

Transcending Boundaries: Reflections on Conceptualizing Union Formation and Dissolution

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In this presentation, I will discuss four important elements to consider when conceptualizing and measuring union formation and dissolution. First is what I am terming the age paradox, which describes how even as union behaviors are converging by age, age is arguably more significant nowadays because the patterns are trending in opposing directions for younger versus older adults. First marriage, divorce, and remarriage rates are declining among younger people whereas they are stable or climbing for middle-aged and older adults. Second, we focus on individuals and dyads when we study union transitions, but union formation and dissolution affect the entire familial unit. I will address how this contributes to family boundary ambiguity, or uncertainty about who is in versus out of the family and how this might shape union patterns. Relationship ties with adult children tend to be negatively related to repartnering among older parents. Third, when we think about union dissolution and subsequent repartnering, we tend to ignore the possibility of reconciliation. I will discuss why this omission is consequential. Finally, research on union formation and dissolution has focused primarily on co-residential unions, including marriage and cohabitation. However, non-coresidential unions (i.e., LAT relationships) are gaining ground, and I will explore their meaning and significance. As we continue to refine how we conceptualize and measure union formation and dissolution, it is important to interrogate their boundaries. By sharpening our focus on the often blurry, fuzzy edges, we can gain new perspectives on union transitions.