

# Stayovers in emerging adulthood: Who stays over and why?

TYLER B. JAMISON AND CHRISTINE M. PROULX

*University of Missouri*

## Abstract

Emerging adulthood is an intense period of personal development and interpersonal exploration; most emerging adults engage in several romantic relationships of varying commitment levels throughout their late teens and early twenties. The current study explored whether one relationship behavior, *staying over*, is related to specific demographic characteristics, previous experiences, and personal beliefs and attitudes. A sample of 627 emerging adults were surveyed about their experiences with staying overnight with their romantic partners, their reasons for doing so, and their attitudes about full-time cohabitation. Participants who were older, had cohabited at some point, lived independently from family, viewed religion as unimportant, and had positive attitudes about cohabitation were found to be more likely to stay over.

Over the past 50 years, loosening social and institutional norms for intimate relationships have redefined how people proceed from casual dating to permanent commitments. Guidelines for appropriate behavior have faded, allowing individuals to self-define and self-direct the formation of committed partnerships (Larson, Wilson, Brown, Furstenberg, & Verma, 2002). The result is that many people engage in a series of committed and uncommitted relationships rather than taking a direct path to marriage (Arnett, 2004). This pattern is particularly salient during emerging adulthood, a period between the ages of 18 and 29 when some individuals (mostly those in the middle class) experience a delay in the roles and responsibilities associated with adulthood (e.g., spouse and parent),

while they engage in identity exploration and formation.

Emerging adults typically engage in a series of committed, often monogamous relationships, which may or may not involve full-time cohabitation and often do not lead to marriage. Much research to date has focused on cohabiting relationships among emerging adults (Sassler, 2010), but contemporary research points to other nonmarital relationship behaviors about which we know little. For example, several researchers have identified a pattern of behavior called *stayovers* (SOs; also called visiting or part-time cohabitation) in which couples spend the night together frequently, while retaining two separate residences (Arnett, 2004; Jamison & Ganong, 2011; Knab, 2005; Knab & McLanahan, 2007). In their study of union transitions among Black, White, and Hispanic working/lower middle-class cohabitators, Manning and Smock (2005) discovered that participants often had difficulty recalling the precise time that they began cohabiting because they stayed together on and off for varying periods of time before combining households completely. Sassler (2004) identified a similar pattern in her qualitative investigation

---

Tyler B. Jamison, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Missouri; Christine M. Proulx, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Missouri.

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2011 National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, Orlando, FL.

Correspondence should be addressed to Tyler B. Jamison, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Missouri, 314 Gentry Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, e-mail: tylerjamison@mail.mizzou.edu.

of city-dwelling cohabitators. These authors concluded that staying together overnight functioned as a precursor to cohabitation, building in frequency until couples lived together full-time. In contrast, Jamison and Ganong (2011) interviewed 22 emerging adults (mostly college and graduate students) who identified themselves as participating in SO relationships. These qualitative data suggested that SOs were viewed by participants as distinct from full-time cohabitation, with specific relationship boundaries not found among cohabitators (e.g., lower commitment and ability to physically separate during conflict). SOs even occurred among individuals who held strong beliefs against cohabiting before marriage. Little formal research has been conducted on the construct of SOs, despite its potential role in union formation during emerging adulthood. The primary goal of the current study was to understand the nature and prevalence of SOs in emerging adults. We explored the characteristics that distinguish between individuals who stay over and those who do not, the links between attitudes about cohabitation and participation in SOs, and motivations for staying over.

### *Theoretical perspectives*

When studying emerging adults, it is important to consider that relational development occurs during a time of continuing, and often intense, individual development. Emerging adults often navigate years of identity exploration, while they engage in a series of monogamous, yet transitory, relationships (Arnett, 2004; Barry, Madsen, Nelson, Carroll, & Badger, 2009). Thus, we used two developmental frameworks to guide our investigation of SOs: Arnett's (2004) theory of emerging adulthood and Erikson's (1968) stages of identity and intimacy development.

Arnett (2004) described emerging adulthood as a unique developmental stage in which individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 can further explore their personal and relational identities without the responsibilities of parenthood, marriage, or financial independence. He suggested that emerging adults confront two main questions during this period:

"What kind of person am I, and what kind of person would suit me best as a partner through life?" (p. 9). For most emerging adults, engaging in a variety of romantic relationships is a part of answering those questions. Although emerging adults often postpone formal commitments such as marriage, they neither abstain from sexual and emotional intimacy nor do they avoid monogamous unions (Arnett, 2004). They form and dissolve meaningful bonds throughout the early period of emerging adulthood (Raley, 2000). Thus, understanding the developmental context within which emerging adults form romantic ties is important for explaining how these pairings take shape and their consequences for later commitment.

Erikson (1968) described two key stages that occur around the time of emerging adulthood: identity versus role confusion (ages 12–18) and intimacy versus isolation (ages 19–40). Erikson defined the successful negotiation of the identity versus role confusion crisis (achieving ego identity) as a process of reevaluating, discarding, and integrating previous knowledge into a set of personal beliefs. Emerging adults tend to complete this process in several domains, including their occupational aspirations and their romantic ties (Arnett, 2004). Engaging in a variety of romantic pairings is instrumental in gaining knowledge about oneself and others (Erikson, 1968). The next major crisis in Erikson's theory, intimacy versus isolation, is characterized by the creation of meaningful connections to others. Intimacy is achieved through closeness and commitment, whereas isolation is the result of reluctance and apprehension toward intimacy.

Some researchers and theorists, including Arnett (2004), argue that the identity formation process substantially overlaps with the formation of intimate ties (Barry et al., 2009; Montgomery, 2005). Yet, Erikson (1968) generally posited that an individual must complete one stage of development before entering another. In terms of the identity and intimacy stages, Erikson argued that a person must know him- or herself before he or she can make meaningful connections with others; thus, identity should be formed

by the late teens or early 20s—just when emerging adulthood begins. Some of Erikson's writing suggests that he was flexible on this point; he stated that intimacy was a way to "take chances" with one's identity (p. 137), but ultimately he conceptualized development as a series of consecutive stages. Data from emerging adults suggest that their romantic ties are an expression of their dynamic identities, and the interplay of identity and intimacy exploration enhances personal development (Arnett, 2004). Despite their differences, most notably the distinction between identity formation as a stage before intimacy achievement versus identity and intimacy formation as fluidity co-occurring, a key similarity between Erikson's and Arnett's theories is the importance placed on intimacy development during the early 20s.

The pairing of these two theoretical perspectives and their emphasis on the tasks of young adulthood sets the stage for investigating alternative relationship behaviors such as SOs during emerging adulthood. Both theories provide an explanation for why some groups of young people choose to experiment with intimate ties, building close relationships with some partners, while enjoying more casual connections with others. Arnett (2004) contends that this is a normative process during emerging adulthood and produces greater identity development. Erikson (1968) is less specific about the exploration of varied romantic ties, but his description of the intimacy versus isolation stage suggests that exploring and discarding alternatives is part of development and the achievement of intimacy. What remains unclear is how relational ties such as SOs take form and how they connect to more global attitudes and beliefs about relationships.

### *Relationship development*

Earlier and more casual sexual encounters, later marriage, and the rise in rates of nonmarital cohabitation have led to more varied trajectories in how emerging adults form commitments (Brown, 2000; Larson et al., 2002). Along with behavioral changes, acceptance for nonmarital sexual relationships

is increasing. Early and open sexual expression has been paired with delays in marriage for many emerging adults. The average age at first marriage has reached historic highs, 26 and 28 for women and men, respectively (Cherlin, 2010). Emerging adults who pursue a college education often postpone marriage until well after they have completed their educations. Arnett (2004) found that 90% of emerging adults wanted to be married at some point, but not at the time they were interviewed. Willoughby and Carroll (2010) found similar results in their study on sexual values among emerging adults; only 17% of their sample wanted to be married at the time of the study. This suggests that emerging adults are balancing a desire for intimate partnerships with delaying permanent commitment.

The literature to date has focused on cohabitation as one way emerging adults achieve intimacy with a partner without the formal commitment of marriage. Cohabitation is becoming a normative part of adult life in the United States, and patterns of coresidence often begin during emerging adulthood (Smock & Manning, 2004). Three fourths of the current cohort of emerging adults are expected to cohabit outside of marriage at some point in their lives (Arnett, 2004). Both Manning and Smock (2005) and Sassler (2004) used primarily emerging adult samples to explore the motivations for and transitions within cohabiting unions. These authors found that emerging adults often entered into cohabitation without much deliberation, either to solve housing or other practical problems or to spend more time with their partners. The couples in these studies frequently engaged in SOs before cohabiting full-time. These patterns of transitioning to coresidence suggest that some cohabitators may be seeking romantic pairings that have functional and relational benefits but that do not engender legal commitments. More data are needed to substantiate these claims, but qualitative investigations of cohabitation appear to support a multidimensional view of cohabitation, with practical motivations (e.g., housing) often taking precedence over relational ones in the decision to cohabit.

In contrast to retrospective reports from cohabitators, Jamison and Ganong (2011) interviewed individuals currently participating in SO relationships and found that SOs are a distinct relationship form not uniformly viewed as a step toward cohabitation. None of the individuals in the study identified as cohabitators, and even those who stayed together nearly every night maintained boundaries that kept them from feeling or acting like full-time cohabitators. For example, most participants stated that they did not bring a lot of personal items to their partners' homes and kept a minimal number of items (e.g., a toothbrush) there permanently. Also, none of the SO couples combined finances or shared a lease. Perhaps most importantly, participants maintained a sense of separateness between their homes, viewing their own space as uniquely theirs while acting as a guest when they stayed over at their partner's residence. This psychological separation highlights the distinction that individuals made between staying over and living together full-time.

Despite their differences from full-time cohabitators, SO couples did not define themselves as casually dating or just "hooking up." Rather, individuals identified themselves as part of exclusive, committed relationships. Participants reported that they enjoyed sharing a bed with their partners (regardless of whether sexual activity was occurring in the relationship) and found that staying over helped them maximize the time they spent together. Yet, SOs also allowed them to exert considerable control over the pace of their relationships. SOs provided the opportunity for couples to spend unstructured time together, which they liked, and it also helped them to avoid the emotional, practical, and social ramifications of living together full-time (e.g., having to find a new place to live if they broke up).

Jamison and Ganong (2011) concluded from their qualitative study that emerging adults use SOs as a stopgap measure between dating and more serious commitments, such as cohabitation. Researchers have found that young people generally approve of cohabiting relationships and many endorse living together as a good idea (Thornton & Young-Demarco,

2001), but closer examination shows some ambivalence in people's attitudes toward their own coresidence. For example, one participant in the study by Sessler (2004) stated that she denied living with her boyfriend until her girlfriends convinced her that she was cohabiting. She conceded the point, but only after several weeks of denying it, perhaps indicating a reluctance to identify as a cohabitor.

Several participants in the study by Jamison and Ganong (2011) expressed apprehension about cohabiting, stating that they would feel stressed knowing that a break-up would also mean having to find a new place to live. Others were uncomfortable with cohabitation because of how they thought their families would react. These voices encompass another side of the growing positivity toward cohabitation: Most emerging adults think cohabitation is an acceptable living arrangement, but they may have mixed feelings about choosing it for themselves.

#### *Present study*

Much remains unknown about who is likely to stay over and why they do so. Jamison and Ganong (2011) presented some findings about why emerging adults stay over, but the qualitative format did not allow the researchers to investigate the attitudinal, interpersonal, and demographic contexts that drive participation in this relationship form more broadly. The study also did not include individuals who do not stay over; thus, comparisons between those who stay over and those who do not were not possible. This study aimed to explore the attitudes and behaviors of emerging adults with respect to staying over and cohabitation, and more generally evaluated whether SOs facilitate intimacy formation during emerging adulthood. Three exploratory questions, along with theory-based predictions, guided our investigation:

RQ1: *What characteristics distinguish individuals who stay over from those who do not?* On the basis of Erikson's (1968) view that advanced identity formation will lead to more definitive attitudes and more varied

experiences in emerging adults, we predicted that older individuals and those who had positive attitudes about cohabitation would be more likely to engage in SOs (Erikson, 1968). In line with the defining features of emerging adulthood, we expected that individuals who attend college after high school and live either alone or with roommates (as opposed to family) will also be more likely to stay over. Finally, we hypothesized that individuals who identify religion as personally important to them will be less likely to stay over. We explored additional individual characteristics, although we do not make specific hypotheses about them: respondent gender, whether respondents had ever cohabited, family religiosity, and drive to marry (DTM).

*RQ2: Are participants with negative attitudes about cohabitation less likely to stay over compared to participants with positive attitudes toward cohabitation?* We predicted that participants with more positive attitudes toward cohabitation will be more likely to stay over because both involve nonmarital intimacy.

*RQ3: Are the reasons emerging adults stay over with their romantic partners related to the task of building intimacy?* Grounded in theories of emerging adulthood and previous research, we created a new measure assessing the interpersonal and individual reasons for staying over and hypothesized that the experience of staying over is driven by both relational factors and individual preferences.

## Method

### *Recruitment and sample*

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval for the recruitment and data collection procedures, we began the first phase of recruitment on Facebook. The first author sent a link to the anonymous online survey to a network of Facebook users. She also posted the link on the home pages of groups that had

high membership, a theme related to intimate relationships, and/or recent activity on the homepage, as well as on her own profile page. Facebook users were instructed to complete the survey if they were between the ages of 18 and 29, parameters commonly used to distinguish emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). After giving electronic consent, participants completed the survey online. These efforts resulted in 268 survey responses. To increase the sample size and gather responses from the younger spectrum of emerging adults, we also recruited participants by visiting large lecture classes in finance, sociology, and nutritional sciences at a large Midwestern university. Instructors provided the survey link to their students via e-mail but were not aware of which students completed the survey nor did they offer an incentive for participating (e.g., extra credit). An additional 462 responses were collected using this method.

The response rate for this study is unknown, as it is not possible to track the number of people who encountered the link on Facebook and then declined to participate or who were invited in classes and did not respond. However, of the 730 people who started the survey, 12 failed to complete anything beyond the consent form, and an additional 52 completed only the first few demographic questions. These participants were eliminated from further analysis. Respondents above the age of 29 were also removed from the sample before analysis ( $n = 39$ ), leading to a final sample of 627 emerging adults.

Participants were emerging adults ranging in age from 18 to 29. The sample was 87% White, 6% African American, 3% Asian, 3% Latino, 1% Native American, and <1% Pacific Islander. Women made up 75% of the sample and were 21.44 years old on average ( $SD = 2.92$ ). Most had a high level of education (37.3% some college, 37.7% college degree). Men made up 25% of the sample, were 22.05 years old on average ( $SD = 3.01$ ) and also had a high level of education (43.8% some college, 35.3% college degree). Many participants were full-time students (47.5%), while others were part-time students (18.4%), employed full-time (21.5%), or unemployed

(6.2% looking for work, 5.7% not looking for work).

A minority of participants were married (6.8%), cohabiting (9.1%), or engaged (3.7%) at the time of the study. Most participants identified themselves as single (29%) or dating someone exclusively (46.3%), with the remainder identifying as casually dating (12.7%) or remarried (< 1%). The average length of relationship for those who were dating, cohabiting, engaged, or married was 22 months ( $SD = 18.76$ ).

Participants recruited through Facebook tended to be older than classroom respondents ( $M_s = 24.79$  and  $19.85$ , respectively),  $F(1, 622) = 1,081.99$ ,  $p < .000$ , and were more likely to have ever cohabited (43% and 14%, respectively),  $\chi^2(1, N = 627) = 63.58$ ,  $p < .000$ , or married (19.6% and 1.5%, respectively),  $\chi^2(1, N = 627) = 65.44$ ,  $p < .000$ . There were no other significant differences in demographic variables between groups.

## Measures

### Attitudes toward cohabitation

The Attitudes Toward Cohabitation Scale (ATCS) was created for this project. (Full information about scale validation is included in the Results section.) The ATCS is a measure of personal attitudes toward cohabitation, including basic beliefs, perceptions of how cohabitation will affect later relationship transitions, and the benefits of coresidence (e.g., "Sometimes living with someone is a practical solution to financial or housing issues"). Likert-scale items (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) were developed through a review of current research and exploration of other measures of attitudes about cohabitation (e.g., items from the National Survey of Families and Households [NSFH]). The final scale consists of nine items, which are organized into three 3-item subscales: core beliefs, relationship trajectories, and coresidential benefits. Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s for the factors were  $\alpha$  (core beliefs) = .85,  $\alpha$  (relational trajectories) = .66, and  $\alpha$  (coresidential benefits) = .63. Items and factor loadings are listed in Table 1.

Participants also completed 13 items about attitudes toward cohabitation from the NSFH (Sweet & Bumpass, 2002) to assist in establishing construct validity for the ATCS. Respondents were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale (1 = *not important at all* to 7 = *very important*) how important each statement would be if they were considering living with someone (e.g., "It allows each partner to be more independent than does marriage"). Items were grouped into two subscales, reasons someone would want to cohabit ( $\alpha = .76$ ) and reasons they would not want to cohabit ( $\alpha = .74$ ). The ATCS and the items from NSFH were significantly correlated,  $r(626) = 0.59$ ,  $p < .000$ . Items from the NSFH were not used for hypothesis testing.

### Reasons for staying over

The Reasons for Staying Over Scale (RSOS) was also created for this project. (Full information about scale validation is included in the Results section.) The RSOS was created to evaluate why participants might stay over with their partners. Items were generated from a grounded theory study of SO couples (Jamison & Ganong, 2011). Qualitative interviews revealed a variety of reasons for staying over. These responses were transformed into a Likert-scale questionnaire with a responses ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Only participants who indicated having ever been in an SO relationship (those who maintained a routine of overnight dates at least three nights per week, while retaining two residences) were prompted to complete the RSOS. This subset consisted of 391 emerging adults with a mean age of 22 and a racial/ethnic distribution similar to the overall sample. Few had ever married (8.5%), but approximately one third had cohabited with a romantic partner at some point (34%). More than half of this sample was currently in an exclusive dating relationship (55%), whereas the remaining participants were single (19%), casually dating (13%), engaged (3%), married (7%), or remarried (< 1%).

The final scale consists of 11 items. Participants were asked to rate their agreement

**Table 1.** Items, factors, and factor loadings for the Attitudes Toward Cohabitation Scale (ATCS)

ATCS item	Factor	Unstandardized regression weight (SE)	Standardized regression weight
1. It does not fit with my personal belief system to live with someone before marriage	Core beliefs	1.00 (–)	0.91
2. It does not fit with my family's belief system to live with someone before marriage	Core beliefs	0.82 (0.04)	0.71
3. Living with someone before marriage makes the transition to marriage less special	Core beliefs	0.89 (0.04)	0.81
4. Sometimes living with someone is a practical solution to financial or housing issues	Coresidential benefits	0.69 (0.08)	0.50
5. Living with a romantic partner is preferable to living with roommates	Coresidential benefits	1.00 (–)	0.71
6. Living with a partner is a good way to determine whether you are compatible for marriage	Relational trajectories	1.00 (–)	0.81
7. If a couple stays most nights together anyway, it makes sense for them to move in together	Relational trajectories	0.56 (0.05)	0.52
8. Living with a partner is a good thing to do if you are not ready to get married	Relational trajectories	0.55 (0.04)	0.55
9. Living with a romantic partner is better than living alone	Coresidential benefits	1.032 (0.09)	0.72

with statements that completed the stem, “I stay(ed) overnight with my partner because . . .” (e.g., “I value having casual, unstructured time with my partner and staying overnight provides that”). The scale is composed of three subscales: comfort (4 items), relationship development (4 items), and relationship maintenance (3 items). Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s for each subscale were  $\alpha$  (comfort) = .67,  $\alpha$  (development) = .75, and  $\alpha$  (maintenance) = .79. Items and factor loadings are listed in Table 2.

#### *Drive to marry*

The DTM scale assessed participants' desire and intentions to get married (Blakemore, Lawton, & Vartanian, 2005). Participants responded to five 5-point Likert scale items

(1 = *disagree strongly*, 5 = *agree strongly*) such as, “Being married will make me feel proud.” For this study,  $\alpha$  = .85.

#### *Personal, relationship, and family background*

Basic demographic information was collected (e.g., age, gender, education, and race) along with residence and employment information. We asked participants to indicate the percentage of time they lived with family, roommates, alone, or in a dormitory in the 4 years following high school (i.e., < 10%, 25%, 50%, 75%, and 100%). We also asked them to indicate the nature of their work or educational activity for the 4 years following high school (i.e., part-time or full-time

**Table 2.** Items and factor loadings for the Reasons for Staying Over Scale (RSOS)

RSOS item	Factor	Unstandardized regression weight (SE)	Standardized regression weight
1. I like to cuddle and have someone next to me while I sleep	Comfort	0.71 (0.09)	0.47
2. I like being able to hang out with my partner without having specific plans	Relational maintenance	0.65 (0.05)	0.65
3. When we stay in together (e.g., cook dinner and watch a movie), it's nice to be able to just stay overnight	Relational maintenance	0.63 (0.06)	0.66
4. I like going to bed and knowing my partner and I will still have time together in the morning	Comfort	1.00 (–)	0.71
5. I want to see if we would be compatible if we lived together/got married	Relational development	0.82 (0.10)	0.46
6. I value the physical closeness of sharing a bed with my partner	Comfort	0.84 (0.07)	0.69
7. I get to know my partner's quirks and habits	Relational development	1.00 (–)	0.75
8. I can tell my partner more intimate things when we are alone together at night than when we are out on a date	Relational development	1.16 (0.10)	0.65
9. I value having casual, unstructured time with my partner and staying overnight provides that	Relational maintenance	1.00 (–)	0.84
10. It gives me a break from the chaos of my day	Comfort	1.04 (0.09)	0.62
11. It allows me to get to know my partner better	Relational development	1.01 (0.07)	0.79

work, trade school, community college, and 4-year college). Current employment status was assessed (i.e., full-time student, working part-time, working full-time, unemployed not seeking a job, and unemployed and looking for a job) as was current occupation using an open-ended item. Personal and family religiosity were assessed using two questions: "Please indicate how important religious faith is to you personally" and "Please indicate how

important religious faith is in your family." Responses ranged from 1 (*not important at all*) to 7 (*very important*). Participants currently in a romantic relationship reported on their relationship length and coresidential status.

#### *SO relationships*

Individuals who were currently in SO relationships, or had been in the past, were



identified using the question: "Have you ever maintained a routine of overnight dates (stayed over 3 or more nights per week) with a romantic partner, while you still lived in separate homes?" We chose three as the minimum number of nights for two reasons. First, we wanted to exclude long-distance couples that stay the night together during weekend visits (i.e., two nights). By doing this we can show that individuals who otherwise could sleep at their own homes are choosing to stay the night with their partners. Second, we wanted to establish that staying over was a routine in the relationship, something that happened frequently enough to be a central characteristic of the relationship itself. We believe the *routine* of staying over is a defining characteristic of SOs, and we wanted to weed out individuals who stay the night together only occasionally.

Average SOs per week was also assessed using the question: "On average, how many nights per week do you/did you stay overnight with your partner?" Participants who indicated that they had not engaged in an SO relationship were provided with an open-ended field to explain why. As a follow-up to the study by Jamison and Ganong (2011), we asked participants whether they agreed with the phrase "informal cohabitation" as a label for the phenomenon of interest (we later dropped this phrase in favor of "staying over"). A field for open-ended responses was provided here as well. These responses, although not germane to the goals of this study, provided important insight into the phenomenon of staying over.

## Results and Discussion

Our goals for this study were to identify the characteristics that distinguish who stays over from who does not, to determine the relationship between attitudes about cohabitation and participation in SOs, and to explore whether the motivations for staying over are related to intimacy. We approached these goals using a developmental lens, highlighting the relevance of identity and intimacy development during emerging adulthood to explain SO behavior. The hypotheses generated using

these theories were generally substantiated, and these data supply a compelling argument that SOs are well suited to the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood.

### Scale development

To achieve the goals of the study, we created two measures, one about attitudes toward cohabitation and another about motivations for staying over with a romantic partner. The results for both measures are described below.

The original ATCS consisted of 17 Likert-scale items with a response set ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Before analysis, we hypothesized that there would be four subscales within the ATCS: core beliefs (e.g., "It does not fit with my personal belief system to live with someone before marriage"; 4 items), coresidential benefits (e.g., "Sometimes living with someone is a practical solution to financial or housing issues"; 5 items), relational trajectories (e.g., "Living with someone is a good thing to do if you are not ready to get married"; 4 items), and caution (e.g., "Living with a romantic partner is emotionally risky"; 4 items). After careful consideration, we decided that one item, "Living with a romantic partner is beneficial because you always have someone to hang out with" did not fit a priori within a factor. We eliminated it before proceeding.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA; Amos 18.0) was used to test our hypothesized factor structure (Arbuckle, 2007). Analyses were completed using the full sample of 627 emerging adults. Full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation was used to handle missing data, which were minimal (1.1%). The hypothesized model was unidentified because the caution factor was unidentified.

After removing the caution factor, the model was identified and was an adequate fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 211.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ; confirmatory fit index [CFI] = 0.93, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.07), but several items had low factor loadings ( $< 0.40$ ) on their specified latent construct. Eliminating these items (i.e., 8, 12, and 13) improved the model fit ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 110.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = 0.96, RMSEA =

0.07). The final scale consists of 9 items, which loaded onto three 3-item subscales: core beliefs, relationship trajectories, and coresidential benefits.

Before analysis, we hypothesized that there would be four subscales within the RSOS: comfort (e.g., "I like to cuddle and have someone next to me while I sleep"; 7 items), convenience (e.g., "Sometimes I drink too much to drive home"; 4 items), relationship development (e.g., "I get to know my partner's quirks and habits"; 4 items), and relationship maintenance (e.g., "I value having casual, unstructured time with my partner and staying overnight provides that"; 4 items).

CFA (Amos 18.0) was used to test our hypothesized factor structure for the RSOS (Arbuckle, 2007). FIML estimation was used to handle missing data, which were minimal (0.07%). The results indicated that the four-factor model was a poor fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 716.55$ ; CFI = 0.76; RMSEA = 0.07). Furthermore, two items did not load significantly onto their a priori factor: "I want to live with my partner, but I know my parents would not approve"; "I don't want to live with my partner before marriage, but I like staying over with him/her." These items were subsequently removed from the analysis.

The convenience subscale contained four items that loaded poorly or not at all. Attempts to remove these items did not resolve the problems with this latent factor. Further investigation into these items and their content led us to conclude that these items focused on external reasons for staying over, rather than interpersonal ones. Thus, we reduced the model to three factors, retaining the comfort, development, and maintenance subscales. This resulted in improved fit statistics ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 297.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = 0.83, RMSEA = 0.08); however, some items continued to have inadequate factor loadings (standardized regression weight < 0.40).

To improve the fit of the three-factor model, we made some final adjustments to the model. First, we correlated error terms for items that were closely related conceptually or substantively (2 and 14, 7 and 18, and 6 and 7). Each of these correlations was significant ( $p < .01$ ). Next, we removed items that

had a factor loading below 0.40 (1, 5, and 21). These changes improved the overall fit of the model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 226.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.07). The final scale consists of 11 items, which loaded onto three subscales: comfort (4 items), relationship development (4 items), and relationship maintenance (3 items).

### *Hypothesis testing*

First, we were interested in discovering which characteristics distinguish individuals who stay over from those who do not (e.g., age and gender). We performed a logistic regression to determine which variables were significant predictors of staying over. The independent variables for this analysis included respondent gender and age, whether respondent had ever cohabited, living arrangements following high school, personal and family religiosity, DTM, and attitudes toward cohabitation. This model correctly categorized 70% of cases as either staying over or not. Being older, living less than 50% of the time with family after high school, reporting that religion is less personally important, having ever cohabited full-time, and having more positive attitudes about cohabitation all increased the likelihood of participating in SOs (see Table 3 for  $p$  values and odds ratios). None of the other variables was significant predictors of staying over.

We predicted that individuals who were older, lived away from family, and attended college after high school would be more likely to stay over. Findings from the logistic regression partially supported this hypothesis. We can tentatively conclude that personal beliefs and attitudes (such as religiosity) along with more situation-specific variables such as living situation affect the likelihood that individuals will stay over. Our assumption that older individuals might have had more opportunities to stay over was also confirmed. Living away from family predicted SOs, an indication that there are contextual factors that may facilitate staying overnight with one's partner. Going to college after high school, another contextual factor, was not significant, but this may be the by-product of low variability within the sample; 93% of participants attended a 4-year college after high school.

**Table 3.** Results of logistic regression analysis predicting likelihood of staying over

Independent variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>df</i>	Significance	Exp( <i>B</i> )
Age	0.073	0.037	1	0.049	1.076
Gender <sup>a</sup>	-0.255	0.227	1	0.261	0.775
Ever cohabit <sup>b</sup>	1.695	0.318	1	0.000	5.445
Live with family < 50% <sup>c</sup>	0.789	0.264	1	0.003	2.201
Attended college <sup>d</sup>	0.579	0.506	1	0.253	1.784
Low personal religiosity <sup>e</sup>	1.004	0.396	1	0.011	2.730
Low family religiosity <sup>f</sup>	-0.251	0.369	1	0.496	0.778
Drive to marry	0.015	0.021	1	0.456	1.016
ATCS	0.031	0.010	1	0.002	1.031

Note. For continuous variables, higher scores indicated greater age, higher drive to marry, and more positive attitudes about cohabitation. Odds ratios for categorical variables were calculated using the following referents.

<sup>a</sup>Males. <sup>b</sup>Never cohabited. <sup>c</sup>Live with family < 50%. <sup>d</sup>Did not attend college. <sup>e</sup>High personal religiosity. <sup>f</sup>High family religiosity.

#### Attitudes toward cohabitation

In conjunction with our second research question, we hypothesized that participants with more favorable attitudes toward cohabitation would be more likely to have maintained an SO relationship with a romantic partner. In support of this hypothesis, ATCS scores were a significant predictor of staying over in the logistic regression analysis (Table 3), and a *t* test showed significant group differences on the ATCS between individuals who had maintained an SO relationship and those who had not,  $t(623) = 6.153, p < .000$ .

To determine the direction of these differences and to make comparisons across groups, scores on the ATCS were coded into three groups in which low scores (1 *SD* below the mean) indicated more negative attitudes toward cohabitation; scores close to the mean indicated neutral, or perhaps ambivalent, attitudes; and high scores (1 *SD* above the mean) indicated more positive attitudes. In line with our prediction, 80% of participants who had more positive attitudes toward cohabitation had been in an SO relationship and nearly half had cohabited full-time. However, a sizable proportion of people with more negative attitudes toward cohabitation also engaged in SOs (47%) and 10% cohabited full-time. Among those with more neutral attitudes about cohabitation, 64% had stayed over, a proportion consistent with the

full sample (65%). Only 15% of this group had cohabited. Participants with more positive attitudes about cohabitation also stayed over with their partners more nights per week on average ( $M = 4.5, SD = 1.81$ ) than participants with more negative attitudes about cohabitation ( $M = 3.3, SD = 1.58$ ),  $t(122) = -3.65, p < .000$ . These findings suggest that SOs may be viewed differently from full-time cohabitation and are more widespread in emerging adulthood as a consequence. Participants who would not choose to cohabit full-time may choose to stay over as an alternative.

Our data from open-ended questions demonstrate clearer distinctions between how participants perceived SOs versus cohabitation. Many participants felt that staying over engendered more freedom, less responsibility, and less commitment than cohabitation. Participants frequently mentioned that SOs allowed them to leave or send their partners home during conflict or when they wanted to be alone. Most disliked the inclusion of the word *cohabitation* in the phrase *informal cohabitation* because they did not feel that what they were doing was cohabitation. Instead, they valued that staying with their partners could be casual and unplanned and did not involve the entanglements of full-time coresidence. A minority of these responses included the view that staying over was a precursor to cohabitation or at least shared

similarities with full-time cohabitation. One participant explained this logic:

Because when you spend more time together you get more comfortable and start to think of each other's homes as your own. We spent every weekend together without a break from each other and it was like an introduction to living together.

Most participants who responded to this question indicated that SOs have benefits (e.g., freedom and flexibility) that cohabitation does not, and those benefits motivated their decision to stay over. For example, one participant felt that SOs provided balance:

My partner and I made a point to spend time apart, with our respective friends. When we do that, we chose to come back to the same location to also spend time with each other. We try to balance our time among the various parts of our lives.

Another appreciated the freedom from the responsibilities she perceived to be part of cohabitation:

Overnight stays are temporary. Living with a partner adds additional stress and responsibility to those in the relationship. Separate homes allows each person their own personal space and more time to miss the person between meetings.

Finally, some participants, such as the woman quoted below, felt a sense of security knowing that they still had their own space.

We both still have our own places. If I want to leave I can. If I want alone time, I can go home, get away from him. When you live together you don't enjoy that option. Even if you never use it . . . it is still there.

#### *SOs and intimacy*

In line with our third research question, we hypothesized that participants would report that they stay over to build intimacy, while maintaining their own personal interests and

preferences. Because participants did not generate their own reasons for staying over, we examined the extent to which participants agreed with the items retained in our confirmatory factor analysis. Participants tended to agree with the items that provided interpersonal reasons for staying over but agreed less frequently with the items about circumstantial or personal reasons; thus, our hypothesis is only partially supported. Participants agreed that they stayed over because they liked spending the night together after they cooked dinner and had a night in ( $M = 6.03$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ), they liked the physical comfort of sharing a bed with their partners ( $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ), and they valued being able to hang out without specific plans ( $M = 5.72$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ). These findings support the notion that staying over engenders some level of intimacy. The routines that characterize overnight dates occur within couples rather than between casual acquaintances or one-night stands. Thus, individuals appear to stay over in part to explore intimacy with their partners.

We were surprised that participants did not strongly agree with items related to their personal convenience or preferences in the RSOS. In the study by Jamison and Ganong (2011), participants frequently mentioned that they stayed over because they did not want to make the trip home after a late night out, did not want to spend time with their roommates, or wanted to escape a dirty or messy home of their own. Low mean scores for these items in this study ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ;  $M = 2.02$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ;  $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ , respectively, on a scale from 1 to 7) indicated that respondents in this study were, on average, unlikely to agree that these were reasons they engaged in SOs with their partners.

During the confirmatory factor analysis, all the items pertaining to relationship transitions or commitment were eliminated from the RSOS because they did not load satisfactorily onto their a priori factors (i.e., "I want to see if we would be compatible if we lived together/got married"; "I want to live with my partner, but I know my parents would not approve"; "I don't want to live with my partner before marriage, but I like staying over

with him/her”). The fact that none of these items was retained in the scale suggests that our measure of reasons for staying over is not capturing broader indicators about how SOs may be linked to relationship commitment or desires to cohabit.

### *Theoretical implications*

One of the underlying motivations for exploring SOs in a large survey sample was to learn more about the scope of the phenomenon. That 65% of emerging adults in our sample had engaged in SOs is an indication that this relationship form requires additional attention in the research literature, and our findings suggest potential avenues for future research.

Emerging adults are expected to have a series of love relationships before they marry. When they do not, it may be considered risky; they believe that they *should* have these explorations before making an enduring commitment (Arnett, 2004). Our data support this point; SOs were common in our sample, yet more formal commitments (e.g., full-time cohabitation) were less so. In our first research question, we explored the characteristics of who stays over and found that several factors help predict the likelihood of engaging in this behavior (e.g., age, residence, and attitudes toward cohabitation). However, it is important to note that even among groups who we found were less likely to stay over (e.g., those with high religiosity or negative attitudes about cohabitation), a sizable proportion of individuals were still staying over. This suggests that SOs might be an arrangement that helps emerging adults balance competing desires for intimacy and control within the confines of their belief system. SOs also allow emerging adults to leave their possibilities open. They can transition into and out of these relationships without changing residence, and thus they are better able to continue searching for opportunities while enjoying exclusive relationships. A 22-year-old male in an exclusive dating relationship summarized this idea well:

... some audiences may find “cohabitation” too strong or loaded of a word—as if cohabiting means something closer to

getting married or being permanent. I say this but I was in a relationship that was pretty permanent at the time and we both knew it, but we also both knew that we’d never get married . . . so it was a sense of temporary permanence—no definitive end in sight but a mutual understanding that we did not want to be life partners. I feel our age, ambitions, and perceptions of what to expect in our own lives or what we still wanted to experience kept us comfortable with this—whether the perceptions were accurate or not.

Although SOs allowed emerging adults to control the level of commitment in their relationships, individuals appeared to be interested in building intimacy with their partners. In line with Erikson’s (1968) definition of intimacy, they were actively seeking meaningful, if not permanent, bonds with others. One of the reasons individuals engaged in SOs was to spend quality time with their partners. As opposed to going out on dates, SOs provided opportunities for emerging adults to spend unstructured time together and engage in a higher level of self-disclosure. SOs also facilitated the development of physical connections, both sexual and nonsexual.

As the time between embarking on romantic relationships and making permanent commitments expands, young people are finding new ways to engage in intimacy without the constraints associated with cohabitation and marriage. These data show that SOs are a common way to do that, particularly when attitudes about sharing (or not sharing) a residence and external factors (e.g., living away from family) align.

### *Limitations and future research*

The purpose of this study was to explore SOs in the context of emerging adulthood, but restricting our sample to this group has several consequences. First, participants were almost exclusively White and had at least some college education. Whereas diversity within the sample would have been useful and interesting, it is important to note that emerging adults are often White, middle class, and

engaged in higher education. The ability to shed adult responsibilities in the service of self-exploration is a privilege not available to all 18- to 29-year-olds, but future research should explore this relationship stage in more diverse samples. Next, we acknowledge that SOs do not exist only among emerging adults. Although we are not aware of empirical data about SOs in other groups, we hypothesize that single and divorced people in other age groups are likely to engage in SOs. Of particular interest to family scholars should be the role of SOs in postdivorce families with children. It would advance the field to learn about how parents manage overnight dates in the presence of their own or a partner's children, and whether SOs may be a vehicle for avoiding the complications of introducing a cohabiting stepparent. Also, despite the surge of interest in unmarried couples with children, we know relatively little about SOs among this group. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study makes the distinction between parents who live together all the time and those who they refer to as "visiting," but no data have been collected on the role of overnight dates in parenting or relationship maintenance in this group. Thus, there is much left to learn about who is staying over and why.

Aside from exploring this phenomenon in different populations, the next major step in advancing this research is to assess whether SOs affect current relationship quality and the development of long-term relationship commitments. This study helps establish the individual correlates of participation in SOs, but couple-level variables such as relationship satisfaction, relationship stability, and relational commitment have yet to be explored. The quality of relationships during courtship bear heavily on future stability and satisfaction, so understanding how SOs affect relationships is an important extension of this research.

Although SOs are interesting in their own right, their connections to other relationship forms are quite compelling, given widespread concerns about cohabitation and the future of marriage. Thus, a second key step is identifying whether staying over influences couples' propensity to cohabit or marry. Is

staying over part of the trajectory toward marriage or is it a behavior that simply accompanies dating relationships? Answering this question would require researchers to follow individuals longitudinally to evaluate the transitions into and out of SO relationships and more formal commitments.

Finally, the use of new measures, in this case the RSOS and ATCS, limits our ability to draw connections between our findings and the findings of other scholars who study cohabitation and its variations. We felt that the creation of these new measures was necessary, given the dearth of available scales for measuring attitudes toward cohabitation and SOs, but we cannot comment conclusively about their validity and we have no data on their reliability (which for some subscales was marginal) beyond this study. We also have concerns that only three of four of the hypothesized subscales were retained in the CFA for both measures. Future research should further test these scales using larger samples, using multiple samples within one study, and running systematic tests of validity. These efforts would make the measures stronger and bolster the available information about their reliability and validity.

### Conclusion

New and innovative research is building a case that coresidence is a fluid concept with variations and norms that have yet to be fully explored. This study contributes one piece of the puzzle about relationship forms that have previously been off the empirical radar. SOs are a common phenomenon among emerging adults, yet this is only the second study to evaluate its characteristics. Future research should continue to elucidate the pathways into and out of SO unions, their connections to cohabitation, and their role in the development of intimacy among emerging adults.

### References

- Arbuckle. (2007). *AMOS 18 user's guide*. Chicago, IL: SPSS.
- Arnett, J. J. (2004). *Emerging adulthood*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Barry, C. M., Madsen, S. D., Nelson, L. J., Carroll, J. S., & Badger, S. (2009). Friendship and romantic relationship qualities in emerging adulthood: Differential associations with identity development and achieved adulthood criteria. *Journal of Adult Development, 16*, 209–222.
- Blakemore, J. E., Lawton, C. A., & Vartanian, L. R. (2005). I can't wait to get married: Gender differences in drive to marry. *Sex Roles, 53*, 327–335.
- Brown, S. L. (2000). Union transitions among cohabitators: The significance of relationship assessments and expectations. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62*, 833–846.
- Cherlin, A. J. (2010). Demographic trends in the United States: A review of research in the 2000s. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 72*, 403–419.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity, youth and crisis*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Jamison, T. B., & Ganong, L. (2011). “We’re not living together”: Stayover relationships among college-educated emerging adults. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 28*, 536–557.
- Knab, J. T. (2005). *Cohabitation: Sharpening a fuzzy concept* (Working Paper No. 04-05-FF). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, Center for Research on Child Wellbeing.
- Knab, J. T., & McLanahan, S. (2007). Measuring cohabitation: Does how, when, and who you ask matter? In S. L. Hofferth & L. M. Casper (Eds.), *Handbook of measurement issues in family research* (pp. 19–34). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Larson, R. W., Wilson, S., Brown, B. B., Furstenberg, F. F., & Verma, S. (2002). Changes in adolescents’ interpersonal experiences: Are they being prepared for adult relationships in the twenty-first century? *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 12*, 31–68.
- Manning, W. D., & Smock, P. J. (2005). Measuring and modeling cohabitation: New perspectives from qualitative data. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67*, 989–1002.
- Montgomery, M. J. (2005). Psychosocial intimacy and identity: From early adolescence to emerging adulthood. *Journal of Adolescence Research, 20*, 346–374.
- Raley, R. K. (2000). Recent trends and differentials in marriage and cohabitation: The United States. In J. L. Waite (Ed.), *The ties that bind: Perspectives on marriage and cohabitation* (pp. 19–39). New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Sassler, S. (2004). The process of entering into cohabiting unions. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 66*, 491–505.
- Sassler, S. (2010). Partnering across the life course: Sex, relationships, and mate selection. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 72*, 557–575.
- Smock, P. J., & Manning, W. (2004). Living together unmarried in the United States: Demographic perspectives and implications for family policy. *Law and Policy, 26*, 87–117.
- Sweet, J. A., & Bumpass, L. L. (2002) *The National Survey of Families and Households—Waves 1, 2, and 3: Data description and documentation*. Madison: Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin.
- Thornton, A., & Young-Demarco, L. (2001). Four decades of trends in attitudes toward family issues in the United States: The 1960s through the 1990s. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 63*, 1009–1037.
- Willoughby, B. J., & Carroll, J. S. (2010). Sexual experience and couple formation attitudes among emerging adults. *Journal of Adult Development, 17*, 1–11.