

Conceptualizing LAT Relationships among Unmarried Older Adults in Later Life

Huijing Wu

Department of Sociology

Bowling Green State University

## Abstract

This study investigated living apart together (LAT) relationships in older adulthood by using data from the 2011 Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS). Scant research in the United States has examined LAT relationships, particularly using quantitative data. This study constructed an innovative, new measure of LAT relationships in later life. First, I conceptualized LAT relationships by using a set of questions about dating behaviors, relationship features, and demographic characteristics in older adulthood. Second, I examined expectations of cohabitation and marriage to assess whether LAT relationships are a new family form, distinctive from cohabitation and marriage. Nearly all LATs (93%) reported no expectations to either cohabit or marry, reinforcing the notion that LAT relationships are a distinctive family form in older adulthood.

Rapid changes in union formation and dissolution have occurred among older adults in recent decades. Unmarried baby boomers have increased since 1980 (Lin & Brown, 2012), and the gray divorce rate doubled between 1990 and 2010 (Brown & Lin, 2010). The increases in singlehood among older adults imply that they have the potential to form a new partnership. However, most researchers focus on marriage or cohabitation among older adults, ignoring non-coresidential relationships, such as dating or living apart together (LAT). Prior research has shown that only modest proportions of older singles repartner through either cohabitation or remarriage after marital dissolution in later life (Brown, Lin, Hammersmith, & Wright, 2018). Older singles are usually categorized as unpartnered in national surveys, which cannot capture the patterns of partnerships accurately because indicators of non-coresidential relationships are lacking. Older singles may go out dates or be in a LAT relationship.

LAT relationships have been discussed increasingly in recent years and have become more accepted in European countries (Connidis, Borell, & Karlsson, 2017; Haskey, 2005; Haskey & Lewis, 2006; Karlsson & Borell, 2005; Levin, 2004; Liefbroer, Poortman, & Seltzer, 2015; Pasteels, Lyssens-Danneboom, & Mortelmans, 2017; Stoilova, Roseneil, Crowhurst, Hellesund, & Santos, 2014; Tai, Baxter, & Hewitt, 2014). However, little research examines LAT relationships in the United States. Most of these studies in the United States are qualitative (Connidis et al., 2017) and the national estimates of LAT relationships are limited.

This study used an innovative approach to conceptualize LAT relationships among older adults. The Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS) collected a set of questions about dating behavior that allow researchers to define LAT relationships. The WLS also provided questions about expectations of cohabitation and marriage that can help us to answer the research question: are LAT relationships are a new family? Additionally, we can compare LAT relationships with

cohabitation to examine whether LAT relationships are an alternative to cohabitation or marriage.

## Background

The work of Connidis et al. (2017) summarized that LAT is characteristically defined as a chosen, intimate relationship between partners who are committed to LAT and each other for the long-term and who live in separate homes. Some researchers view LAT relationships as a new family form, and others see LAT relationships as a stepping stone to cohabitation or marriage (Levin, 2004; Connidis et al., 2017). Researchers have examined reasons why people are in LAT relationships to clarify whether LAT relationships are a new family form (Duncan & Phillips, 2011; Duncan, Carter, Phillips, Roseneil, & Stoilova, 2014; Liefbroer et al., 2015; Benson & Coleman, 2016b). For example, some people choose LAT relationships because they feel it is too early to live together with their current partners, and some people simply reject cohabitation or marriage due to their previous negative experiences in coresidential relationships (Roseneil, 2006). However, important questions regarding the definition of LAT relationships remain unanswered. The definitions of LAT relationships are varied and widely debated (Amato & Hayes, 2014; Connidis et al., 2017; Duncan & Phillips, 2010; Levin, 2004).

Researchers have discussed two main perspectives on LAT relationships. One perspective sees LAT as an innovative type of relationship that is associated with individualism and emerges from the context of the Second Demographic Transition (Levin, 2004; Strohm et al., 2009; Upton-Davis, 2012; 2015). In this perspective, individuals seek intimate relationships, but not necessarily marriage or a relationship that involves living in the same household. LAT relationships are long-term committed relationships. Individuals in LAT relationships are unlikely to have intentions to live together or get married, especially among older adults (Benson & Coleman, 2016b; Duncan

et al., 2014; Strohm et al., 2009). LAT relationships seem to be an alternative to cohabitation or marriage. In this context, some scholars think LAT relationships are a new family form.

The other perspective is that LAT relationships operate less as a new family form and more as a practical response to life course constraints, such as financial issues (Haskey & Lewis, 2006; Turcotte, 2013). From this perspective, individuals who are LATs will tend to transition into cohabitation or marriage, and this is particularly likely among young adults (Coulter & Hu, 2017). Therefore, LAT relationships may resemble dating relationships and not a new family form (Duncan & Phillips, 2011). LAT relationships are an intimate relationship in response to the demands of life circumstances or personal needs. If life circumstances or personal needs change, individuals or couples may change their intimate relationships. It also implies LAT relationships are short-term and often unstable. Especially, young individuals in LAT relationships were more likely to move into living together or even break up than older individuals in LAT relationships (Régnier-Loilier, 2015).

The debates of those two perspectives are associated with the measurement of LAT relationships. Most national surveys do not collect data to ask non-coresidential relationships. Previous research has indicated that lack of appropriate quantitative data has led to weak measurement of LAT relationships (Strohm et al., 2009). The other possible issue about the measurement of LAT relationships is that early research on LAT relationships did not examine age differences specifically. In recent studies, scholars have demonstrated that the reasons why individuals are in LAT relationships differ by age (Duncan et al., 2013, 2014; Lewin, 2017). LAT relationships have unique meanings in older adulthood (Benson & Coleman, 2016a), and older adults are likely to remain LAT relationships (Lewin, 2017; Régnier-Loilier, 2015). The perspective of LAT as a new family form may appropriately explain why older adults choose LAT

relationships in later life. Thus, researchers may have inaccurate results for measuring LAT relationships if they do not examine LAT relationships separately for the young and older populations.

Past studies have yielded some crucial correlates of being in a LAT relationship that may help to conceptualize LAT relationships. Age is one of the main factors to consider. Older adults in LAT relationships have different demographic characteristics and motivations from young adults. Connidis et al. (2017) argued that LAT relationships among older adults have different meanings and should be categorized as another type of relationship which they termed LLAT. In their article, they did not provide a specific definition for LLAT. The reason for the term LLAT is that Connidis and her colleagues want to emphasize the unique features of LAT in later life.

LAT relationships provide the opportunity to have a committed relationship that can protect the autonomy and limit the obligations of older adults. Older adults feel uncomfortable calling their partner 'boy/girlfriend' (Benson & Coleman, 2016a; Connidis et al., 2017) which also signals different meanings of LAT relationships. Older adults often have responsibilities to family members, such as children or aging parents, and these responsibilities may decrease their willingness to be in a new coresidential relationship. Children in particular play an essential role for unmarried older adults in LAT relationships. Having children increased the probability of being in a LAT relationship versus a coresidential relationship (De Jong Gierveld & Mert, 2013).

Other explanations for choosing or staying in LAT relationships are related to personal autonomy or independence. LAT relationships may also help to avoid gender inequities in cohabiting relationships (Funk & Kobayashi, 2016; Kobayashi, Funk, & Khan, 2017). LAT relationships can provide unmarried older adults who experienced divorce or widowhood with a fulfilling intimate relationship but also ensure they maintain a significant degree of autonomy at

the same time, especially among older women (Karlsson & Borell, 2002; 2005). LAT relationships not only have the potential to protect older adults against the erosion of autonomy in an intimate relationship, but also to avoid the erosion of resources following relationship dissolution (Upton-Davis, 2012; 2015).

The research about expectations of cohabitation and marriage may raise a question: whether LAT relationships are an alternative to cohabitation or even an alternative to marriage. If LATs are satisfied in their current relationships, LAT relationships may be a new form of family, and an alternative to cohabitation or marriage. Little research on LAT relationships considers expectations of cohabitation and marriage. Expectations of cohabitation and marriage are also associated with age. Prior research shows that older adults in long-term relationships are likely to live apart together and do not think about cohabitation necessarily (Malta & Farquharson, 2014). As age increased, the probabilities of expecting to live together or get married decreased (Coulter & Hu, 2017; Reimondos, Evans, & Gray, 2011). Strohm et al. (2009) predicted expectations of marriage by comparing cohabitation and LAT relationships in the United States. The findings indicated that individuals in LAT relationships are less likely to expect to marry than cohabitators. A recent study showed that individuals in LAT relationships are less likely than daters to expect marriage in the future (Brown, Manning, Payne, & Wu, 2016). However, those studies did not examine differences of expecting marriage by age. Thus, it is unclear whether older adults in LAT relationships are less likely to expect to marry than older adults in cohabitation. Researchers need to explore why older adults in LAT relationships are reluctant to live together or get married.

### The Current Study

This study is comprised of two parts. The first part of this study is designed to identify what characteristics are related to older adults in LAT relationships. I gather information about

LAT relationships by presenting descriptive statistics. I define LATs as those who have a steady partner and whose relationship duration with their partner is one year or more. Then I show descriptive statistics by demographic characteristics, relationship features, and expectations of cohabitation and marriage among LATs. Social and economic demographic characteristics, self-reported health, traditional gender ideology and autonomy are all included for descriptive statistics. I hypothesize LATs are not economically disadvantaged. Thus, LATs are likely to have high educational attainment, be employed, have high personal income, and live in a private home. Older adults who had coresident children are unlikely to have increased probabilities of being in LAT relationships (De Jong Gierveld, 2004; De Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013), thus LATs are expected to more often have coresident children. LATs are unlikely to live alone. LATs may also receive social supports from their children. Most LATs experienced divorce or widowhood. LATs may have good health generally. Additionally, researchers found that LAT relationships are an important type of relationship among older women (Upton-Davis, 2012). Thus, I expect that older women are more often in LAT relationships than older men. Maintaining autonomy and holding more non-traditional gender role attitudes may lead to older adults choosing LAT relationships, particularly among women (Karlsson & Borell, 2002, 2005; Upton-Davis, 2012; 2015).

The second part of this study examines expectations of cohabitation and marriage among older adults in LAT relationships to clarify whether LAT relationships function as an alternative to cohabitation or marriage. I use multivariate analyses to examine what factors are related to expectations of cohabitation and marriage among LATs. I also include older adults who are cohabiting to do a comparison of expecting to marry. Comparing expectations of marriage between LATs and cohabitators helps me to explore whether LAT relationships are different from cohabitation and marriage.



If LATs are unlikely to expect to cohabit and marry in the future, it implies that LAT relationships may be an alternative to cohabitation or marriage, respectively. Previous research showed that cohabitation is an alternative to marriage for older adults (Brown et al., 2012). Additionally, LAT relationships are similar to cohabitation in that they are unlikely to be formalized through marriage (Reimondos et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2016). Scant research examines the expectations of marriage by comparing LAT relationships and cohabitation. Understanding whether LAT relationships and cohabitation are distinctive can provide researchers new insights into intimate relationships in later life. It also helps to clarify the debate about whether LAT relationships are a new family form. I hypothesize that LATs are less likely to expect to get married than cohabitators because LAT relationships have unique meanings and are different than cohabitation.

## Method

### *Data*

Data came from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS). The WLS is a longitudinal survey that includes 10,317 men and women who graduated from Wisconsin high schools in 1957. The graduate respondents were born between 1938 and 1940. The WLS not only interviewed graduates but also included a randomly selected sibling of these graduates. The birth years of the sibling sample were between 1930 and 1948 (N=7928) (Herd, Carr, & Roan, 2014).

This study used data from the wave of 2011 CAPI, including the sample of graduates and siblings. There are several advantages of the WLS. First, the WLS has a series of questions about dating behaviors in the 2011 survey that allows researchers to conceptualize LAT relationships. Second, the WLS asks questions about whether unmarried respondents expect to live together or

get married to their partners in the future. These two questions allow this study to examine the expectations of union formation among older adults who are in LAT relationships. Finally, respondents who are cohabiting are also asked about their expectations of marriage. Comparing expectations of marriage between cohabitation and LAT relationships can help us to answer the research question: are LAT relationships an alternative to cohabitation or marriage?

The original sample size in 2011 was 9,684 respondents. The majority of those respondents were born between 1930-1948, including 6,152 graduates and 3,532 siblings. The graduates are homogeneous in age, but ages of siblings vary widely. Sewell, Hauser, Springer & Hauser (2003) indicated that the ages of selected siblings were mainly ten years older to ten years younger than the graduates. In 2011, the range of age was from 71 to 74 years old among graduates and was from 51 to 93 years old among siblings.

Nineteen cases were excluded from the analytic sample because they were missing valid information about relationship status. This study focused on older adults who were in LAT relationships and cohabitation, thus the sample excluded another older adults (N=9,181).. The final analytic sample in this study was 484 respondents who were aged 50 and older, including 250 respondents were in LAT relationships (52%) and 234 respondents were in cohabitation (48%).

### *Measures*

#### *Dependent variables*

This study examines expectations of cohabitation and marriage to understand whether LAT relationships are a new relationship type and are different from cohabitation and marriage. The expectation of cohabitation was created by using the question “How likely is it that you and partner will decide to live together without being married?” The label values were 1” Definitely won’t live

together,” 2 “Probably won’t,” 3 “About a 50-50 chance,” 4 “Probably will,” and 5 “Definitely will live together.” Respondents who refused to answer this question or reported “don’t know” were coded as missing values. Three respondents answered “Already live together,” indicating an actual behavior rather than the expectation of cohabitation. Thus, those cases were excluded to reduce bias in measurement. The expectation of cohabitation is a continuous variable that was coded from 1 to 5. Higher scores represented higher chances that respondents expected to live together with their partners in the future.

The expectation of marriage was coded by using the question “How likely is it that you and partner will get married?” The original coding values were 1 “Definitely won’t get married,” 2 “Probably won’t,” 3 “About a 50-50 chance,” 4 “Probably will,” and 5 “Definitely will get married.” Respondents who refused to answer this question or reported “don’t know” were coded as missing values. Seven cases were coded as “Other specify” in data. Because the survey did not provide more information about these cases, it is unclear what the actual expectation of marriage was for those respondents. These cases were coded as missing values. Three respondents reported “Already married” that may lead to bias in the analysis. Hence, those cases were also coded as missing values. The expectation of marriage is a continuous variable that ranged from 1 to 5. Higher scores represented higher chances that respondents expected to get married to their partners in the future.

### *Independent variables*

LAT relationships and cohabitation were coded as binary variables. Unmarried respondents were coded as cohabitators if they reported that they are living in a marriage-like relationship or cohabiting. Respondents who were neither currently married nor cohabiting answered series of questions about dating behaviors. I used two questions to define LAT

relationships. The first question is: “Do you go out on dates?” Respondents who reported “yes” were asked: “Do you regularly date one person that you consider your steady partner?” Then, I calculated relationship duration among respondents who reported that they go out dates and regularly date with their steady partner. If relationship duration was less than one year, they were not categorized as LATs. Thus, LATs were defined as respondents who go out dates and have a steady partner, and their relationship duration is one year or more.

Relationship duration is a continuous variable and was created by using questions about the length of relationship with a partner. For respondents who are in LAT relationships, the survey asked the length of relationship with a partner by unit and number. The unit included days, weeks, months, and years. The unit of the length of relationship was coded into years. After calculating the unit and number in the length of relationship, I created years of relationship duration in LAT relationships. Respondents who reported less than 365 days, 52 weeks, or 12 months in their relationships that were coded as 0 “less than one year.” Respondents who reported more than one year were coded as numbers of years in their relationship duration.

For relationship duration of cohabitators, I calculated the beginning year of cohabitation by using the century month for the beginning of current cohabiting relationship. Then, I subtracted the beginning year of cohabitation from the survey year (2011) to get total years of relationship duration in cohabitation. If the number of relationship duration was 0, it means that relationship duration was less than one year.

The frequency of getting together with a partner in the last week is a continuous variable. This variable was created from the question: “How many days last week did you get together with your partner?” The range of values was from 0 to 7. Respondents who reported less than one day of getting together with a partner in the last week were coded as 0.

### *Control Variables*

Control variables are several social and economic demographic characteristics, self-rated health, traditional gender ideology and the scale of autonomy. Age is a continuous variable that was created using year of survey (2011) minus participants' birth year. Educational attainment was coded as a series of dummy variables: less than a high school degree or high school degree (reference group), some college, Bachelor's degree, and Master's degree or higher. The presence of children was coded as three categories: respondents had children but did not live with their children, respondents had children who live with them, and respondents were childless (reference group). Marital status was coded as three categories, including never married (reference group), divorced or separated, and widowed. Living alone is a dummy variable (1=yes, and 0=no). Employment status was categorized as currently unemployed (reference group) and currently employed. Total personal income was calculated from all sources of income, such as wages, salaries, social security, or pensions. It is a continuous variable and measured in dollars. The ownership of the home was coded as a dummy variable: the respondent rented in a private residences (reference group), or the respondent owned a private residence. Self-rated health was a five-point scale that ranged from poor to excellent.

Traditional gender ideology was created by using three questions in the survey. The questions include "to what extent do you agree that a working mother can establish just as warm and secure of a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work?", "to what extent do you agree that when a husband and wife make decisions about buying major things for the home, the husband should have final say? (reverse code)", and "to what extent do you agree that it is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family? (reverse code)" Responses ranged from 1 "Strongly Agree" to 5 "Strongly

Disagree.” Higher values reflected more traditional beliefs about work and family. These items were consistently used to measure gender ideology in previous research (Davis, 2011).

The scale of autonomy was created by three items: “to what extent do you agree that you have confidence in your opinions even if they are contrary to the general consensus?” (reverse coded), “to what extent do you agree that you are not afraid to voice your opinions, even when they are in opposition to the opinions of most people?” (reverse coded), and “to what extent do you agree that it is difficult for you to voice your opinions on controversial matters?” For each item, responses range from 1 “strongly agree” to 6 “strongly disagree.” The scale sums responses across the three items and ranges from 3 to 18. Higher scores indicate higher levels of autonomy. The scale of autonomy followed Magee (2006)’s analytic strategy to verify autonomy is distinct from the other dimensions of Ryff’s scales of psychological well-being.

Variables have some invalid cases because respondents did not offer their responses, or their answers were inappropriate for analysis. Seven variables have some invalid cases in this study. The number of the lowest missing was 1 case for employment status and the highest missing was 104 cases for the scale of autonomy. The average of missing values was 7% in the analysis. The analysis managed those missing values by using multiple imputations in regression models.

### *Analytic strategy*

First, I will examine how to define LAT relationships. I use several dating questions to determine older adults who have an intimate partner but do not live together. Additionally, I examine relationship duration to signal if older adults in LAT relationships have long-term relationships (Hasky, 2005; Duncan & Phillips, 2011). Scholars indicated long-term relationship duration can help researchers to focus on the most stable relationships and discard less committed

relationships when measuring LAT relationships (Castro-Martín, Domínguez-Folgueras & Martín-García, 2008). The descriptive statistics show all variables among LATs, including social and economic demographic characteristics, relationship features, self-reported health, the level of traditional gender ideology, and the level of autonomy.

Next, I will measure expectations of living together and getting married among LATs by using ordered logistic regression models. I will predict what factors are associated with the expectations of cohabitation and marriage among LATs. The first ordered logistic regression model is the expectation of living together among LATs, with controls for social and economic demographic characteristics, relationship features, self-reported health, traditional gender ideology, and autonomy. The second ordered logistic regression model is the expectation of marriage among LATs, net of all control variables.

Finally, I will examine the expectation of marriage by comparing LATs and cohabitators. The ordered logistic regression model will compare the levels of expecting to marry among LATs and cohabitators, controlling for the scale of autonomy, traditional gender ideology, relationship features, self-reported health, and all social and economic demographic characteristics.

## Results

### *Demographic characteristics among LATs and cohabitators*

The results of demographic characteristics in Table 1 showed that those in LAT relationships were more often women than men. Among LATs, 52% were women and 48% were men. Among cohabitators, 51% were men and 49% were women. The average age among

LATs was 71.1 years old. Cohabitators were younger than LATs. The average age among cohabitators was 69.7 years old.

Over half of LATs had less than a high school degree or high school degree (52%), and nearly 21% had some college degree. Among LATs, roughly 12% had a bachelor's degree and 15% had a master degree or higher. Cohabitators tended to have lower levels of education. About 57% of cohabitators had no more than a high school degree. The majority of LATs were currently not employed (62%), and 38% were currently employed. Among cohabitators, 64 % were currently not employed and 36% were currently employed. The average total personal income among LATs was \$36,900 which was higher than cohabitators (\$31,673). LATs were not economically disadvantaged when compared with cohabitators.

Among LATs, about 79 % reported that they had non-resident children. Only 7% lived with their children, and 14% reported that they were childless. Cohabitators were more than LATs to have non-resident children than LATs. Among cohabitators, about 83% had non-resident children. Merely 4% lived with their children, and 13% were childless. LATs more often lived alone. Nearly nine-tenths of LATs were living alone (89%). The majority of LATs owned private residence (87%). Cohabitators had 92% that owned private residences. The average score of self-rated health was 3.7 indicating that LATs had good health generally. The average score of self-rated health among cohabitators was 3.7. There is no difference in self-rated health between LATs and cohabitators. Over half of LATs were divorced or separated (52%), 42% were widowed, and only 6% were never married. The majority of cohabitators were divorced or separated (53%). Cohabitators were more likely to be never married (17%) than LATs (6%). However, cohabitators were less likely to be widowed (30%) than LATs (42%). Cohabitators had a longer relationship



duration (13.2 years) than LATs. The mean relationship duration among LATs was 8.7 years. LATs averaged 2.7 days of getting together with their partner within last week.

The average score of traditional gender ideology was 6.5 among LATs. The scores of traditional gender ideology ranged from 3 to 15. Higher values reflected more traditional beliefs about work and family. The finding showed that LATs tended to have less traditional beliefs about work and family. The average score of gender ideology among cohabitators was 6.1, slightly lower than LATs. The scores of autonomy ranged from 3 to 18. Higher scores indicated higher levels of autonomy. LATs tended to have a high level of autonomy. The average score of autonomy was 13.4 among LATs. This result was related to findings of previous research, which emphasized the importance of maintaining autonomy for LAT relationships (Benson and Coleman, 2016b; Karlsson & Borell, 2002, 2005; Upton-Davis, 2012; 2015).

Table 2 shows that few older adults who were in LAT relationships expected to live together in the future. Among older adults who were in LAT relationships, 39% reported that they definitely won't live together and another 37% reported that they probably won't live together. LATs had lower expectations of getting married than expectations of living together. Nearly 47% reported that they definitely won't get married and another 30% reported that they probably won't get married in the future. Compared with older adults who were cohabiting, LATs were more likely to report that they will not get married than cohabitators. Among cohabitators, 39% reported that they definitely won't get married and 34% probably won't get married. Nearly all LATs (93%) reported that they did not expect to live together or get married. The results confirmed that LAT relationships tend to be a new family form for older adults rather than a stepping stone to cohabitation or marriage.

*Ordered logistic regression models of union formation expectation among LATs*

Table 4 showed the ordered logistic regression models of union formation expectation among older adults who were in LAT relationships. The first model examined the expectation of living together among LATs. The finding indicated that women were lower odds of expecting to live together than men. Age was a significant factor that related to the expectation of living together. LATs were less likely to expect to live together when their age increased. Relationship duration showed a significant negative association with the expectation of living together among LATs. When relationship duration was longer, LATs were lower odds of expecting to live together. Days of getting together with a steady partner within last week had a significant positive association with the expectation of living together among LATs. When LATs got together more often with their partners, they had greater odds of expecting to cohabit. LATs who were living alone were less likely to expect to cohabit when compared to LATs who were not living alone.

The second model examined the expectation of getting married among LATs. Gender and age showed significant negative associations with the expectation of getting married. Women who were in LAT relationships were lower odds of expecting to marry when compared to men. When LATs became older, they were less likely to expect to marry than LATs who were younger. LATs who owned private residences showed a significant positive association with the expectation of getting married. If LATs owned private residences, they were greater odds of expecting to marry. Relationship duration also had a significant negative association with the expectation of getting married among LATs. When relationship duration was longer, LATs were lower odds of expecting to marry. However, days of getting together with a steady partner within last week did not have statistically significant associations with the expectation of getting

married. LATs who were living alone also did not statistically significant associations with the expectation of getting married.

*The ordered logistic regression model of marital expectation among LATs and cohabitators*

Table 5 examined the ordered logistic regression model of expectations of getting married among LATs and cohabitators. The result found a statistically significant difference of the marital expectation between LATs and cohabitators. LATs were lower odds of expecting to marry when compared to cohabitators. This result confirmed that LAT relationships are different than cohabitation. Women and older age statistically significantly decreased the odds of expecting to get married. Women were less likely to expect to marry than men. When age became older, LATs and cohabitators had lower odds of expecting to marry. Older adults owned private residences that had greater odds of expecting to marry than those who did not live in a private residence. Presence of children was a significant positive association with the expectation of getting married. When compared to older adults who were non-resident children, older adults who were childless had greater odds of expecting to marry. Relationship duration still played an important role. If older adults had long relationship duration with their partners, they were less likely to expect to marry in the future.

## Discussion

This study aims to conceptualize LAT relationships and examine whether LAT relationships are a new family form in older adulthood. Scant research in the United States has examined LAT relationships by using quantitative data. The quantitative data came from the WLS that allowed the researcher to construct an innovative, new measure of LAT relationships in later life. The WLS had a set of questions about dating behaviors and relationship features for

measuring LAT relationships. According to the partnership status and relationship duration, I define LATs as whom those have a steady partner and relationship duration with their partner is one year or more. In the first part, the research results not only showed the definition of LAT relationships but also showed descriptive statistics by demographic characteristics, relationship features, and expectations of cohabitation and marriage among LATs. The findings also provided a general background of LAT relationships among unmarried older adults that can help researchers to conceptualize LAT relationships. The second part of the study focused on examining expectations of cohabitation and marriage among older adults in LAT relationships to clarify whether LAT relationships function as an alternative to cohabitation or marriage. The findings provided explanations for the debate about LAT relationships as a new family form. Understanding whether LAT relationships and cohabitation are distinctive can provide researchers new insights into intimate relationships in later life.

The research results showed that LATs are likely to have high educational attainment, be employed, have high personal income, and live in a private home. The findings supported the hypothesis that LATs were not economically disadvantaged. Previous studies have demonstrated that resident children play an important role when adults are in LAT relationships (De Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013; Lewin, 2017). LATs were more often to have resident children than cohabitators. The result partial supported the hypothesis that children play an important role in LAT relationships. Although the findings of the ordered logistic regression did not find that resident children significantly affect expectations of union formation among LATs. The finding did not support the hypothesis that LATs are unlikely to live alone. LATs had a high proportion of living alone to imply that LATs may have fewer social supports. Roughly half of LATs were divorced or separated. LATs were more than cohabitators to experience widowhood. The findings

supported the hypothesis that most LATs experienced divorce or widowhood. However, previous marital status did not find significant associations with expectations of union formation among LATs when some research emphasized the importance of experiencing divorce and widowhood (Steven, 2004; De Jong Gierveld, J., 2002, 2004).

The finding supported the hypothesis to show that nearly all LATs reported no expectations to live together or marry in the future. LATs tended to remain their current partnerships rather than entering a union formation. Multivariate analyses examined expectations of union formation confirmed that women were less likely to expect of living together and getting married than men among LATs. The increase in age also declined the intentions of union formation in the future. Those findings provided the same results as prior studied that gender and age are important factors of being LAT relationships (Bildtgård & Öberg, 2017; Lewin, 2017). The findings supported the hypothesis that LAT relationships are an important type of relationship among older women (Upton-Davis, 2012). Researchers have argued that autonomy plays an important factor for women who chose to stay in LAT relationships (Karlsson & Borell, 2002; Upton-Davis, 2012; Ayuso, 2019). However, there was little evidence to support that LATs were reluctant to live together or get married because they want to maintain autonomy.

Finally, this study found that relationship duration is another essential factor that is associated with expectations of union formation. When relationship duration was longer, LATs were reluctant to expect to live together and get married. The finding reflected that older adults who were in LAT relationships remained long-term relationships with their partners (Krapf, 2018). Furthermore, the result indicated that LATs and cohabitators had a different expectation of marriage. LATs were less likely to expect to marry than cohabitators. Older adults who were in LAT relationships tended to be in a stable and long-term state and had fewer intentions to

cohabit or marry in the future (Régnier-Loilier, 2015; van der Wiel, Mulder, & Bailey, 2018). Unlike the debates argued that LAT relationships are less as a family form (Levin, 2004; Coulter & Hu, 2017), this study confirmed the hypothesis that LAT relationships are a new family form rather than a stepping stone of cohabitation and marriage. Older adults see LAT relationships as similar to cohabitation and marriage.

This study confirmed that LAT relationships have unique meanings and LAT relationships are a new family form in older adulthood. Older adults who were in LAT relationships were reluctant to cohabit and marry in the future. LAT relationships were long-term relationships, and LATs were likely to remain their current partnerships. One of the explanations may due to older adults who are in LAT relationships have the uncertainty and ambivalent attitudes toward the partnerships (Benson & Coleman, 2016a, 2016b; Connidis et al., 2017). The uncertainty may be associated with some structural obstacles, such as children or negative experiences of previous marriage. Older adults might not have time to overcome structural obstacles like young adults (Bildtgård & Öberg, 2017). Thus, LAT relationships become another option of partnerships that have flexibility in later life. This study provided a new insight of conceptualizing LAT relationships in the United States by using quantitative data and found that LAT relationships can be a permanent state in an intimate relationship as a new family form in later life.

There are limitations to this study. First, the majority of racial/ethnic groups in the WLS is white. This study cannot measure racial/ethnic differences in LAT relationships. Second, the WLS does not have direct questions about the commitment among LATs. The analysis cannot directly capture the commitment among LATs when commitment may play an important role in expecting future partnerships (van der Wiel et al., 2018). Future research should consider

racial/ethnic differences in LAT relationships and recognize how commitment is associated with LAT relationships in older adulthood. Despite these limitations, this study demonstrates the definition of LAT relationships and confirms that LAT relationships are distinctive from cohabitation and marriage in older adulthood.

## References

- Amato, P. R., & Hayes, L. N. (2013). 'Alone Together' Marriages and 'Living Apart Together' Relationships. In A. Abela & J. Walker (Eds.), *Contemporary Issues in Family Studies* (pp. 31–45). John Wiley & Sons. doi:10.1002/9781118320990.ch3
- Ayuso, L. (2019). What future awaits couples Living Apart Together (LAT)?. *The Sociological Review*, 67(1), 226-244. doi:10.1177/0038026118799053
- Benson, J. J., & Coleman, M. (2016a). Older adult descriptions of living apart together. *Family Relations*, 65(3), 439–449. doi:10.1111/fare.12203
- Benson, J. J., & Coleman, M. (2016b). Older adults developing a preference for living apart together. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 78(3), 797–812. doi:10.1111/jomf.12292
- Bildtgård, T., & Öberg, P. (2017). New Intimate Relationships in Later Life: Consequences for the Social and Filial Network?. *Journal of family issues*, 38(3), 381-405.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X15579503>
- Bildtgård, T., & Öberg, P. (2017). *Intimacy and ageing: New relationships in later life*. Bristol, UK; Chicago, IL, USA: Bristol University Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctt1t89787
- Brown, S. L., & Lin, I. F. (2012). The gray divorce revolution: Rising divorce among middle-aged and older adults, 1990–2010. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 67(6), 731-741.  
doi:[10.1093/geronb/gbs089](https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbs089)
- Brown, S. L., Lin, I. F., Hammersmith, A. M., & Wright, M. R. (2018). Later life marital dissolution and repartnering status: A national portrait. *Journals of Gerontology Series B*, 73(6), 1032-1042. doi:10.1093/geronb/gbw051



- Brown, S. L., Manning, W. D., Payne, K. K., & Wu, H. (2016). Living apart together (LAT) relationships in the U.S. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America.
- Castro-Martín, T., Domínguez-Folgueras, M., & Martín-García, T. (2008). Not truly partnerless: Non-residential partnerships and retreat from marriage in Spain. *Demographic Research*, 18(16), 443–468. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2008.18.16>
- Connidis, I. A., Borell, K., & Karlsson, S. G. (2017). Ambivalence and living apart together in later life: a critical research proposal. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 79(5), 1404-1418. [doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12417](https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12417)
- Coulter, R., & Hu, Y. (2017). Living apart together and cohabitation intentions in Great Britain. *Journal of Family Issues*, 38(12), 1701-1729. doi: 10.1177/0192513X15619461
- Davis, S. N. (2011). Support, demands, and gender ideology: Exploring work–family facilitation and work–family conflict among older workers. *Marriage & Family Review*, 47(6), 363-382. [doi:10.1080/01494929.2011.594216](https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2011.594216)
- De Jong Gierveld, J. (2002). The dilemma of repartnering: Considerations of older men and women entering new intimate relationships in later life. *Ageing International*, 27, 61–78. [doi:10.1007/s12126-002-1015-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12126-002-1015-z)
- De Jong Gierveld, J. (2004). Remarriage, unmarried cohabitation, living apart together: Partner relationship following bereavement or divorce. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66, 236–243. [doi:10.1111/j.0022-2445.200400015.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-2445.200400015.x)

- De Jong Gierveld, J., & Merz, E. (2013). Parents' partnership decision making after divorce or widowhood: The role of stepchildren. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75, 1098–1113.  
doi:10.1111/jomf.12061
- Duncan, S., & Phillips, M. (2011). People who live apart together (LATs): New family form or just a stage?. *International Review of Sociology*, 21(3), 513–532. doi:[10.1080/03906701.2011.625660](https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2011.625660)
- Duncan, S., Carter, J., Phillips, M., Roseneil, S., & Stoilova, M. (2013). Why do people live apart together? *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 2(3), 323–338.  
<https://doi.org/10.1332/204674313X673419>
- Duncan, S., Phillips, M., Carter, J., Roseneil, S., & Stoilova, M. (2014). Practices and perceptions of living apart together. *Family Science*, 5(1), 1–10. doi:[10.1080/19424620.2014.927382](https://doi.org/10.1080/19424620.2014.927382)
- Funk, L. M., & Kobayashi, K. M. (2016). From motivations to accounts: An interpretive analysis of “Living Apart Together” relationships in mid-to later-life couples. *Journal of Family Issues*, 37(8), 1101-1122. doi:[10.1177/0192513X14529432](https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14529432)
- Haskey, J. (2005). Living arrangements in contemporary Britain: Having a partner who usually lives elsewhere and Living apart together (LAT). *Population Trends*, 122, 35-45.
- Haskey, J., & Lewis, J. (2006). Living-apart-together in Britain: Context and meaning. *International Journal of Law in Context*, 2(01), 37–48. doi:10.1017/S1744552306001030
- Herd, P., Carr, D., & Roan, C. (2014). Cohort profile: Wisconsin longitudinal study (WLS). *International journal of epidemiology*, 43(1), 34-41. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dys194>
- Karlsson, S. G., & Borell, K. (2002). Intimacy and autonomy, gender and ageing: Living apart together. *Ageing International*, 27(4), 11–26. doi:[10.1007/s12126-002-1012-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12126-002-1012-2)

- Karlsson, S. G., & Borell, K. (2005). A home of their own. Women's boundary work in LAT-relationships. *Journal of Aging Studies, 19*(1), 73–84. doi:[10.1016/j.jaging.2004.03.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2004.03.008)
- Kobayashi, K. M., Funk, L., & Khan, M. M. (2017). Constructing a sense of commitment in 'Living Apart Together'(LAT) relationships: Interpretive agency and individualization. *Current Sociology, 65*(7), 991-1009. doi:[10.1177/0011392116653237](https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392116653237)
- Krapf, S. (2018). Moving in or breaking up? The role of distance in the development of romantic relationships. *European Journal of Population, 34*: 313-336. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-017-9428-2>
- Levin, I. (2004). Living apart together: A new family form. *Current Sociology, 52*(2), 223–240. doi:[10.1177/0011392104041809](https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392104041809)
- Lewin, A. C. (2017). Health and relationship quality later in life: A comparison of living apart together (LAT), first marriages, remarriages, and cohabitation. *Journal of Family Issues, 38*(12), 1754-1774. doi:[10.1177/0192513X16647982](https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X16647982)
- Liefbroer, A. C., Poortman, A. R., & Seltzer, J. A. (2015). Why do intimate partners live apart? Evidence on LAT relationships across Europe. *Demographic Research, 32*, 251–286. doi:[10.4054/DemRes.2015.32.8](https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2015.32.8)
- Lyssens-Danneboom, V., & Mortelmans, D. (2014). Living Apart Together and Money: New Partnerships, Traditional Gender Roles. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 76*(5), 949–966. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12136>
- Lin, I. F., & Brown, S. L. (2012). Unmarried boomers confront old age: A national portrait. *The Gerontologist, 52*(2), 153-165. doi:[10.1093/geront/gnr141](https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnr141)

- Magee, W. (2006). Effects of family background on social autonomy at midlife. *Social Science Research*, 35(4), 851–870. doi:[10.1016/j.ssresearch.2004.11.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2004.11.004)
- Pasteels, I., Lyssens-Danneboom, V., & Mortelmans, D. (2017). A Life Course Perspective on Living Apart Together: Meaning and Incidence Across Europe. *Social Indicators Research*, 130(2), 799–817. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-015-1189-x>
- Régnier-Loilier, A. (2015). Neither single nor in a couple in France: What became of them three and six years later. *Analysis of determinants and prevalence of LAT*, 29-53.
- Reimondos, A., Evans, A., & Gray, E. (2011). Living-apart-together (LAT) relationships in Australia. *Family matters*, 87, 43–55.
- Roseneil, S. (2006). On not living with a partner: Unpicking coupledness and cohabitation. *Sociological research online*, 11(3), 1-14.
- Sewell, W. H., Hauser, R. M., Springer, K. W., & Hauser, T. S. (2003). As we age: a review of the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, 1957–2001. *Research in social stratification and mobility*, 20, 3-111. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0276-5624\(03\)20001-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0276-5624(03)20001-9)
- Stevens, N. (2002). Re-engaging: New partnerships in late-life widowhood. *Ageing International*, 27(4), 27-42. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12126-002-1013-1>
- Stoilova, M., Roseneil, S., Crowhurst, I., Hellesund, T., & Santos, A. C. (2014). Living Apart Relationships in Contemporary Europe: Accounts of Togetherness and Apartness. *Sociology*, 48(6), 1075–1091. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038514523697>

- Strohm, C. Q., Seltzer, J. A., Cochran, S. D., & Mays, V. M. (2009). “Living Apart Together” relationships in the United States. *Demographic Research*, 21, 177–214.  
doi:10.4054/DemRes.2009.21.
- Tai, T., Baxter, J., & Hewitt, B. (2014). Do co-residence and intentions make a difference? Relationship satisfaction in married, cohabiting, and living apart together couples in four countries. *Demographic Research*, 31(3), 71–104. doi:[10.4054/DemRes.2014.31.3](https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2014.31.3)
- Turcotte, M. (2013). Insights on Canadian society: Living apart together. *Statistics Canada*. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-006-x/2013001/article/11771-eng.pdf>
- Upton-Davis, K. (2012). Living apart together relationships (LAT): Severing intimacy from obligation. *Gender Issues*, 29(1–4), 25–38. doi:10.1007/s12147-012-9110-2
- Upton-Davis, K. (2015). Subverting gendered norms of cohabitation: Living apart together for women over 45. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 24(1), 104–116. doi:10.1080/09589236.2013.861346
- van der Wiel, R., Mulder, C. H., & Bailey, A. (2018). Pathways to commitment in living-apart-together relationships in the Netherlands: A study on satisfaction, alternatives, investments and social support. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 36, 13–22.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2018.03.001>

Table 1. Mean or Percentage of Demographic Characteristics among LATs and Cohabitators

	LATs	Cohabitators
Gender		
Men	48%	51%
Women	52%	49%
Age	71.1	69.7
Educational attainment		
Less than HS or HS	52%	57%
Some college	21%	16%
BA	12%	12%
MA & MA+	15%	16%
Employment status		
Currently employed	38%	36%
Currently not employed	62%	64%
Total Personal Income	36,900	31,673
Presence of children		
Non-resident children	79%	83%
Resident children	7%	4%
childless	14%	13%
Status of owned home		
Rented or not live in a private residence	13%	8%
Owned private residence	87%	92%
Living alone		
Yes	89%	
No	11%	
Self-rated health	3.7	3.7
Previous marital status		
Never married/single	6%	17%
Divorced/separated	52%	53%
Widowed	42%	30%
Relationship duration (Years)	8.7	13.2
Days of getting together last week	2.7	
Traditional gender ideology	6.5	6.1
Autonomy	13.4	13.9
Sample N (%)	N=250 (52%)	N=234 (48%)

Table 2. Percentage of Expectations of Union Formation among LATs and Cohabitators

	LATs	Cohabitators
Expectation of living together		
Definitely won't live together	39%	
Probably won't	37%	
About a 50-50 chance	16%	
Probably will	6%	
Definitely will live together	2%	
Expectation of getting married		
Definitely won't get married	47%	39%
Probably won't	30%	34%
About a 50-50 chance	15%	12%
Probably will	5%	9%
Definitely will get married	3%	6%
Sample N (%)	N=250 (52%)	N=234 (48%)

Table 3. Percentage of Expecting Union Formation among LATs

Expectation of getting married	Expectation of living together	
	Yes	No
Yes	17%	7%
No	83%	93%

Table 4. Odds Ratios from Ordered Logistic Regressions of Union Formation Expectation among LATs

	Expectation of living together	Expectation of getting married
Gender		
Women	0.41**	0.28***
Ref: Men		
Age	0.90***	0.87***
Previous marital status		
Divorced/separated	0.52	1.59
Widowed	0.53	1.11
Ref: Never married		
Educational attainment		
Some college	1.42	1.81
BA	0.96	0.63
MA & MA+	0.88	1.59
Ref: HS or less than HS		
Employment status		
Currently employed	1.18	1.45
Ref: Currently not employed		
Status of owned home		
Owned private residence	1.33	2.57*
Ref: Rented or not live in a private residence		
Total personal income	1.00	1.00
Self-rated health	0.95	1.17
Presence of children		
Resident children	0.27	0.85
childless	0.69	2.15
Ref: Non-resident children		
Days of getting together last week	1.30***	1.07
Relationship duration	0.97*	0.95**
Traditional gender ideology	1.10	0.98
Autonomy	0.94	0.93
Living alone	0.26*	0.72
cut1	0.00***	0.00***
cut2	0.00**	0.00**
cut3	0.00**	0.00**
cut4	0.01*	0.00*
N	250	250

legend: \* p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\* p<.001



Table 5. Odd Ratios from Ordered Logistic Regression of Marital Expectation among LATs and Cohabitators

	Expectation of getting married
LATs	0.67*
Ref: cohabitators	
Gender	
Women	0.36***
Ref: Men	
Age	0.89***
Previous marital status	
Divorced/separated	0.76
Widowed	0.70
Ref: Never married	
Educational attainment	
Some college	1.37
BA	0.85
MA & MA+	1.04
Ref: HS or less than HS	
Employment status	
Currently employed	1.17
Ref: Currently not employed	
Status of owned home	
Owned private residence	2.16*
Ref: Rented or not live in a private residence	
Total personal income	1.00
Self-rated health	1.09
Presence of children	
Resident children	1.33
childless	2.02*
Ref: Non-resident children	
Relationship duration	0.97**
Traditional gender ideology	0.96
Autonomy	0.94
cut1	0.00***
cut2	0.00***
cut3	0.00***
cut4	0.00***
N	484

legend: \* p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\* p<.001

Appendix

Table 1. Mean or Percentage of Demographic Characteristics among LATs by Expectations of Union Formation

	Expectation of living together			Expectation of getting married		
	Won't live together	Ambivalent	Will live together	Won't get married	Ambivalent	Will get married
Gender						
Men	44%	65%	56%	44%	65%	53%
Women	56%	35%	44%	56%	35%	47%
Age	71	70	68	71.6	70.5	67.2
Educational attainment						
HS or less than HS	53%	46%	53%	56%	41%	47%
Some college	20%	23%	33%	19%	30%	27%
BA	12%	13%	14%	13%	8%	8%
MA & MA+	15%	18%	0%	13%	22%	17%
Employment status						
Currently employed	37%	40%	50%	34%	49%	63%
Currently not employed	63%	60%	50%	66%	51%	37%
Total Personal Income	35,918	45,338	33,769	35,392	51,413	30,051
Presence of children						
Non-resident children	78%	80%	89%	81%	76%	63%
Resident children	7%	10%	6%	8%	3%	11%
childless	15%	10%	6%	11%	22%	26%
Status of owned home						
Rented or not live in a private residence	14%	13%	6%	14%	11%	5%
Owned private residence	86%	88%	94%	86%	89%	95%
Self-rated health	3.7	3.8	3.7	3.7	3.7	3.8
Previous marital status						
Never married/single	7%	3%	6%	5%	16%	0%
Divorced/separated	52%	55%	44%	51%	51%	58%
Widowed	41%	43%	50%	44%	32%	42%
Relationship duration	9.5	5.5	6.8	9.6	6.1	4.3
Days of getting together last week	2.4	3.1	4.8	2.6	2.8	2.7
Living alone						
Yes	89%	88%	83%	88%	95%	84%
No	11%	13%	17%	12%	5%	16%
Traditional gender ideology	6.3	7.4	6.4	6.4	6.6	6.5
Autonomy	13.4	13.6	13.1	13.5	13.1	13.5

Table 2. Mean or Percentage of Demographic Characteristics among Cohabitators by Expectation of Getting Married

	Won't get married	Ambivalent	Will get married
Gender			
Men	43%	76%	68%
Women	57%	24%	32%
Age	70.5	69.7	66.7
Educational attainment			
HS or less than HS	59%	68%	48%
Some college	17%	8%	16%
BA	10%	12%	16%
MA & MA+	14%	12%	19%
Employment status			
Currently employed	34%	32%	48%
Currently not employed	66%	68%	52%
Total Personal Income	27,867	43,658	49,566
Presence of children			
Non-resident children	88%	80%	81%
Resident children	3%	12%	3%
childless	10%	8%	16%
Status of owned home			
Rented or not live in a private residence	8%	0%	10%
Owned private residence	92%	100%	90%
Self-rated health	3.7	3.4	3.7
Previous marital status			
Never married/single	15%	12%	19%
Divorced/separated	54%	44%	58%
Widowed	31%	44%	23%
Relationship duration	13.5	12.2	10.4
Traditional gender ideology	6.0	6.7	6.3
Autonomy	13.9	13.9	13.9