

Public Abstract

First Name: Jacquelyn

Middle Name: J

Last Name: Benson

Adviser's First Name: Marilyn

Adviser's Last Name: Coleman

Co-Adviser's First Name:

Co-Adviser's Last Name:

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Title: From Living Apart, to Living-Apart-Together: Older Adults Developing a Preference for LAT

As a result of increased life expectancy, rising divorce rates, and declining marriage and remarriage rates, cohorts of older Americans have experienced remarkable changes in norms surrounding patterns of partnering and family formation. New ways of “doing family” have become more prevalent, particularly in terms of how romantic partnerships are enacted and maintained. Older adults have shown interest in engaging in a form of non-marital partnering – Living-Apart-Together, or LAT, relationships. LAT relationships are committed intimate partnerships between unmarried individuals who live in separate homes but identify themselves as a couple. To gain a better understanding of what factors are important in deciding to enact an LAT relationship in later life, this dissertation explores the LAT relationships of adults age 65 or older residing in the Midwest. Twenty-five men and women were interviewed and asked questions about how they decided to LAT, rather than cohabit or marry. These LAT partners were also asked to describe how they maintain their relationships. Results suggest that deciding to LAT in older adulthood is experienced differently for men and women, and the process involves seven contributing factors, including: personal and relational goals, age, health, partner factors, relationship history, historical time, and relationship beliefs. Some partners were opposed to the LAT lifestyle – wishing to eventually cohabit or marry. Others were ambivalent about being in an LAT and recognized both benefits and drawbacks to the arrangement. Finally, many championed the LAT lifestyle, viewing it superior to marriage or cohabitation and promoting LAT as the ideal way to enact romantic relationships in later life. Whether LAT partners were opposing, ambivalent, or champions of the arrangement depended on the degree to which they had reconciled their relationship beliefs regarding long-held and often-ingrained beliefs about romantic relationships. Those who viewed LAT as an ideal arrangement - or at least minimally recognized its benefits - engaged in two strategies for maintaining their relationships. They maintained separateness (or retained autonomy) in certain domains of life and redefined what it means to be committed to their partners, allowing themselves to have different expectations and/or a sense of obligation compared to what they may have expected in past relationships. The results of this study suggest that older adults experience LAT in varied ways. Not all older adults are satisfied with being in an LAT, although most recognize its benefits and enjoy the independence the LAT arrangement offers individuals. As norms about romantic partnering and the aging experience continue to evolve, exploring the ways in which older adults “do” romantic relationships and identifying the mechanisms underlying how romantic relationships are enacted and negotiated in late life are important contributions to our greater understanding of the ways in which relationships impact wellbeing across the lifespan.