

## **How alternatives affect the development of non-cohabiting partnerships: A multidisciplinary perspective**

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Numbers of non-cohabiting couples living in separate households are growing across western societies. Prevalence rates for these “living apart together” (LAT) couples differ from around 6% to around 10% in Australia, Canada, the US, the UK, France, Germany and Eastern Europe.

While there is an ongoing debate about whether living apart together is a stable alternative to cohabitation or marriage, most people live at least temporarily in this kind of relationship. Therefore, living in a non-cohabiting relationship has become a standard sequence for nearly every life course and partnership today. Although this pattern of relationship development is quite common, only little research has been done on the question why some couples remain non-cohabiting while others move in together or break up. However, this question is of crucial meaning because only the minority of non-cohabiting couples remain stable over time while the majority experience transitions to cohabitation or separation, resulting in the highly transitory character of non-cohabiting partnerships. Yet, our understanding of why some couples move in together while others break up or remain in separate households is still emergent, there are a few longitudinal studies about the development of those couples over time. They mainly focus on intra-dyadic characteristics of couples or individual partners like distance, employment arrangement, satisfaction, independence or intentions.

The aim of our study is to investigate how the number of alternatives affect the development of non-cohabiting partnerships. What happens with the couple if one or both partners have many or few potential alternative partners? In addition to intra-dyadic factors, couple's development over time is also highly influenced by the context or social structural environment they live in. Previous findings for married or cohabiting couples suggest that especially the number of other potential partners in their social environment is crucial for relationship development. Finding a new partner or extradyadic affairs are main reasons for separation and divorce. Studies from several disciplines show a higher risk for separation when the number of potential alternative partners is high.

For this reason, we develop a multidisciplinary theoretical perspective for analysing the influence of alternatives for non-cohabiting couples with assumptions from demographic, sociological, and evolutionary theories. All of them underline the importance of alternatives for partnerships but differ in assumptions for alternatives of men or women, resulting in different consequences for relationship development. Demographic-opportunity theory emphasizes the relevance of population sex distribution at local levels for the availability of potential partners. Hence, the chance that a man will meet a potential female partner or vice versa depends on the (relative) number of men and women on a contextual level.

Furthermore, social exchange and family economist theory suggest that not only the sheer number of alternatives, but also the quality of potential partners compared to the current partner, is essential. Based on a cost and benefit perspective these theories suppose that someone will end the current relationship if benefits from an alternative relationship with an other partner is higher than benefits from the current partner. Both theoretical approaches result in gender-neutral assumptions in the way that a surplus of alternatives increases the risk of separation. Theories combining social exchange and evolutionary perspective, however, come to gender-specific hypotheses. They assume that an unbalanced number of alternatives influences the dyadic power balance between men and women. The partner with more alternatives has more dyadic power while the dependency of the partner with less alternatives increases. Therefore, the partner with more alternatives and power is able to accomplish his/her preferences. In addition, sex differences in obligatory parental investment result in a female preference for committed relationships while men tend to be more promiscuous. Consequently, evolutionary perspectives arrive at gender-specific predictions for relationship development: If men have more alternatives, the risk of separation increases. If women have more alternatives, the chance of cohabitation increases.

We test these predictions on the effect of alternatives for relationship development of non-cohabiting couples using waves 1-7 (2008-2015) from the German Family Panel. Our final sample includes 906 non-cohabiting couples who are followed over time. Several previous studies show that non-cohabiting couples differ across age and life course stages. Therefore, we categorize the couples in our data into the age groups 18-24 (N=436); 25-35 (N=352); 36-44 (N=118). We link this data with official population data from the German Federal Statistical Office to capture the availability of alternatives for both partners using age-specific sex ratios at the district level. Using a multilevel time-discrete event history modelling framework, we analyse couples' transitions with competing risks of (1) remaining in a non-cohabiting relationship, (2) cohabitation, and (3) separation. Our models allow for interactions

between both partners' alternatives to investigate which combination of availability of potential partners influences relationship development. Moreover, we control also for intra-dyadic characteristics like employment arrangement, education or age difference, distance and children.

Results reveal a significant association of partner's alternatives for the transition to cohabitation in couples in early adulthood. If women have many alternatives, but men have only few alternatives, chances to move in together increase. For separation, the effects show that the risk for separation is highest when men have many and women have few alternatives, but the association is not significant. These gender-specific effects become insignificant in later age cohorts. We do not find any significant associations of alternatives with relationship development for non-cohabiting couples aged 25-35 or 36-44.

Our study helps to find a deeper understanding of highly transitory non-cohabiting partnerships. Our study contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, it is the first study that analyses the role of alternatives for relationship transitions of non-cohabiting couples. Previous studies limit their analyses to married couples or coresidential partnerships. Second, on a theoretical level, our work integrates social exchange theory as well as ideas from demographic opportunity theory and evolutionary theory. This approach allows for a multidisciplinary view on consequences of alternatives and the investigation of gender-neutral and gender-specific hypotheses. Third, previous studies only analyse co-residential couples, which implies both partners are part of the same local partner market. However, when analysing couples living in separate households, and often in different districts, it is possible to examine the effects of alternatives in a dyadic perspective. Particularly, we are able to investigate the influence of good or poor partner market prospects for either partner and sex-specific effects of unbalanced availability of alternatives.