

## INTRODUCTION

Dating today is nebulous. Whereas courtship used to follow a traditional track (i.e., from initiation to being exclusive to either getting married or breaking up), dating now has very few rules or clear-cut paths. Relationships take on various forms and progress in a myriad of different trajectories. This ambiguity combined with emerging adulthood lengthening and people waiting longer to marry means that our dating careers are expanding in scope and complexity. Yet, in this new age where technology has afforded us an inconceivable number of options to swipe through, we often go back to our previous partners. Why?

This book tries to answer that question by putting together everything we know about “on-again/off-again” relationships. Although this label typically connotes what we might think of as juvenile or impetuous relationships, the occurrence of breakups and renewals in relationships can have significant implications for current relationship dynamics (e.g., conflict) and long-term outcomes (e.g., divorce) (Dailey, Pfister, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009a; Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013a; Roberson, Norona, Lenger, & Olmstead, 2018; Vennum & Johnson, 2014; Vennum, Lindstrom, Monk, & Adams, 2014; Waters, 2015). Estimates suggest at least half of us dissolve but then renew at least one of our dating relationships (Dailey et al., 2009a; Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013a; Vennum, 2011). As such, it is important to understand how these cyclical relationships develop, their functioning, and how they affect our individual and relational health.

Although we can all conjure a variety of examples of on-again/off-again relationships (e.g., Justin Bieber and Selena Gomez, Prince William and Kate Middleton, Carrie and Mr. Big, your own relationship?), research defines these relationships as any committed, romantic relationship that has broken up and renewed at least once. In other words, partners in these relationships had been exclusive but dissolved their relationship and then subsequently reconciled, and perhaps continuing this cycle several times. I discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this definition in Chapter 1.

We should also differentiate on-again/off-again (on-off) relationships from other types of relationships such as “friends with benefits” and “hook-ups” (see Wentland & Reissing, 2014). Friends with benefits and hook-ups focus primarily on sexual activity – the former involving sex on a repeated basis with a friend who is not an exclusive romantic partner and the latter involving isolated sexual contact with an acquaintance. Both friends with benefits (e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2007; Knight, 2014; Mongeau, Knight, Williams, Eden, & Shaw, 2013; Owen, Fincham, & Polser, 2017) and hook-ups (Montes, Napper, Froidevaux, Kenney, & LaBrie, 2016; Olmstead, Norona, & Anders, in press; Wade, 2017) have received increasing attention in the research as well as in the media and could be the topic of their own texts. Sex, however, is not a defining feature of on-off relationships. Although there are overlaps (e.g., friends-with-benefits relationships and hook-ups could lead to on-off relationships, and vice versa), on-off relationships are more similar to what we typically deem as traditional, committed romantic relationships but with an additional component of multiple relational transitions (i.e., breakups and renewals).

This book attempts to synthesize what we know about these complex relationships, and how they are different from relationships that do not break up and renew, the latter of which we refer to as non-cyclical relationships. Additionally, given that on-off relationships run the gamut of the developmental course of relationships (e.g., initiations, breakups, reconciliations, redefinitions), explicating these relationships offers a means to weave together various strands of research on romantic relationships.

#### ORIGIN STORY

In presentations on this topic, I often begin with how my interest in these relationships started. I’ll do the same here. While in graduate school, I had a friend who was in a relationship that was on, then off, then on, then off, . . . There were so many transitions in their relationship that I could not keep track of whether they were together or not. The report on one Monday would be the fun activities they did over the weekend. The report the next Monday was how they had called it off. Knowing my research interests in dating relationships, my friend once asked me what she should do. Should she give up on the relationship? Should she (could she) try to make it more stable? Up until this point, I had been an intrigued observer. I had never been involved in an on-off relationship and was curious about why she and her partner would continually ride the roller coaster that was their relationship. I am not a counselor – that was, and is, not my training – so I did not feel comfortable offering advice. Yet, being the social science nerd that I am, I thought about what the research on dating relationships might offer her in terms of recommendations.

It was at that point that I realized how the current models and theories of romantic relationships did not easily accommodate on-off relationships. Traditional models of relational development suggest romantic relationships move from initiation to maintenance, and potentially to termination. Importantly, this implies that relationships either remain intact or dissolve. The models theoretically implied there was no further contact between partners after breakups – there was no formal “after dissolution” phase (or what is referred to as post-dissolution relationships; see Chapter 5). Yet, we all know that many ex-partners remain in touch, and their relationships take on different forms (Koenig Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008). We become or remain friends, co-workers, co-parents (e.g., Griffith, Gillath, Zhao, & Martinez, 2017; Gurmen, Huff, Brown, Orbuch, & Birditt, 2017). And sometimes we reconcile.

These models of relationships also reflect the standard conceptualization of stability, which becomes problematic when applied to on-off relationships. Put a pin in that thought while I take a step back. Relationship researchers assess two major outcomes: satisfaction and stability. Obviously, researchers look at a plethora of partner perceptions and behaviors with regard to their relationships, but it really boils down to how these aspects predict or explain satisfaction and stability. And this makes sense, right? Ultimately, we are concerned with whether our relationships make us happy and whether they will last.

Satisfaction is a difficult concept to define. Is it a feeling? A state? And how to measure satisfaction has been the subject of much consideration (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Graham, Diebels, & Barnow, 2011; Heyman, Sayers, & Bellack, 1994). Commonly, researchers view satisfaction as one’s subjective feeling about the relationship – an evaluation of how “good” the relationship is – and measure it through how well the relationship meets their needs or through adjectives such as “pleasant,” “enjoyable,” or conversely “disappointing.”

Stability, on the other hand, is simply defined as whether the relationship remains intact or dissolves. Interestingly, explicating the concept of stability has not received nearly as much attention as satisfaction. Karney, Bradbury, and Johnson (1999), in their treatise on the concept of stability in relationship research, emphasized that researchers had adopted a definition of stability as an endpoint – intact or not. This still appears to be true today. Stability is often measured as a dichotomous variable. As a result, the path, progression, or trajectory of a relationship has, to a certain extent, remained in the background. Although the simplicity of the standard intact versus dissolved measure is functional and advantageous for certain outcomes (e.g., predicting divorce), it can mask the diverse and complex nature of relationship persistence.

Now pulling that pin out, on-off relationships challenge this traditional notion of stability. Using the binary measure as an outcome is not viable when

assessing on-off relationships (Dailey, Middleton, & Green, 2012a; Poole, 2014). At any given point, they might be “on” or “off,” but that status might be likely to change. In other words, that assessment of together or broken up is not necessarily the endpoint or the end of the story for these relationships. (And this is true even when assessing relationships that do not break up and renew – staying together six months, one year, or ten years does not mean that they will remain together until death do them part.) The binary assessment of stability at one point in time might not be very diagnostic of other dynamics in on-off relationships; relationship status might be relatively meaningless to those involved in these relationships. Complicating this idea of stability even further, repeatedly breaking up and renewing seem to be the very essence of instability; yet this could actually be a “stable” pattern for some on-off couples (Dailey, Crook, Brody, & LeFebvre, 2017; Dailey, Brody, LeFebvre, & Crook, 2013a).

Thus, in addition to providing an overview of the research regarding on-off relationships, a major goal of this book is to (re)consider the definition and measurement of stability (see Chapter 6). This explication might not entail a definitive definition, but the issues associated with conceptualizing stability will be unpacked and some additional insights will be offered.

#### CAVEATS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Today, my friend and her on-off partner are happily married and have kids. Depending on how you define success, she and her partner could be a success story in on-off relationships – partners finding a way to make their seemingly unsteady relationship stable and satisfying. Understanding how partners find sure-footing once getting off the roller coaster is an important endeavor. Yet, we should equally focus on what makes for successful breakups. Not all relationships should persist, and we need to understand how to end relationships in ways that minimize the distress for the individual partners. Additionally, although perhaps hard to imagine, some partners might actually desire the cyclical process and find the ups and downs beneficial or exciting. Hence, I take a neutral stance in this book regarding on-off relationships. Whereas some might characterize the cyclical nature of dating relationships as detrimental (and for good reason based on the research to date), there are pockets of evidence that suggest cycling can be advantageous or preferred for some. I see my task as a relationship scientist to understand when and how on-off relationships lead to negative outcomes and when and how they can lead to positive ones. We should see both the good and the bad sides. Thus, despite much of what will be discussed in this book, a cyclical nature is not a death warrant for relationships. Benefits can be gained, regardless of whether partners stay together, permanently dissolve, or continue to cycle.

Although reconciliations can happen after divorce (Tumin, Han, & Qian, 2015; Wineberg & McCarthy, 1994), this book primarily focuses on dating relationships. Reconciling after marital separation and divorce is no less important, and understanding the effects of cycling on later stages of relationships will be a key area of future research. As such, throughout the chapters, I incorporate the few studies that have assessed trends in cycling across relationship status such as cohabitation and marriage (e.g., Vennum et al., 2014). Yet, the research to date has mostly focused on non-marital relationships, and cycling is more common in relationships that do not have legal constraints. Hence, the occurrence of breakups and renewals and its effects while dating will take center stage.

I should also highlight that although being in a romantic relationship is a goal for many, it is not the ultimate goal for all. Some of the points from the research suggest on-off partners prefer companionship over being single. Being single, however, should not be considered “less than.” For some, this is preferred. Just like some couples choose not to have children for a variety of valid reasons, some people might prefer to be single. Bella DePaulo has championed research in this area showing that single individuals are often just as satisfied in life, just as healthy, and often provide valued support to people in their social network (DePaulo, 2006, 2014). Thus, despite some of the conclusions put forth in this book that suggest on-off partners might prefer an oscillating and typically less satisfactory relationship as compared to being alone, this is not meant to suggest that all individuals need, or even desire, a romantic relationship.

#### LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

A team of graduate students and I started on this journey now more than a decade ago. To me, that seems like yesterday. But while recently taking the opportunity to clean out all my files when moving offices, I found transparencies from our first conference presentation on this topic. Yes, those clear plastic sheets used with overhead projectors! (Some younger readers might not even know what I’m talking about.) This made me realize (1) that I’m getting old and (2) that we have come a long way (and not just in the transition from transparencies to PowerPoint). We have learned a great deal of information about these relationships – some of this information is expected, some of it surprising. The diversity of what we know became even clearer to me when we had a symposium at the 2018 International Association for Relationship Research conference that included researchers from a variety of disciplines (many of whom I cite heavily in this book), including Amber Vennum, Kale Monk, Sarah Halpern-Meekin, and Sadie Elder Leder. It was energizing to hear all of us talk about our perspectives and insights. Yet, I feel we have only scratched the surface and there is much left to be gleaned.

If someone were to say that an entire book devoted to cyclical relationships is premature, I might not disagree. But I felt we hit a critical mass in terms of studies, and other than a couple of specific conclusions, we did not have a broad understanding of these relationships. As such, taking a step back to see the “story” of these relationships across the research would be informative. Selfishly, the process of writing this book has been helpful to me in determining which direction to go next in my research, but I hope it is also helpful for any other researchers who are interested in this or related areas. Equally, I hope this book is helpful for anyone who just wants more information on these relationships because they, or someone they know, are in one (Chapters 2, 4, 5, and 7 might be of particular interest to these readers). When assessing the market for this type of book, I was surprised to find no trade or “self-help” books specifically devoted to this topic. I have not read every self-help book, so undoubtedly some authors have touched on this issue. Yet, to my knowledge, only Nancy Kalish’s (1997) *Lost and Found Lovers* specifically details individuals’ accounts of rekindled relationships (those that have renewed after at least five years). But now with several researchers having amassed a substantial amount of research, this book allows for a description of what we know as well as a map for future research.

Throughout the book, I draw on the great work of my brilliant colleagues working on all dimensions of romantic relationships to situate research regarding on-off relationships within the context of what we know about relationships in general. Yet, I will admit that I am unabashedly reviewing the research I have done with my research teams. (But hey, isn’t that one of the great things about writing a book?) And so when I refer to “we,” “us,” or “our research,” I am referring to the great teams of graduate and undergraduate students who have worked with me on this topic. This book also provides an opportunity to detail the trove of unpublished data we have. In these cases, I have provided information on the statistical analyses in the Notes as these cannot be found elsewhere. Additionally, these new analyses are often conducted on compilations of our datasets in hopes of providing more definitive conclusions.

To provide more context on these new analyses, all of our datasets are outlined in the Appendix. These datasets will be referenced throughout the book, particularly when describing analyses of our unpublished data. The Appendix includes basic characteristics of the samples as well as any resulting papers and publications. More information about these samples is also provided along with the analyses in the Notes (indicated by numbers in superscripts in each chapter).

In Chapter 1, I detail the prevalence of on-off relationships and describe the samples from which these data stem. In Chapter 2, I describe how on-off relationships are different from non-cyclical relationships. Chapter 3 reviews theoretical models that have been used to explain on-off relationships. Getting

more specific, Chapter 4 details different types and trajectories of on-off relationships. Using breakups and post-dissolution relationships as a backdrop, Chapter 5 explores why partners renew their relationships. Chapter 6 explicates the concept of stability and how on-off relationships complicate its standard definition. Chapter 7 describes some practical applications that we can derive from the on-off research as well as the general research on romantic relationships. Finally, in gaining a broader view with the previous chapters, Chapter 8 outlines some areas of future research.

So let's start the tour of the research regarding on-off relationships. If you oblige, I will play tour guide by noting the significant attractions as well as a behind-the-scenes look at some of this research. Although I have always been better at seeing and describing the specific trees, my intent is that we will also get to higher ground to see the forest. In doing so, we might see how on-off relationships are informed by, as well as inform, the whole of relationships research.