

Relationship Churning

Understanding on-again/off-again relationships

Sarah Halpern-Meekin



What are churning relationships?

- On-again/off-again relationships
 - Broken up and gotten back together
 - Can occur in dating, cohabiting, and marital relationships
 - Partners may or may not agree on whether they have “churned”
- Some studies also examine having “sex with an ex”
- Topic is understudied—limited data, limited samples



How common is churning?

- Among young adults:
 - Nearly half reported churning in present/most recent relationship
 - Average number of churning episodes: 2.5
 - Over half who broke up continued sexual relationship
 - Nearly 9 in 10 exes who had sex attempted to reconcile

I think we should stop ambiguously dating and start being ambiguously broken up.

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How common is churning?

- Among parents:
 - Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

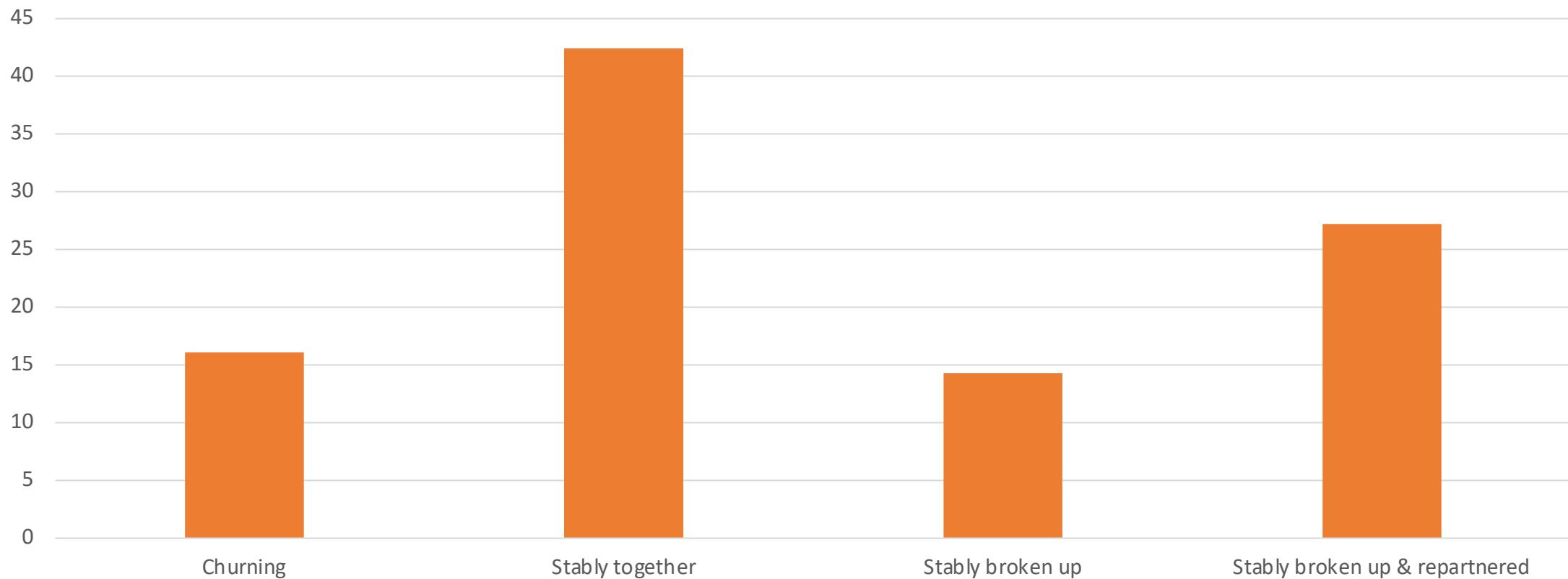
Thanks for always taking me back when my mission to find a boyfriend with less baggage than you keeps failing.



your eCards
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Parents' relationship status by child's 5th birthday

Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study



How common is churning?

- Among adults:
 - Similar across opposite-sex and same-sex relationships
 - Partners can disagree about whether they churned

Relax, I'll see you later in round three of our on-again, off-again ridiculous relationship.



your
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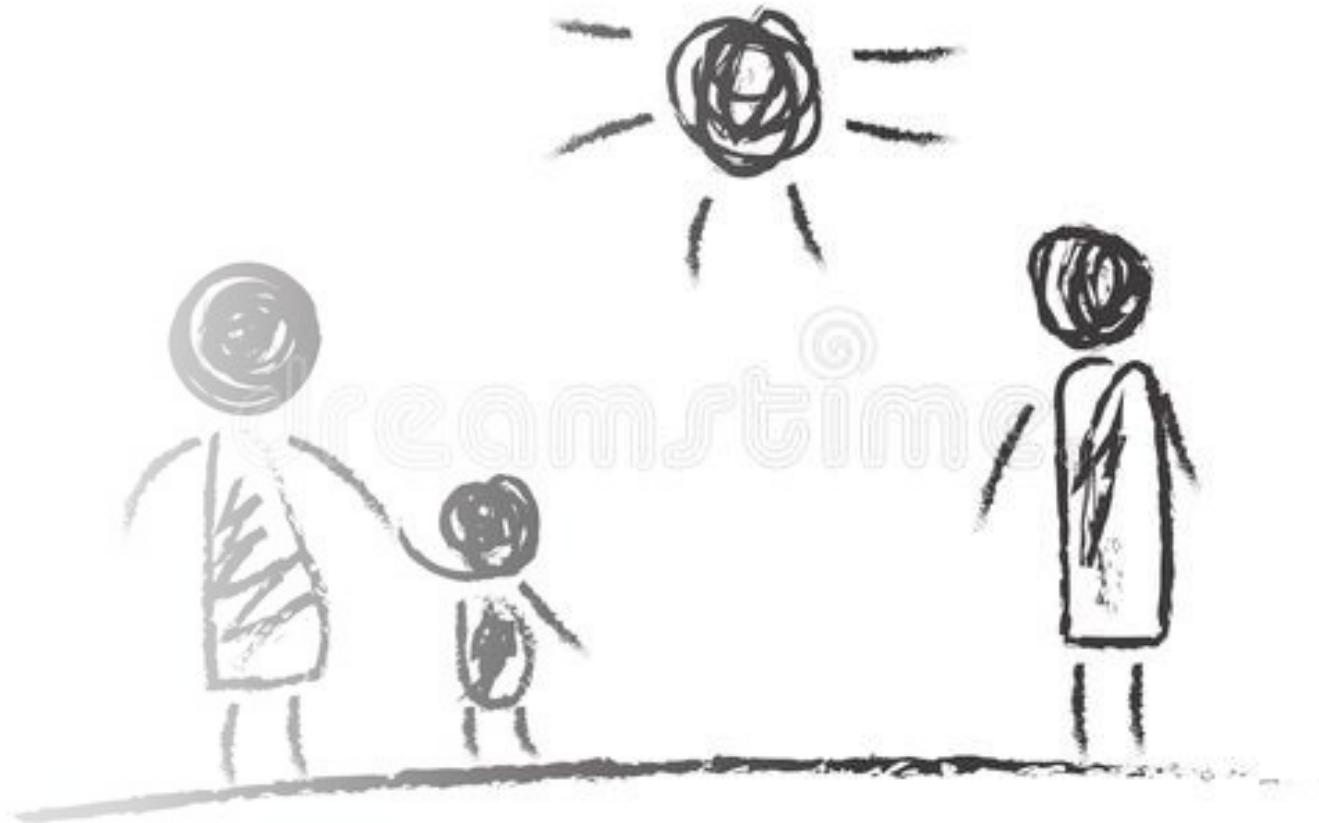
A photograph of two fingers, likely from a child, with faces drawn on them using black marker. The faces are sad, with wide eyes and downturned mouths. Below each face is a red, heart-shaped mark with a black line through it, resembling a broken heart. The background is a plain, light color.

What do we know about churning?

- For individuals
 - One episode predictive of future episodes
 - Including after beginning to cohabit or marrying
 - Predictive of psychological distress, lower relationship satisfaction, lower dedication/commitment, and worse communication
 - But also higher intimate self-disclosure
- Churners more likely to report conflict and intimate abuse
 - Desistance from abuse more likely among those who stably separate than churners

What do we know about churning?

- For children
 - Churning fathers more involved than stably broken up fathers
 - Churning parents report higher parenting stress than stably together or broken up parents
 - Differences in children's outcomes mostly due to demographic and economic characteristics
 - Child internalizing or externalizing
 - Adolescent romantic relationship behaviors
- Churning is not randomly or equally distributed across the population



Why do people get back together?

- Relationship factors
 - One-sided breakup (vs. mutual)
 - Higher intimate self-disclosure
 - Uncertainty about why they broke up
 - Lingering feelings and attachments post-breakup
 - Feeling the breakup improved the relationship
 - Living together (sex with an ex)
- Structural/situational factors
 - Economic distress
 - Incarceration
 - Parents' relationship history
 - Race/ethnicity

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What does churning say about a relationship?

- Buffeted by countervailing forces
- Liminality in status
- Ambiguity in feelings and commitment
- Difficulty managing conflict productively

limi·nal

limənl/

adjective:

1. of or relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process.
2. occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold.

Implications for program administration

Breakups may not be stable

Who is recruited into couple versus
individual relationship education?

How to collect information –
romantically involved or not?

- On participant characteristics
- To assess program outcomes

Implications for program content

Past relationships and partners may be future relationships and partners

Avoid simplistic presentations of relationships

- Not good or bad relationships, partners, etc. – relationships can be experienced as both

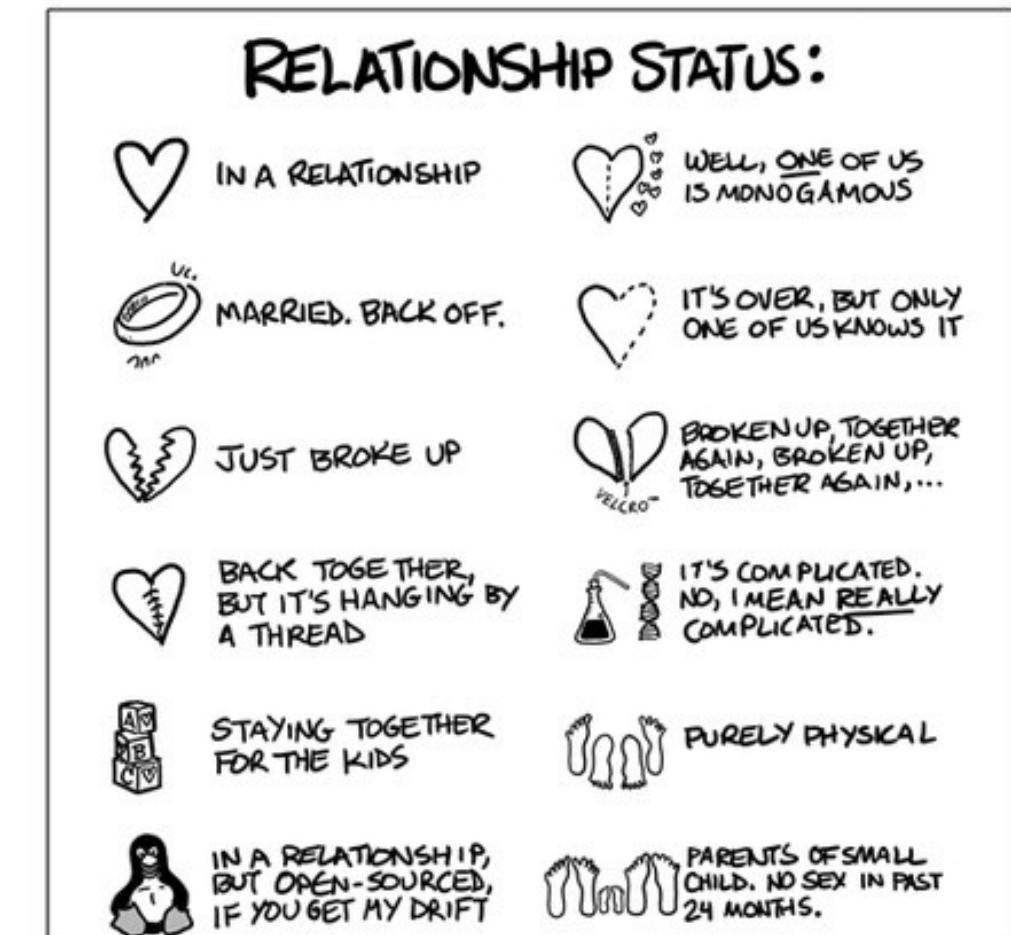
Support deciding, not sliding

- Constraints can make it harder to avoid sliding into reconciliation

Are there ways to help reconciliations be beneficial turning points?

Thank you!

Please be in touch:
sarah.halpernmeekin@wisc.edu



Research on churning

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