 1,016. To avoid problems associated with outliers and some of the problems associated with over- or underreporting (for an analysis, see Wiederman, 1997), for all respondents who reported having had 100 sexual partners or more, this variable was recoded as 100. This reduced the discrepancy between men and women from 1:2.72 to 1:2.40. Although this discrepancy reduction is moderate, preliminary analysis demonstrated that the use of a smaller cutoff would obscure significant differences between categories. The number of partners in the last year (a dependent variable) was subtracted, and the resulting number was divided by the number of years the respondent had been sexually active. The resulting variable indicated the average number of partners per year since the respondent became sexually active and prior to the last year. On the assumption that the conceptual difference between 0 partners and 1 partner was a larger difference than that between 99 and 100 partners, we added an integer to each

value to allow for log transformation, and the natural logarithm of each value was taken.

The total number of relationship transitions represented the number of times respondents had moved in or out of cohabitational or marital relationships over their lifetimes. For respondents who were single and had never married or cohabited or who were in their first marriage or cohabitational relationship, this variable was coded as 0. (Counting began at the first divorce because if the variable had been coded as 0 only for single respondents who had never married or cohabited, the variable would map onto the reference group: single people who had never married or cohabited.) For a respondent who had entered and then left a relationship, the variable was coded as 1, and a 1 was added for each time a respondent had subsequently moved into or out of a relationship.

A dummy variable representing respondents who were currently married or cohabiting was included. This variable included married or cohabiting respondents whose relationship status did not change, as well as those who had made a transition into a relationship in the last year on the presumption that they had a committed relationship prior to their cohabitational relationship or marriage.

Relationship dissolution variables. Relationship dissolution variables include the dissolutions of both marriages and cohabitational relationships and treat them distinctly when possible. Dissolution was considered to have occurred on the date the partners ceased living together (instead of the date of legal divorce). The month of separation was subtracted from the month of the interview to determine the length of separation.

If relationship dissolution is accompanied by an adjustment period, we might expect that those who had experienced dissolution quite recently and those who had been in a postdissolution state longer would differ with regard to their levels of adjustment. Dual sets of dummy variables indicated whether a person had experienced a transition out of a cohabitational relationship or marriage 1 year or more ago and whether they had experienced a transition out of a cohabitational relationship or marriage in the past year.

We constructed six interaction variables to explore the interaction of relationship dissolution with age, income, and the presence of children. Because of the small sample size, the four dummy variables measuring cohabitational dissolution in the last year, marital dissolution in the last year,

cohabitational dissolution 1 year or more ago, and marital dissolution 1 year or more ago were combined into two dummy variables representing the experience of relationship dissolution either within the past year or ≥ 1 year ago. In other words, the interaction variables maintained a distinction between lengths of separation but did not address whether the relationship was a marriage or a cohabitational relationship. The two new variables were then each multiplied by a dummy variable for age (0 = *ages 18–39*; 1 = *ages 40–59*), a dummy variable representing the respondent's income (0 = *\$0–\$20,000*; 1 = *\$20,001 or more*), and the number of related children living in the house (0, 1, 2, or 3 or more).

We expected the transition to a new context that accompanies divorce to interact with gender and the individual characteristics described above to contribute to the permissiveness of a respondent's attitudes and sexual behaviors. We attempted to ascertain whether individuals who leave cohabitational relationships appear to experience similar transition processes. Furthermore, because we conceived of divorce as a process, we expected to see changes over time. For this reason, we considered people who had been single and in a post-dissolution state for less than 1 year separately from those who had been single for longer. Finally, because age, income, and the presence of children may all complicate the postdissolution experience, we included interaction variables (collapsing cohabitational and marital dissolutions in these cases).

METHOD

The release of the National Health and Social Life Survey data provides an excellent opportunity to explore the connection between relationship dissolution and sexual attitudes and behaviors. Laumann et al. (1994) designed a questionnaire that was administered by interviewers in 1992 to a probability sample of households. A 79% response rate resulted in a total sample of 3,432 English-speaking respondents. Although the survey is now 10 years old, the data obtained in this survey remain the most extensive, representative, and recent data available.

Some respondents were excluded from our analyses. On the presumption that the relationship dissolution experience of widows is considerably different from that of other newly single people, we excluded single widows ($n = 62$) from the analysis. Self-reported nonheterosexual respon-

dents ($n = 117$) were excluded because the illegality of gay and lesbian marriage makes comparisons with those for whom marriage is an option problematic. Finally, some of the respondents ($n = 38$) appear to have provided contradictory information, and these respondents were also excluded from the analyses. With the missing data for the dependent and independent variables being taken into account, the final sample included 78% of the original respondents ($N = 2,680$). Analysis of the excluded portion of the sample did not reveal any problematic patterns of elimination.

Examination of the correlation matrix did not reveal any problems with regard to multicollinearity. The file was split by gender, and the independent variables were entered into multiple linear regressions for each dependent variable. Single individuals who had never married served as our reference group.

RESULTS

Regressions with and without the interaction terms were examined for each dependent variable. Selected models for sexual attitudes and the frequency of sex can be found in Table 2. Regressions for the rate of acquisition of sexual partners both with and without interactions can be found in Table 3. This section addresses the results for each set of regressions individually, gender differences, and the difference between marital and cohabitational dissolution.

Sexual Attitudes

None of the interaction variables were significantly related to attitudes. For this reason, interaction variables were dropped from the analysis. Only one of the eight variables representing cohabitational or marital dissolution in the past year or before was significant. Women who had left a cohabitational relationship in the last year had sexual attitudes that were significantly more permissive. Otherwise, it appears that variables pertaining to relationship dissolution within the last year or before are not particularly useful in predicting the permissiveness of sexual attitudes.

In contrast, demographic and religious-influence variables were predictive of the permissiveness of sexual attitudes. For both men and women, a high level of reported religious influence is the strongest significant predictor of less permissive sexual attitudes. Education, the average number of sexual partners per year, and the number of relationship transitions are each associated positively

TABLE 2. UNSTANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS AND STANDARD ERRORS FOR SEXUAL ATTITUDES AND FREQUENCY OF SEX

Independent variable	Sexual Attitudes				Frequency of Sex per Month			
	Men		Women		Men		Women	
	B	(SE)	B	(SE)	B	(SE)	B	(SE)
Demographic variables								
Age	0.005	0.017	0.003	0.016	-0.257	0.053***	-0.364	0.048***
Level of education	0.038	0.006***	0.039	0.006***	0.006	0.020	0.004	0.019
Respondent's income	0.004	0.009 ^a	0.029	0.009*** ^a	-0.019	0.027	-0.024	0.028
Children in house (1 = yes)	-0.068	0.017*** ^a	0.003	0.015 ^a	0.004	0.054	0.032	0.045
African American (1 = yes)	0.124	0.042**	0.041	0.038	0.333	0.130**	0.067	0.115
Attitude variables								
Reported religious influence (0 = low; 4 = high)	-0.351	0.017***	-0.345	0.015***	-0.063	0.061	0.033	0.053
Sexual-attitudes index (0 = low; 4 = high)					0.182	0.088*	0.086	0.078
Relationship history variables								
Partners per year	0.215	0.034***	0.280	0.048***	0.595	0.106***	0.569	0.146***
Number of transitions	0.016	0.007*	0.018	0.008***	-0.021	0.021	-0.012	0.023
In a relationship (1 = yes)	-0.072	0.046	0.018	0.043	1.671	0.140***	1.809	0.129***
Relationship dissolution > 1 year ago								
Left a cohabitational relationship (1 = yes)	-0.064	0.070	0.024	0.056	0.041	0.214	0.329	0.169
Left a marriage (1 = yes)	0.036	0.064	0.022	0.066	0.419	0.196*	-0.076	0.198
Relationship dissolution < 1 year ago								
Left a cohabitational relationship (1 = yes)	0.088	0.091	0.188	0.088*	1.084	0.283***	1.315	0.317***
Left a marriage (1 = yes)	-0.045	0.126	0.075	0.116	0.587	0.407	0.952	0.411*
Left Relationship × Children					0.746	0.374*	0.062	0.181
N	1,207		1,473		1,207		1,473	
R ²	.415		.377		.197		.249	
Adjusted R ²	.409		.372		.187		.241	

^aSignificant difference between men and women ($p < .05$).
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed significance levels).

TABLE 3. UNSTANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS AND STANDARD ERRORS FOR RATE OF ACQUISITION OF NEW SEXUAL PARTNERS

Independent Variable	Without Interactions				With Interactions			
	Men		Women		Men		Women	
	B	(SE)	B	(SE)	B	(SE)	B	(SE)
Demographic variables								
Age	-0.003	0.005	-0.003	0.003	0.000	0.005	-0.002	0.003
Level of education	0.000	0.002	-0.000	0.001	0.000	0.002	-0.000	0.001
Respondent's income	-0.000	0.002	-0.001	0.002	0.000	0.003	-0.000	0.002
Children in house (1 = yes)	-0.005	0.005	0.000	0.003	-0.003	0.005	-0.000	0.003
African American (1 = yes)	0.028	0.012*	0.013	0.007*	0.029	0.012*	0.011	0.007
Attitude variables								
Reported religious influence (0 = low; 4 = high)	-0.003	0.006	-0.001	0.003	-0.003	0.006	-0.002	0.003
Sexual-attitudes index (0 = low; 4 = high)	0.009	0.008	0.011	0.004*	0.008	0.008	0.011	0.004*
Relationship history variables								
Partners per year	0.040	0.010***	0.028	0.008***	0.040	0.010***	0.027	0.008***
Number of transitions	0.000	0.002	-0.001	0.001	0.001	0.002	-0.001	0.001
In a relationship (1 = yes)	-0.009	0.013	0.005	0.007	-0.014	0.013	0.004	0.007
Relationship dissolution >1 year ago								
Left a cohabitation (1 = yes)	0.003	0.020	0.003	0.010	0.003	0.028	0.004	0.015
Left a marriage (1 = yes)	0.028	0.018	0.013	0.011	0.022	0.020	0.012	0.013
Relationship dissolution <1 year ago								
Left a cohabitational relationship (1 = yes)	0.406	0.026*** ^a	0.244	0.015*** ^a	0.459	0.029*** ^a	0.266	0.020*** ^a
Left a marriage (1 = yes)	0.182	0.035***	0.186	0.020***	0.291	0.046***	0.194	0.026***
Left Relationship × Age					0.041	0.050	0.037	0.028
Left Relationship × Income					-0.172	0.041***	-0.118	0.024***
Left Relationship × Children					-0.029	0.035	0.010	0.011
N	1,207		1,473		1,207		1,473	
R ²	.272		.254		.286		.269	
Adjusted R ²	.263		.247		.274		.259	

^aSignificant difference between men and women ($p < .05$).
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed significance levels).

and significantly with permissive attitudes. For women, income is positively related to permissive attitudes. For men, the number of children in the house is negatively and significantly related to the dependent variable, and identification as African American is associated positively and significantly with the sexual-attitudes index.

Frequency of Sex in the Last Year

For the full model explaining sex frequency in the last year, only one of six interaction terms was significant. This interaction, between relationship dissolution in the last year and the presence of children, was retained in the partial model. All other interactions were dropped.

In support of previous findings regarding the frequency of sex, being in a marriage or cohabitational relationship and being younger are strong predictors of a high frequency of sex for both men and women. The average number of partners per year is also associated significantly and positively with the frequency of sex. Having left a cohabitational relationship in the last year is significantly and positively related to the frequency of sex for both women and men, and having left a marriage in the last year is similarly related for women. Identification as African American, permissive sexual attitudes, and the interaction between relationship dissolution in the last year and children are positively related to the dependent variable for men.

Although relationship dissolution in the last year appears to be related to the frequency of sex, we suggest that these results be interpreted with caution. A question about one's frequency of sex in the last year may be difficult for any individual, but particularly for an individual who has experienced dissolution during that period, to answer. If the frequency of sex does not change dramatically with relationship dissolution, then the variable is not problematic. However, there may be a wide frequency-of-sex spectrum, with some individuals entering new relationships and experiencing a honeymoon period of high frequency and others making a transition to being single without a new partner. Alternatively, a question about one's average frequency of sex in the last year may not be meaningful for individuals who have left a relationship in that time, because such a respondent may have to cognitively collapse several different phases (such as a period of inactivity followed by a period of high activity). The respondent may answer honestly (although perhaps not

accurately) with an average frequency or with the frequency of sex with the most recent partner, or the respondent may use an alternative strategy to answer the question. As Lewis (1997) emphasized, in contemporary America, "... many sexual lives are in erratic circulation and transition" (p. 250). For this reason, we suggest that the results for the relationship between the frequency of sex and the relationship dissolution variables be interpreted carefully. A measure of the frequency of sex that better applies to inconsistent sexual behavior, such as one that asks about a shorter period or one that is applied to each separate sexual partner, could facilitate more productive research into sexuality (Call et al., 1995; Schwartz & Rutter, 2000) and is critical for a meaningful analysis of individuals who have recently made a transition. More important, all variables related to marriage or family that inquire into long-term behaviors or attitudes are vulnerable to this critique.

The Rate of Acquisition of New Sexual Partners

Relationship dissolution in the last year and its interactions account for much of the variance explained in the rate of sexual-partner acquisition. The full model is discussed below. Both the full model (with interactions) and the partial model (without interactions) are presented in Table 3.

For both men and women, having left a marriage or a cohabitational relationship in the last year is significantly and positively related to partner acquisition. For example (to use the most dramatic case), the average man who left a cohabitational relationship in the last year has had 0.46 more sexual partners per month in the last year than a comparable man who has not. Furthermore, for both women and men, the interaction between income and relationship dissolution in the last year significantly and negatively affects the number of partners acquired. Conversely, variables representing relationship dissolution 1 year or more ago and their interactions are completely insignificant, suggesting that partner acquisition is relatively rapid in the 1st year after relationship dissolution but then declines. The average number of partners acquired per year is significantly and positively related to the rate of partner acquisition in the last year for both men and women. Sexually permissive attitudes for women and identification as African American for men are also associated with higher rates of partner acquisition. These results are supportive of the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective in that they suggest that a burst of

TABLE 4. PARTNER ACQUISITION RATES FOR RESPONDENTS WHO LEFT A MARRIAGE OR COHABITATIONAL RELATIONSHIP IN THE LAST YEAR

Variable	Left a Cohabital Relationship <1 Year Ago		Left a Marriage <1 Year Ago	
	Men (n = 41)	Women (n = 51)	Men (n = 18)	Women (n = 23)
Average number of months since dissolution	5.85	5.60	6.83	6.82
Average rate of partner acquisition per month	0.51	0.31	0.25	0.24
Number of new sexual partners since dissolution, %				
0	2.4	2.0	5.6	4.3
1	31.7	60.8	50.0	47.8
2	29.3	17.6	38.9	39.1
3	7.3	11.8	5.6	4.3
4	14.6	5.9	0.0	0.0
5-10	9.8	2.0	0.0	4.3
11-20	4.9	0.0	0.0	0.0

sexual-partner acquisition occurs immediately after relationship dissolution.

It is important that in predicting the rate of acquisition of new sexual partners, demographic and attitude variables are almost completely insignificant. Clearly, the prediction of sexual behavior by demographics and attitudes alone is insufficient for a full understanding of adult sexual choices. Furthermore, although investigators typically include a variable representing an individual's current relationship status, they often overlook or oversimplify relationship history and the diversity within a single status. At the very least, as demonstrated by these results, it is important to distinguish between those who are more and less recently single.

Table 4 provides details on the pattern of partner acquisition among respondents who had left a marriage or cohabitational relationship in the last year. The rates of acquisition for newly uncoupled people were 0.51 and 0.31, respectively, for men and women who had left a cohabitational relationship and 0.25 and 0.24, respectively, for men and women who had left a marriage—certainly not the extraordinary rate that the stereotype suggests. Although the establishment of new sexual relationships does appear to be important, we assert that the rate of partner acquisition does not support the social problem perspective that frames postdissolution sexuality as maladaptive.

Gender Differences

Few gender differences emerged from our analyses. However, two stand out as deserving of comment: those pertaining to identification as African American and the presence of children.

All three dependent variables are significantly and positively associated with identification as African American for men but not for women (with the exception of the partial model for the rate of acquisition of sexual partners). Although in all cases being an African American man is among the weakest of the significant predictors, our findings confirm previous research suggesting that much of the difference between Blacks and Whites lies with men (Cubbins & Tanfer, 2000; Patterson, 1998). Although these results must be interpreted cautiously because of the lack of significance for the difference between men and women, they add to the accumulation of research documenting the importance of paying special attention to the interaction of race and gender.

Gender differences were also found with regard to the presence of children. Perhaps surprisingly, the number of related children in the house is significantly and negatively correlated with permissive sexual attitudes for men but not for women. There is also a significant and positive relationship between the interaction variable linking relationship dissolution in the last year and the presence of related children in the house to the frequency of sex for men but not for women. (Although only 10 men who had left a relationship in the last year were living with related children, 8 of these 10 men reported frequencies of sex in the top two frequency categories [data not shown]. Therefore, an outlier among these 10 men does not cause this result.) These same men do not appear to be acquiring partners at a high rate. Indeed, divorced men with custody of children are more likely to be remarried than are women with custody (Meyer & Garasky, 1993). Among other things, the cultural importance placed on mothers

may motivate single fathers to establish stable relationships rather quickly.

These two significant results highlight men's relationships with their children. Although there has been a great deal of scholarly interest in the parenting of nonresident fathers, single fathers, stepfathers, abusive fathers, young unmarried fathers, and gay fathers, there has been little research on how fatherhood is subjectively experienced by custodial fathers. In the mountain of research on problematic dads, perhaps the effect that the responsibility of caring for children has on men has been underestimated. The effect on men's sexuality (culturally critical to masculinity) should be particularly interesting because these men are taking on a stereotypically feminine role.

Overall, the results of these analyses suggest that relationship dissolution affects men and women similarly in terms of changes in the permissiveness of sexual attitudes, rates of acquisition of new sexual partners, and frequency of sex. However, even when reported rates of behaviors are similar, men and women may differ with regard to how they experience their sexual accessibility with regard to their motivations for abstaining from or participating in certain behaviors (Hill, 1997; Simon, 1996). Qualitative work is clearly important in investigating this level of difference.

Cohabitation and Marriage

Mika and Bloom's (1980) qualitative work on the dissolution of cohabitational relationships suggests a period of adjustment similar to the one for divorcees proposed by the divorce stress adjustment perspective. For each dependent variable, the independent variables representing cohabitation and marriage perform similarly. Cohabitation and marital dissolution 1 year or more ago are insignificant in the prediction of the permissiveness of sexual attitudes and the rate of acquisition of sexual partners. For the frequency of sex, both variables are insignificant in the prediction of the dependent variable for women, and the cohabitational dissolution variable is insignificant in the prediction of the dependent variable for men. For all three dependent variables, relationship dissolution ≥ 1 year ago is insignificant in 11 of 12 cases. Relationship dissolution in the last year is not significantly related to permissive attitudes (except for women who have left cohabitational relationships), positively related to the frequency of sex (although the coefficient for men who have left a marriage in the last year is not significant),

and predictive of a higher rate of sexual-partner acquisition. Respondents who have recently left a cohabitational relationship consistently show higher values for the dependent variables than do respondents who are recently divorced. However, this finding may be related to the higher frequency of sex and the higher rates of partner acquisition reported by cohabitants in general (Forste & Tanfer, 1996; Rao & Demaris, 1995). Overall, it appears that marriage and cohabitation dissolution are comparable in terms of how they affect sexual attitudes and behaviors. Prior research has shown that many cohabitants plan to marry, which suggests that their relationships may be similar to marriage (Brown & Booth, 1996).

Our results, along with the increase in the incidence of cohabitation and the rise of childrearing in this family form (Seltzer, 2000), call for increased attention to cohabitation. A lack of attention to cohabitational dissolution, compared with the attention given to marital dissolution, is symptomatic of a bias that elevates the interdependence in marriage and regards the dissolution of cohabitational relationships as unproblematic. The increasing diversification of family life and the awareness of "the family" as a socially constructed unit should be reflected in empirical research with a less problem-oriented attention to cohabitation per se and a more thorough investigation into the positives and negatives of diverse family forms.

DISCUSSION

Relationship Dissolution as a Life Stage Transition

That newly single people are more likely to be acquiring sexual partners than other single people may seem like a tautology. After all, people who have been single for a year or more may have already settled down with a regular partner. However, if one examines the regression for the rate of acquisition of sexual partners per year, relationship dissolution in the last year appears to be far more predictive than demographic or attitudinal variables. This regression suggests that it matters less how old, poor, religious, or educated you are, how many children you have, or what color you may be than what life stage you are in. In other words, contextual factors, such as life stage, are key to sexual choices. To illustrate this point, we discuss how age, sexual attitudes, and identi-

fication as African American are related to the dependent variables.

Age. Our data show that age is significant only for the prediction of the frequency of sex. The interaction of age and relationship dissolution is not significant in any case. Factors other than age play a more influential role in predicting permissive attitudes and the rate of acquisition of new sexual partners. This finding is consistent with Blumstein and Schwartz's (1983) study, which demonstrated that the sex lives of 50- and 60-year-old newlyweds are more similar to the sex lives of younger couples than to the sex lives of long-married couples their own age. For the frequency of sex, the age variable acts more predictably. However, a 10-year increase in age influences the frequency of sex less strongly than, for example, a divorce less than 1 year ago. This finding indicates that age is not the most important determining factor even for the frequency of sex and suggests that in many research projects, when age is shown to be significant, it is acting as a proxy for other variables.

Sexual attitudes. Sexually permissive attitudes are not significantly predictive of either the frequency of sex for women or the rate of acquisition of sexual partners for men. When such attitudes are significant, such as in the prediction of the rate of acquisition of new sexual partners for women, the substantive difference is small. An increase of 1 point on the 4-point permissive-attitudes scale is associated with 0.01 more sexual partners per month in the last year. This effect is weak compared with other effects, such as the 0.27 or 0.19 increase in sexual partners per month associated with having left a cohabitational relationship or a marriage, respectively, in the last year. Similarly, although reported religious influence easily overshadows the other variables in the prediction of attitudes, it is insignificant in the prediction of the rate of acquisition of new sexual partners and the frequency of sex. Other variables that dominate prediction for sexual attitudes do not overlap extensively with the variables that dominate prediction of the rate of acquisition of new sexual partners and the frequency of sex. Nowhere in these results is there a strong link between attitudes and behavior.

It seems reasonable to expect that general attitudinal permissiveness would be linked with measures of sexual behavior. However, our results substantiate prior research demonstrating weak attitude-behavior correlations (Kraus, 1995). Unfor-

tunately, despite this common finding, much sociological research optimistically assumes that in most cases attitudes prevail over contextual pressures and opportunities. We argue that it is important to pay special attention to weak attitude-behavior correlations. Specifically, examining variation in the strength of the attitude-behavior correlation might help us understand certain experiences.

It is possible that low correlations between attitudes and behaviors are particularly likely among individuals experiencing a life stage transition. Social psychologists suggest that the extent to which an attitude guides a behavior is mediated by perceived outcomes, such as the extent to which others will approve or disapprove. The salience of a type of outcome is dependent on the behavior and the contextual cues (Gilbert, Fiske, & Lindzey, 1998). Adjustment to new contextual cues, a new identity, and a new network may make the potential (dis)approval of others more influential than it would be otherwise. Simon (1996) argues that behavior does not necessarily follow from attitudes. Instead, he suggests, behavior "... increasingly advertises, with understandable uncertainty, one's life-cycle stage" (p. 54). This view suggests that the link between attitudes or religious values and behavior is particularly complicated for an individual in transition, whose familiar attitude stance may be less applicable and only weakly influential compared with the ever-present contextual pressures. Special attention to the attitude-behavior (dis)connection in the investigation of life stage transitions might be particularly productive.

Identification as African American. Prior research has shown that respondents who identify as African American report significantly more sexual partners. In this analysis, this variable is moderately significant for men and insignificant for women. Identification as African American is associated with 0.03 more sexual partners per month for men. However, other variables are much more strongly related to the rate of acquisition of new sexual partners. For example, for men, cohabitational dissolution in the last year is associated with 0.46 more sexual partners per month compared with the rate for single men who have never married, whereas marital dissolution in the last year is associated with 0.29 more sexual partners per month. These results suggest that the discrepancy in the number of reported sexual partners between African Americans and Whites may be attribut-

able in part to the fact that African Americans spend more time in a postdissolution state. Relative to Whites, African Americans form less stable cohabitational relationships (Bumpass et al., 1991; Patterson, 1998), are more likely to divorce once they are married, and are less likely to remarry (Cohen, 1999; McLloyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000). It is important that this is true despite the fact that African Americans and Whites are equally likely to express the desire for a stable marriage (Patterson, 1998; Sparrow, 2000).

The significant correlation between the interaction of relationship dissolution in the last year with income and the rate of acquisition of new partners suggests that the relationship between relationship dissolution and partner acquisition is exacerbated by low income. Indeed, given these results, it is not at all surprising that African Americans report more partners than Whites given the contemporary structural constraints of poverty that contribute to less stable relationships (Conger et al., 1990; White, 1990; Wu & Pollard, 2000). Our results show that the disproportionate representation of African Americans in the lower economic classes may contribute to their higher reported rates of acquisition of new partners in at least one way that is not related to a "culture of poverty." In other words, the higher rate of sexual partners reported by African American men may not simply be attributable to an internalized cultural norm that emphasizes sexual conquest as an avenue to masculinity (see Kimmel, 2001). These results contribute to a structural explanation for the difference that focuses on blocked opportunity (i.e., economic conditions that destabilize family relationships) and undermines a cultural, socialization-based explanation.

Conclusion

Although much research explicitly or implicitly frames divorce as a categorical and steadily problematic status, the clear differences found in this study between respondents who had been in a postdissolution state for less than a year and those who had been in a postdissolution state for longer support a perspective that emphasizes diverse and changing stages within a transitional process. Although sexual behavior changes, the sexual behavior that occurs in the first year after the dissolution of a relationship, but not later, does not appear maladaptive and cannot fairly be described as problematic. Instead, it may indicate an adjust-

ment period in which people seek to restructure their identity.

In this study, the life stage transition of relationship dissolution proves to be a powerful tool in understanding the diversity in sexual attitudes and behavior. In fact, it is much more powerful than most individual characteristics. Clearly, a life stage approach is informative; however, phrases such as *life course disruption* reveal the researcher's attachment to a life stage model with a strict, anachronistic progression of stages. To truly accommodate the diversification of family forms in America today, we must realize that a theory of life stages is itself a social construction. It must not be rigid in either the characterization or the progression of the stages.

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