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## Consequences of Dating for Post-Divorce Maternal Well-Being

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### Abstract

Repartnering has been linked to health benefits for mothers, yet few studies have examined relationship quality in this context. According to the divorce-stress-adaptation perspective, relationship quality may influence the relationship between maternal well-being and dating after divorce. The current study examines the consequences of dating, relationship quality, and dating transitions (breaking up and dating new partners) on maternal well-being (negative affect and life satisfaction). Using monthly surveys completed by mothers over a two-year period after filing for divorce, we examined changes in intercepts and slopes of dating status and transitions for maternal well-being while also testing the effects of relationship quality. Mothers entering high-quality relationships were likely to report boosts in well-being at relationship initiation compared to single mothers and mothers entering low-quality relationships. Mothers entering lower-quality relationships were likely to report lower levels of well-being than single mothers. Dating transitions were associated with increases in well-being. Implications for maternal adjustment are discussed.

### Keywords

Adult outcomes; divorce; relationship quality; well-being

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Repartnering after divorce is linked to better psychological and physical health outcomes for mothers, as it helps to alleviate the negative effects associated with post-divorce stress (Amato, 2000; Anderson & Greene, 2005; Hetherington, 2003; Skew, Evans, & Gray, 2009; Wang & Amato, 2000). However, this association presumes that *any* repartnering relationship is beneficial for maternal well-being, independent of relationship quality. Only recently have researchers sought to understand the role of relationship quality in dating relationships after divorce, despite previous calls from researchers (Anderson & Greene, 2005; Cartwright, 2010; Langlais, Anderson, & Greene, 2015; Symoens, Colman, & Bracke, 2014). Also, the positive effects associated with repartnering are primarily based on research of post-divorce cohabitating relationships and remarriages rather than on dating relationships

that precede these relationship experiences (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Montgomery, Anderson, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1992; Wu & Schimmele, 2005). Subsequently, previous researchers have viewed repartnering as a static variable, rather than capturing the effects of entering and leaving post-divorce dating relationships (Anderson et al., 2004; Montgomery et al., 1992). Additionally, many mothers may choose *not* to enter romantic relationships after divorce (Hetherington, 2003), which also has implications for maternal well-being. The goal of the current investigation is to examine the effects of mothers' entering, maintaining, and ending dating relationships, as well as relationship quality, on maternal well-being in order to promote post-divorce adjustment.

The focus of the current study is divorced women with primary residential custody of children. These women are distinct from childless women and divorced fathers, as mothers arguably face the most difficulty after divorce, particularly in terms of psychological health, as a result of decreases in family income after divorce, increases in parental responsibilities, and reductions in their social network (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Symoens et al., 2014; Tavares & Aassve, 2013; Wu & Schimmele, 2005). To achieve the goals of this study, we examined different approaches to dating after divorce to capture the impact of relationship quality on varying repartnering transitions: no dating, dating only one partner (single-partner dating), dating multiple partners serially (dating more than one partner after divorce, but the relationships do not overlap), and dating multiple partners simultaneously (see Langlais et al., 2015, for more details).

## Background

### Divorce-Stress-Adaptation Perspective

Divorce is a difficult experience for mothers (Amato, 2000; Wang & Amato, 2000; Zhang & Hayward, 2006), resulting in increased stress that is damaging for maternal health (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wang & Amato, 2000). A prominent model explaining the processes promoting post-divorce stress is the divorce-stress-adaptation perspective, described by Amato (2000). The foundation of this perspective derives from family stress theory, which designates three variables that predict adjustment to divorce: accumulation of stressors, resources for coping with stress, and the definition of the stressful event (McCubbin et al., 1980). Amato (2000) centered on the resources for coping with stress in order to demonstrate how some families cope with post-divorce stress and how other families do not.

According to the divorce-stress-adaptation perspective, adults and children experience one of two different processes of adjustment subsequently after divorce: the short-term crisis model and the chronic strain model (Amato, 2000). With the short-term crisis model, post-divorce stress is relatively brief, with adults and children returning to pre-divorce stress levels. For this model, divorce is a temporary crisis that impedes well-being only in the short term. However, the second process, the chronic strain model, illustrates that the stressors resulting from divorce remain, with the potential to compound over time (Amato, 2000). According to Amato (2000), protective factors predict which of the two processes individual family members experience. For example, mothers who have a steady job have more resources to cope with divorce, which would predict the short-term crisis model. Mothers who do not

have a steady job report more stress from increased financial strain after divorce, which would characterize the chronic strain model. The goal of the current study is to examine whether the relationship quality of post-divorce dating relationships may also be a protective factor predicting these two processes.

### Trends in Repartnering After Divorce

The literature on dating after divorce stems from studies on repartnering (remarriages or transitions into cohabitation) after divorce (Anderson et al., 2004; Anderson & Greene, 2005; Skew et al., 2009), which demonstrates that new relationships are typically beneficial for maternal well-being (Cartwright, 2010; Hetherington, 1999, 2003; Hughes, 2000). In his meta-analysis on divorce and remarriage, Amato (2000) found that many studies reported higher adjustment for divorced individuals who formed new romantic relationships than for those who did not. Even though divorce is associated with loneliness, these feelings are likely to dissipate when individuals initiate new romantic relationships (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003). In addition, new relationships might buffer against post-divorce stress by decreasing mental health complaints, increasing self-esteem, and decreasing depression (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Nevertheless, after divorce, several mothers are uninterested in forming or unable to form romantic relationships (Anderson & Greene, 2011; Hetherington, 2003). Bzostek, McLanahan, and Carlson (2012) argued that many mothers do not remarry because there are a limited number of eligible partners, and mothers with steady jobs have the resources (e.g., confidence from not having to financially rely on a partner) that are necessary to promote well-being after divorce. Mothers also have fewer opportunities to repartner because of breakdowns in their social networks after divorce; and furthermore, parents go out socially less often than do individuals without children (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003). Many mothers choose not to date because the presence of children alone is enough to provide company and support (Skew et al., 2009). On the basis of these studies, dating may be beneficial for mothers but possibly not detrimental if mothers avoid it:

Hypothesis 1: Maternal well-being (negative affect and life satisfaction) is positively associated with the onset of dating (i.e. the intercept) and the length of time dating (i.e. the slope) as compared to when mothers do not date.

### Relationship Quality

Only recently have researchers explored the quality of mothers' post-divorce dating relationships (Langlais et al., 2015; Symoens et al., 2014). A study by Symoens et al. (2014) examined relationship quality for new repartnering relationships with a sample of Belgium mothers. Using conflict, these researchers compared relationship quality across three domains: the former marital relationship, the current relationship with the ex-spouse, and a new intimate relationship. Although conflict with the ex-spouse was damaging for maternal well-being, the researchers found that, independent of conflict in the current dating relationship, new relationships were beneficial for maternal mental health.

Although this study advances literature on repartnering by examining the influence of relationship quality, Symoens et al. (2014) quantified relationship quality through a measure

of conflict. In the dating and marital literature, many researchers have used variables indicative of positive attributes of relationships, such as relationship satisfaction (Mark & Herbenick, 2014) and commitment (Surra, Curran, & Williams, 2009). In a meta-analysis of the Investment Model of Commitment (Rusbult, 1983), by Le and Agnew (2003), relationship satisfaction, investment in the relationship, and attention to alternative partners were significant indicators of whether a relationship would last. Researchers regularly use variables from this model, such as relationship satisfaction and commitment, as indicators of relationship quality because these variables predict relationship stability than conflict does (Hetherington, 2003; Reed, 2007). Couples who experience conflict are more likely to report relationship maintenance than to break up (Surra, Curran, & Williams, 2009). The current study uses measures of relationship satisfaction and commitment to examine relationship quality when mothers date. Presumably, being in a satisfying and committed relationship should be beneficial for maternal well-being:

Hypothesis 2: Entering high-quality relationships is associated with higher levels of well-being than is not dating or entering low-quality relationships; remaining in high-quality relationships is associated with higher levels of well-being than is remaining single or in lower-quality relationships.

### Repartnering Transitions

Previous studies have illustrated that transitions in and out of romantic relationships are associated with changes in maternal well-being (Anderson et al., 2004; Capaldi & Patterson, 1991). Although not always as troublesome as divorce, the experience of breakup in nonmarital relationships is stressful (Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006; Reed, 2007). Breaking up prompts individuals to redefine their self-concept, which is emotionally taxing (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010) and may be likely to increase maternal stress in the context of dating after divorce. In addition, coping with breakup may also be difficult for mothers, who commonly have a smaller social network of support after divorce (Tavares & Aassve, 2013):

Hypothesis 3: Post-divorce breakups and length of time single after breakup are associated with lower levels of well-being at the time of breakup.

Few studies have examined the effects of entering in a new relationship after a dating or repartnering breakup. After divorce, mothers can date more than one partner, either serially (dating one partner, breaking up, and then dating someone new after the breakup) or simultaneously (dating multiple partners at the same time; Langlais et al., 2015). Both approaches have implications for maternal well-being. Mothers who leave a dating relationship in favor of a better relationship should improve maternal well-being, assuming that a mother upgrades, meaning entering a higher-quality dating relationship than the previous dating relationship, and maintains the new relationship. However, mothers who date multiple partners simultaneously may decrease well-being, as navigating multiple romantic roles may increase stress because of higher numbers of relationship transitions (Rodgers & Conrad, 1986; Wang & Amato, 2000). Capaldi and Patterson (1991) found that mothers who reported more relationship transitions after divorce were more antisocial, which increased familial stress. Because serial dating may not involve as many transitions as simultaneous dating, serial dating may be beneficial for mothers, assuming that they upgrade

their relationship, in contrast to mothers who simultaneously date and are likely to report multiple relationship transitions. Therefore, dating serially may be beneficial for maternal well-being, whereas dating multiple partners simultaneously may be adversely related to maternal well-being:

Hypothesis 4: Entering subsequent dating relationships (dating serially) and maintaining these relationships is positively associated with maternal well-being.

Hypothesis 5: Entering and maintaining simultaneous dating relationships is negatively associated with maternal well-being.

## Method

### Participants

Data for this study come from a longitudinal study of parental repartnering after divorce and its influence on child and family outcomes (Texas Families Project; Anderson & Greene, 2005). Eligible families were those with an elementary-school-aged child (i.e., kindergarten through fifth grade) who resided with their mother at least 50% of each week ( $N = 319$ ). At the baseline assessment, legal divorce had occurred for 25% of the families (in data collection, the waiting period before a divorce could be legally granted was 60 days). This was the first divorce for 77% of mothers, the second divorce for 15% of mothers, and more than the second divorce for 8% of mothers. The average length of marriage was 122.26 months (range: 8–321 months) and the average length of separation from their former spouse was 14.56 months (range: 0–103 months). All children who participated in the study were the biological or adoptive children of the parents who were ending the current marriage. The children were almost evenly split by gender (52% female) and the mean number of children living in the household was 2.07 ( $SD = .90$ ). The average age of the participating child was 7.77 ( $SD = 2.0$ ). Median age of mothers was 36.8 (range: 21–53 years). The majority of mothers were non-Hispanic white (64%), whereas the rest of the sample was Hispanic (27%) and African American (9%). Level of mothers' education varied from less than high school (9.4%) to doctoral degree (1.3%), with the median education being a two-year associate's degree. Although 82% of the mothers were working in a paid position at least part time, 23% of mothers received some means of governmental assistance. There were no eligibility criteria in regard to repartnering status at the baseline assessment, nor was there a requirement for the child to know whether his or her parent was dating. With regard to repartnering status, almost half of mothers were in a new relationship after divorce at baseline (44.5%), whereas 26.5% reported interest in dating and 29% reported no interest in dating. By the two-year follow-up, 86% had reported being in a serious relationship, with an additional 24% reporting a breakup of a serious relationship. During the study, 27 mothers remarried and 109 mothers reported cohabitation with dating partners. Descriptive statistics for the study sample based on mothers' dating approaches are reported in Table 1.

### Procedures

Divorce petitions were obtained from public court records for a large metropolitan city in the southwestern United States during the year. Any woman who filed for divorce over a period

of 60 days (during the spring of 2004) was mailed recruitment brochures to the most recent address provided (987 mothers were mailed brochures). This brochure explained the purpose of the study (to better understand divorce and related transitions) and informed mothers that they would receive a follow-up phone call to answer any questions and describe the study in greater detail. Each brochure contained \$1.00 as incentive for mothers to read its contents and respond to the phone call. A research firm made follow-up phone calls to each mother who was mailed a brochure to verify a family's eligibility. Subsequently, 363 eligible families were invited to participate in a get-acquainted visit in the family's home to answer questions about participation. Eighty-eight percent of families who agreed to the get-acquainted visit accepted participation in the study ( $N = 319$ ). Baseline, 12-month, and 24-month interviews took place in mothers' homes, which incorporated interviews and self-report questionnaires completed by mothers and children. In addition, mothers completed monthly surveys over the course of the study, starting at the baseline assessment that continued for up to 24 months. Mothers were given the option of completing the diaries online through a password-protected website or through the mail. Mothers reported on their own well-being and information for one or multiple romantic relationships per survey (if they were dating), including the date the relationship began or ended and relationship quality. The mean number of monthly surveys completed was 14.58 (out of 24 possible; median = 13;  $SD = 9.71$ ; range: 1–28), and 91% of mothers completed at least three surveys. Mothers were compensated \$5 for each monthly survey. Loss of participants over time occurred as a result of various factors, including ineligibility (primarily reconciliation or changes in custody; 5%), temporary loss of contact (participants completed the 24-month assessment but not the 12-month assessment), and dropout (6%). Data for the current study come from mothers' monthly surveys, which provide more reliable and consistent data of mothers' dating after divorce than do the annual assessments.

## Measures

**Repartnering initiation and length of relationship**—Mothers reported their relationship status on each monthly survey for each partner they dated during that month. Mothers selected one of the following options concerning their repartnering status for each partner: 1 (*interested but not yet romantically involved*), 2 (*never romantically involved, and now no longer interested*), 3 (*in a casual romantic relationship*), 4 (*in a serious romantic relationship*), and 5 (*romantic relationship was casual or serious, but has ended*). This information was encompassed in a discrete-time, person-period data set, with each line of data corresponding to a monthly survey a mother completed. In this data set, a dichotomous variable signaled whether a mother began a relationship that month (variable = 1, when mothers first report a 3 or 4), and another variable measured the time spent in that relationship (time since she first reported a 3 or 4) until a breakup or the end of the study. When a mother was not in a relationship, the dichotomous variable and time variable alternated back to zero. A similar approach, but different variables, signaled when mothers began or maintained serial dating relationships (a new dating relationship) or simultaneous dating relationships (dating two people on the same monthly survey). Mothers not dating had zeros for these variables.



**Repartnering breakup**—Mothers who broke up with a romantic partner responded with a 5 to the question previously described (“relationship has ended”). The date that the breakup occurred triggered a dichotomous variable to alternate from a 0 to 1. This variable also included temporary breakups, where some mothers broke up and got back together with the same partner. A slope variable corresponding to time since breakup was recorded until the mother entered a new relationship or reached the end of the study. Over the course of the study, 63 mothers reported 92 breakups for 74 different partners (18 mothers broke up and got back together with the same partner).

**Negative affect**—On each monthly survey, mothers responded to 13 items examining negative affect using a scale based on Anderson and Greene's (2011) study of repartnering. Example items include “In the past month how often have you experienced trouble focusing on household chores?” and “In the past month how often have you experienced feelings of helplessness?” Response choices for this scale ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*most or all the time*) and displayed adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .78). Mothers' average negative affect per monthly survey assessment was 1.55 ( $SD = .63$ ).

**Life satisfaction**—Life satisfaction was measured using the monthly surveys and was based on Anderson and Greene's (2011) study of repartnering. This scale contained eight items, which included examples such as, “In the past month how often have you experienced satisfaction with your life?” Response choices for this scale ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*most or all the time*). These items showed acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .81). Mothers' average life satisfaction per monthly survey assessment was 2.68 ( $SD = .62$ ).

**Relationship quality**—Mothers reported their level of relationship satisfaction and commitment for each romantic partner listed on their monthly surveys. Mothers responded to the following question considering satisfaction with her repartnering relationship, “All things considered, how happy or unhappy has the relationship with this person been this past month?” Response choices ranged from 1 (*very happy*) to 6 (*very unhappy*) and was reverse-scored for ease of interpretation. Mothers reported an average score of 3.35 ( $SD = 2.52$ ) for this item at each monthly survey. Mothers also reported their level of commitment by responding to the item “How likely is it that you will have a long-lasting or permanent, romantic relationship with this person?” with response choices ranging from 1 (*very likely*) to 5 (*very unlikely*). This item was also reverse-scored for ease of interpretation. Mothers reported an average commitment score of 2.63 ( $SD = 1.58$ ) per monthly survey. Because these measures were highly correlated,  $r(4228) = .94, p < .01$ , they were summed together to provide a single measure of relationship quality (range: 0–11;  $M = 5.98$ ;  $SD = 4.10$ ).

**Control variables**—At the baseline assessment, mothers reported demographic information. Mothers designated their race as White, Black, or Hispanic, which was dichotomized for analyses (0 = *White*; 1 = *non-White*). Concerning education, mothers were asked, “What is the highest grade in school you completed or the highest degree you received?” Mothers responses ranged from 1 (*8th grade or less*) to 13 (*advanced college degree, doctoral*), with 7 representing *some college, less than 2 years*. Regarding income,

mothers were asked, “Thinking about the income you will receive during the current year from all sources, like wages or salary, child support, alimony, income from your own business, unemployment, anything like that, what is your best guess what your income before taxes will be?” Mothers' responses ranged from 1 (*less than \$5,000 per year*) to 17 (*\$80,000 or more*), where subsequent responses represented a \$5,000 boost from a previous response (i.e., 2 = *\$5,000 to \$9,999*). Mothers also reported the age and number of children as well as length of marriage and separation from their former spouse. In addition, during each annual assessment, mothers indicated if their romantic relationship transitioned into cohabitation and/or remarriage.

## Data Analysis

To address the study hypotheses, we conducted multilevel models using hierarchical modeling techniques (HLM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). This approach accounts for discontinuous time, as mothers started and ended relationships at different times during the study. HLM also accounts for missing data using full maximum likelihood; however, no data were missing at the between-person level for this data set. For the current study, missing data occurred (at random) only when mothers failed to complete a monthly survey. Therefore, all 319 mothers were included in study analyses. Before testing hypotheses, we examined changes over time for each measure of maternal well-being independent of hypothesized predictors, to provide a baseline model for negative affect and life satisfaction. This model provides the estimated trajectory for each dependent variable for a prototypical mother when she is not dating. For study hypotheses, we added additional intercept and slope terms to capture discontinuous change for each relationship transition, as recommended by Singer and Willett (2003). For instance, the first hypothesis states that entering and maintaining a repartnering relationship predicts increases in maternal well-being. To conduct this analysis, we add the intercept of repartnering (the dichotomous variable indicating when mothers are dating) and slope (length of time dating) on maternal well-being to the baseline model (see Equations 1–3):

$$WB_{ij} = B_{0i} + B_{1i}(\text{TIME}_{ij}) + B_{2i}(\text{PARTNERED}_{ij}) + B_{3i}(\text{PARTNEREDTIME}_{ij}) + e_{ij}, \quad (1)$$

$$B_{0i} = B_{00} + \mu_{0i}, \text{ and} \quad (2)$$

$$B_{1i} = B_{10} + \mu_{1i}, \quad (3)$$

where  $WB_{ij}$  refers to the measure of maternal well-being (either negative affect or life satisfaction),  $PARTNERED_{ij}$  refers to the dichotomous variable signaling the beginning of a relationship for mother  $i$  at time  $j$ , and  $PARTNEREDTIME_{ij}$  refers to the length of time in the dating relationship and captures the effect of slope during times when mothers are in a relationship versus when they are not. The residual components are represented by  $e_{ik}$ ,  $\mu_{0i}$ ,



and  $\mu_{1j}$ . All other Level 2 equations are fixed and, therefore, not displayed. On the basis of this model, we can capture changes in elevation from the baseline model of maternal well-being when mothers enter a relationship (*PARTNERED* = 1) and changes in the slope based on how long mothers remain in that relationship (*PARTNEREDTIME*). Mothers who did not date over the course of the study were the reference, as they would have a 0 for both *PARTNERED* and *PARTNEREDTIME*. Figure 1 provides an illustration of using multiple intercepts and slopes, as described by Singer and Willett (2003) and illustrated in other studies (e.g., Murnane, Willett, & Boudett, 1999). The top-left graph in Figure 1 illustrates a hypothetical baseline model for mothers concerning a theoretical dependent variable. The top-right graph demonstrates a change in elevation at the initiation of a repartnering relationship and a change in slope when maintaining that relationship for this hypothetical dependent variable. By including an additional intercept and slope term to the baseline model, we capture potential changes in elevation and slope for negative affect and life satisfaction when mothers enter and maintain dating relationships.

For the second hypothesis, relationship quality is included as an additive term to the previous model. Mothers who are not in a relationship would not have a measure of relationship quality or the other repartnering variables, again making mothers who do not date the reference group. The third hypothesis predicts that breaking up is negatively associated with maternal well-being. For this analysis, we included a dichotomous variable signifying the occurrence of a breakup and a slope variable indicating time single since breakup to the previous model. The bottom-left graph of Figure 1 illustrates a change in elevation and slope at the time of breakup concerning a hypothetical dependent variable by adding these terms to the previous model.

The fourth hypothesis predicts that entering and maintaining serial dating relationships is positively associated with maternal well-being. Consistent with previous approaches, we added a new intercept and slope term designating when mothers began serially dating and how long mothers dated serially. The bottom-right graph of Figure 1 provides an illustration of the trajectory for a hypothetical dependent variable for mothers who report serial dating. The fifth hypothesis predicts that simultaneous dating is negatively associated with maternal well-being. For this analysis, rather than add to the previous model, we replaced the variables for serial dating with intercepts and slope terms designating simultaneous dating, because these variables are highly correlated. When mothers reported simultaneous dating relationships, relationship quality was averaged across relationships in order to have a single measure of relationship quality for that monthly survey. All analyses controlled for the following variables by including them as Level 2 predictors in each model: maternal age, race, education, income, number of children, age of youngest child, length of marriage, length of separation, and whether or not a dating couple cohabitated or remarried during the study. In addition, we report Akaike and Bayesian information criteria (AIC, BIC) and  $R^2$  for model fit, as described by Woltman, Feldstain, MacKay, and Rocchi (2012).

## Results

The results for each hypothesis are displayed in Table 2 (negative affect) and Table 3 (life satisfaction). On the basis of baseline models, negative affect decreased significantly over

time but life satisfaction remained relatively consistent during the course of the study. The first hypothesis predicted that beginning and maintaining a dating relationship, compared to not dating, would be positively associated with maternal well-being. As evidenced by the significant intercept, beginning a relationship was associated with declines in negative affect and increases in life satisfaction; however, there were no significant effects of the slope for either measure of maternal well-being. At relationship initiation, the intercept of mothers' negative affect was .08 lower than that of mothers who did not date, and the intercept for life satisfaction was .19 higher than that of mothers who remained single. In examining  $R^2$ , 2% of the variance was explained by these models .

The second hypothesis predicted that relationships of higher quality would be positively associated with maternal well-being, as compared to being single or in low-quality relationships. Relationship quality was significantly associated with negative affect and life satisfaction. Mothers in higher-quality relationships reported higher levels of well-being than mothers not dating, whereas mothers in lower-quality relationships reported lower levels of well-being than mothers not dating. These results are illustrated in Figure 2, which portrays a prototypical mother at any given time in the study regardless of dating approach. Mothers reporting higher-quality relationships tended to exhibit the highest levels of well-being; however, single mothers typically reported slightly lower levels of well-being than mothers in high-quality relationships.  $R^2$  values indicate that these models explained 3%–4% of the variance.

The third hypothesis predicted that breaking up would be negatively associated with maternal well-being. For both negative affect and life satisfaction, relationship quality and post-partner intercept were significant. Mothers tended to report increases in well-being at the time of breakup, which was inconsistent with our predictions. On the basis of these results, the intercept of negative affect at time of breakup was  $-.13$  lower and  $.11$  higher for life satisfaction than for mothers who did not experience a breakup. We did not find any significant effects for length of time single after breakup. The fourth hypothesis predicted that serial dating relationships would be positively associated with maternal well-being. For these models, relationship quality and post-partner intercept remained significant, while only the intercept of entering new subsequent dating relationships was significant for mothers' life satisfaction. Mothers reported a  $.08$  increase in life satisfaction when they entered a subsequent dating relationship over mothers who did not begin serial dating. We did not find any significant effects for length of time dating serially. The fifth hypothesis predicted a negative association between beginning and maintaining simultaneous dating relationships and maternal well-being. Contrary to our hypothesis, there was a significant, positive relationship between life satisfaction and the onset of simultaneous dating. The intercept for life satisfaction increased by  $.13$  when mothers started dating simultaneously compared to when mothers did not date simultaneously. For both negative affect and life satisfaction, relationship quality and post-partner intercept remained significant. Each of these models explained 4%–5% of the variance.

Across each model, we found consistent significant effects for a few control variables depending on the dependent variable. For negative affect, mothers who identified as any non-White race were likely to report less negative affect than were mothers identifying as

White. For life satisfaction, entering into cohabitation and/or remarriage, as well as education, contributed to mothers' reports of life satisfaction. Mothers who reported higher levels of education or a remarriage during the study were likely to report higher levels of life satisfaction. Mothers who entered into cohabitation during the study reported lower levels of life satisfaction.

## Discussion

The goal of this investigation was to examine the impact of beginning, maintaining, ending, and relationship quality for dating relationships on maternal well-being, a topic that has only recently received attention (Langlais et al., 2015; Symoens et al., 2014). For the current study, about 46% of mothers dated only one partner after divorce, 21% reported dating serially, 18% reported dating simultaneously, and 15% chose not to date during the study. Mothers' dating relationships on average lasted a little longer than a year, and most relationships were high quality. This investigation advances the literature by examining relationship quality over the first two years of divorce filing and using satisfaction and commitment to measure relationship quality. This study also addresses the call from researchers to capture the dating period that precedes cohabitation and remarriage (Cartwright, 2010; Langlais et al., 2015; Symoens et al., 2014).

The results of this study provide support that relationship quality plays an important role for maternal well-being when mothers begin to date after divorce. Mothers in high-quality relationships tend to exhibit higher levels of life satisfaction and less negative affect than do mothers in low-quality relationships, yet mothers who do not date were likely to report higher well-being than mothers in low-quality relationships. Although mothers in high-quality relationships were most likely to report the highest levels of maternal well-being, these mothers appeared to report only slightly higher levels of well-being than single mothers. Also consequential for maternal well-being is the initiation of a post-divorce breakup. On the basis of findings from this study, mothers tended to exhibit improvements in well-being during relationship transitions, which was contrary to our predictions.

### Benefits of Repartnering and Relationship Quality

The results of this study have implications for the divorce-stress-adaptation perspective (Amato, 2000). The findings provide support that the quality of dating relationships may be a protective factor for this theoretical model. Although being in a post-divorce relationship has been described as beneficial for mothers (Cartwright, 2010; Hetherington, 2003; Hughes, 2000), high-quality relationships appear to be better for mothers' psychological health than lower-quality relationships, which emphasizes the importance of relationship quality beyond simply being in a relationship after divorce. For mothers, high-quality relationships may characterize the short-term crisis model, whereas low-quality relationships may predict the chronic strain model.

The notion that relationship quality can be a protective factor raises two questions. First, what about mothers who do not date? According to our findings, mothers who do not date may not be doing worse than mothers who are dating, as single mothers tended to report higher levels of well-being than mothers in low-quality relationships. Although past research

has described repartnering as an approach to promote post-divorce adjustment, the current study provides some support for remaining single, which may not be bad for mothers' well-being. One reason remaining single could be beneficial for maternal well-being is that some mothers may be satisfied by receiving the needed company and support from children rather than romantic partners (Anderson & Greene, 2011; Skew et al., 2009). Also, some single mothers may already possess protective factors mentioned in the divorce-stress-adaptation perspective, such as a steady job or a positive interpretation of the divorce (Amato, 2000). The second question regarding relationship quality as a protective factor is why some mothers might remain in low-quality relationships if doing so is damaging to well-being. According to the Investment Model of Commitment (Rusbult, 1983), mothers may remain in less satisfying relationships because of high amounts of investment in the relationship, such as shared residences, combined incomes, and the amount of time their partner dedicates to their child (Cartwright, 2010; Hetherington, 2003). However, the size of the difference between low- and high-quality relationships regarding well-being, though significant, is not drastically different; for example, single mothers' score for negative affect was 1.68 compared to 1.82 for mothers in high-quality relationships, which means that few mothers reported high levels of negative affect.

### Repartnering Transitions

Although breaking up is a difficult process (Reed, 2007; Slotter et al., 2010), mothers who experienced a breakup in the current study tended to report higher levels of well-being than did mothers who did not experience a breakup. There are a few explanations for this finding. First, mothers might enter relationships after divorce when they may not be mentally prepared to date; some mothers might be attached to the former marriage when they first date after divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Spielmann, Joel, MacDonald, & Kogan, 2013). In the case that mothers are ruminating on former marital relationships, ending a dating relationship could promote maternal well-being by potentially alleviating any cognitive dissonance between the new relationship and the former marriage. Also, during the first two years after divorce, mothers are commonly exposed to stress, such as change in residences and social network depletion (Tavares & Aassve, 2013). Dating relationships may add to post-divorce stress, as relationships could introduce conflict that mothers would not be exposed to if they were not in a relationship. The end of dating relationships may promote adjustment by decreasing the opportunity for conflict, regardless of the intensity of the conflict (Reed, 2007).

Subsequently, the transition into new dating relationships, whether serial or simultaneous, was also associated with higher levels of well-being. Many individuals have described increases in self-esteem, happiness, and passion during relationship initiation, which is correlated with positive life appraisals (Miller, 2012). In the context of post-divorce dating, mothers' experiences with new romantic partners may decrease feelings of loneliness, as described by de Graaf and Kalmijn (2003). Mothers may also report higher levels of well-being if a new partner promotes family adjustment by spending quality time with the child or providing other resources for the family, such as financial support.

From the findings of this study, all transitions appear to be good, irrespective of whether they involve entering or leaving relationships. Presumably, people leave relationships because things are not going well, and that should make them happier. Although no one likes to be “dumped,” women may end dating relationships more often than men (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). In ending a relationship, it is possible that mothers are taking control of their romantic lives. Future studies should examine who initiated the breakup to better understand these findings.

In addition, life satisfaction was positively associated with the transition to cohabitation and remarriage. Being more satisfied with life may make mothers appear more attractive as romantic partners than mothers who do not appear satisfied with life. Higher life satisfaction may demonstrate to romantic partners that mothers may be open to more serious transitions after divorce (Amato, 2000). In addition, remarriage had a significant estimated effect on life satisfaction. After divorce, remarriage may have more of an impact on maternal well-being than dating relationships. Future studies are needed to flesh out these findings.

### Limitations and Conclusions

Although this study extends research on repartnering, it is not without limitations. The theoretical opponent to the divorce-stress-adaptation model is selection theory, which postulates that poorly adjusted people are selected out of marriage (Amato, 2000; Wang & Amato, 2000). Mothers who exhibit higher levels of well-being may appear more attractive as romantic partners, which would make it more likely that they would enter repartnering relationships. However, we were unable to test this theory given the analytic approach of this study. Second, this investigation focused on the first two years after divorce filing. Some mothers began dating during the separation period, yet given the nature of data collection, we were unable to examine the quality or length of these relationships. Rather, this study captured the effect of time since the divorce filing. Despite this limitation, this study is one of the first to capture mothers' dating after divorce prospectively. Next, the measures used for relationship quality were based on single items. It would have been better to use more precise measures of relationship quality. Nevertheless, this study was able to examine the level of happiness and commitment for each relationship that a mother experienced monthly over the course of two years from divorce filing, a method that, to our knowledge, had not been previously conducted. Also, even though we used only single-item measures, the results were consistent and robust across different multilevel models.

The generalizability of the findings are limited. This study involved mothers of elementary-school-aged children and may not represent different populations of mothers. Mothers were also recruited from a specific region of the United States, and findings may not be generalizable to other locations. Another limitation of the study involves controlling for family structure. During the original study, mothers were not asked how many family members lived at the home. The presence of extended family members in the home has implications for mothers' dating and family income, which could influence study findings. Future studies should control for the number of family members in the home and use more stringent measures of income.

The main goal of this study was to examine the influence of entering, maintaining, ending, and relationship quality of mothers' dating relationships for maternal well-being. This investigation found that relationship quality predicted maternal well-being beyond relationship status. Although there were some limitations to this study, the findings, implications, and contributions increase understanding of dating after divorce for maternal well-being.

## Acknowledgments

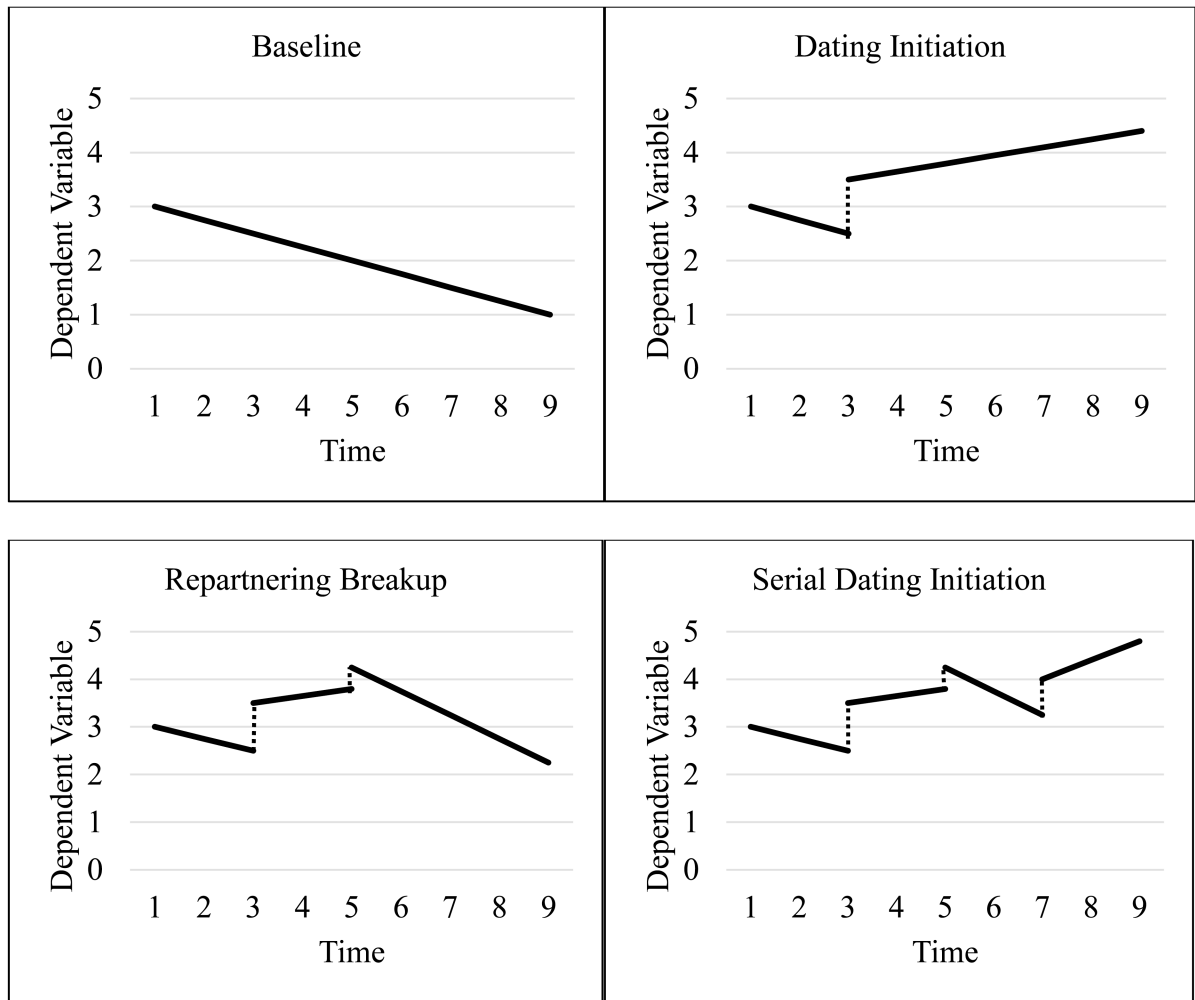
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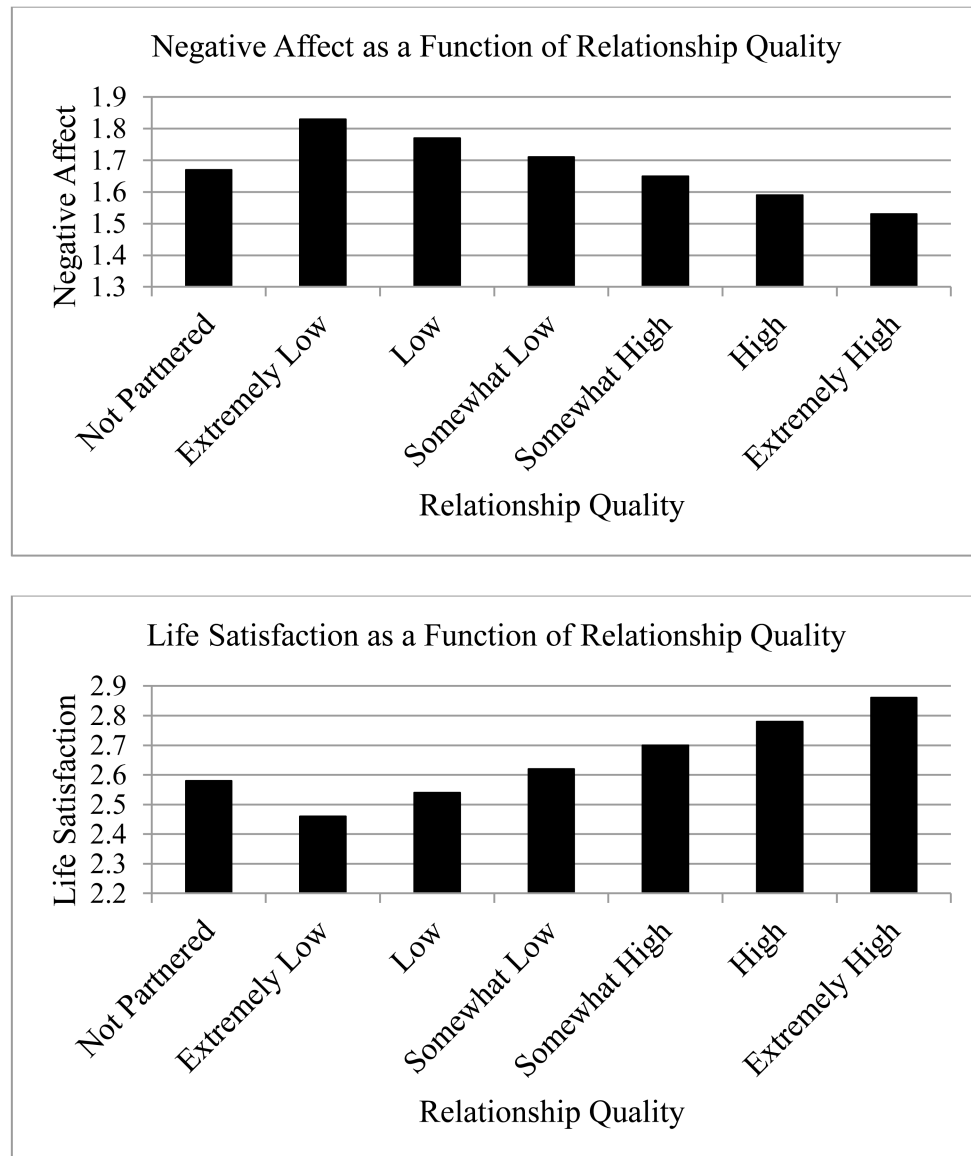


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**Figure 1. Hypothetical Depiction of Analytic Approach**

*Note.* Each graph provides a hypothetical trajectory of a theoretical dependent variable based on repartnering status. The top-left graph represents a baseline model for a hypothetical dependent variable using one intercept and slope term (time), reflecting mothers who do not date. The top-right graph represents a change in elevation and slope on a hypothetical dependent variable at the initiation of a dating relationship by adding an intercept and slope term (Hypothesis 1). The bottom-left graph illustrates the effect of breakup on a hypothetical dependent variable; this analysis includes a tertiary intercept and slope term (Hypothesis 3). The bottom-right graph represents the effect of dating someone new on a hypothetical dependent variable (Hypothesis 4). This approach illustrates how additional intercept and slope terms can capture changes in maternal well-being based on mothers' dating status (Singer & Willett, 2003).



**Figure 2. Results for Well-being Based on Relationship Quality**

*Note.* The top panel compares findings for negative affect based on relationship quality for a prototypical mother at any given time during the study regardless of relationship type (single-partner, serial, or simultaneous dating). The bottom panel compares findings for life satisfaction based on relationship quality for a prototypical mother at any given time during the study regardless of relationship type. Mothers in lower-quality relationships were likely to report more negative affect (and lower levels of life satisfaction) than single mothers.

**Table 1**  
**Descriptive statistics for mothers across four different repartnering histories (N = 319)**

	No Dating ( <i>n</i> = 49)		Single-Partner Daters ( <i>n</i> = 145)		Serial Daters ( <i>n</i> = 65)		Simultaneous Daters ( <i>n</i> = 60)		Total		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	<i>F</i> (2,318)
Length of marriage <sup>a</sup>	132.00	72.94	111.70	63.53	129.01	61.74	132.52	63.99	122.26	65.21	2.39
Length of separation <sup>a</sup>	14.33 <sup>a,b</sup>	22.34	20.13 <sup>a</sup>	24.70	9.78 <sup>b</sup>	12.88	6.47 <sup>b</sup>	7.01	14.56	20.62	8.31 <sup>****</sup>
Maternal age	39.14 <sup>a</sup>	7.06	35.71 <sup>b</sup>	6.42	36.88 <sup>a,b</sup>	6.48	37.37 <sup>a,b</sup>	6.27	36.79	6.59	3.61 <sup>*</sup>
Percentage non-White	.39	.49	.41	.49	.37	.49	.22	.42	.36	.48	2.33
Education <sup>b</sup>	8.16	2.74	7.63	2.81	8.58	2.41	8.28	2.46	8.03	2.67	2.24
Income <sup>c</sup>	11.02 <sup>a,b</sup>	5.42	9.37 <sup>a</sup>	5.41	11.88 <sup>b</sup>	4.96	12.65 <sup>b</sup>	5.18	10.75	5.42	6.88 <sup>****</sup>
Number of children	2.00	.82	2.16	.96	1.94	.88	2.05	.79	2.07	.89	.37
Age of oldest child	10.39	3.85	10.07	3.81	9.74	4.11	9.58	4.18	9.96	3.94	.48
Begin cohabitation <sup>d</sup>	.02 <sup>a</sup>	.14	.47 <sup>b</sup>	.50	.29 <sup>b</sup>	.46	.35 <sup>b</sup>	.48	.34	.48	12.38 <sup>****</sup>
Remarriage <sup>d</sup>	.02	.14	.13	.34	.03	.17	.08	.28	.08	.28	3.07 <sup>*</sup>
Pregnancy <sup>d</sup>	.00	.00	.06	.24	.09	.29	.02	.13	.05	.22	2.31
Partners at baseline <sup>e</sup>	.57 <sup>a</sup>	1.26	1.53 <sup>b</sup>	2.08	1.77 <sup>b</sup>	2.48	1.52 <sup>a,b</sup>	1.79	1.43	2.04	3.73 <sup>*</sup>
Casual partners <sup>e</sup>	.49 <sup>a</sup>	1.06	.92 <sup>a,b</sup>	1.68	1.40 <sup>b</sup>	2.18	1.25 <sup>a,b</sup>	1.61	1.02	1.72	3.17 <sup>*</sup>
Serious partners <sup>e</sup>	.08 <sup>a</sup>	.28	.61 <sup>b</sup>	.66	.37 <sup>c</sup>	.60	.27 <sup>a,c</sup>	.45	.41	.60	12.71 <sup>****</sup>
<i>Dyadic variables<sup>f</sup></i>											
Number of partners <sup>g</sup>											
Relationship length (max.) <sup>h</sup>			384.52	304.45	335.38	218.13	410.13	220.85	378.38	268.94	1.29
Occurrence of breakup <sup>i</sup>			.25 <sup>a</sup>	.43	.88 <sup>b</sup>	.33	.83 <sup>b</sup>	.38	.53	.50	78.23 <sup>****</sup>
Max. relationship quality			9.46	2.66	10.15	1.26	10.01	1.39	9.74	2.17	2.90
<i>Dependent variables</i>											
Negative affect <sup>j</sup>	1.62	.73	1.49	.64	1.47	.54	1.72	.59	1.55	.63	2.52
Life satisfaction <sup>j</sup>	2.50	.63	2.72	.65	2.72	.60	2.67	.57	2.68	.62	1.59

Note. Means with no subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$  using Bonferroni post hoc comparisons.

<sup>a</sup>Measured in months.

- b* Measured on a scale of 1 (*8th grade or less*) to 13 (*advanced college degree, doctoral*).
- c* Measured on a scale of 1 (*less than \$5,000 per year*) to 17 (*\$80,000 or more*).
- d* Percentage of mothers reporting this transition during the study period.
- e* Number of partners mothers dated during separation, before legal divorce.
- f* Statistics were based only on mothers reporting at least one dating relationship ( $n = 270$ ).
- g* Mothers who were single-partner daters had only one partner over the course of the study; degrees of freedom for this row is 224.
- h* Relationship length refers to longest dating relationship and is measured in days.
- i* Occurrence of breakup refers to percentage of mothers reporting a breakup, including temporary breakups.
- j* Dependent variables were measured on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*most or all of the time*).

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 2**  
**Results of models examining the associations of dating, relationship quality, and repartnering transitions with negative affect (N = 319)**

	Baseline Model	Hypothesis 1	Hypothesis 2	Hypothesis 3	Hypothesis 4	Hypothesis 5
Intercept	1.61 (.05)***	1.65 (.05)***	1.65 (.05)***	1.70 (.05)***	1.70 (.05)***	1.70 (.05)***
Slope	-.07 (.02)**	-.05 (.03)	-.04 (.03)	-.01 (.03)	-.01 (.03)	-.01 (.03)
<i>Within-person variables</i>						
Partnering intercept		-.09 (.03)**	.18 (.03)***	.09 (.06)	.09 (.06)	.10 (.06)
Partnering slope		-.04 (.03)	-.04 (.03)	-.06 (.04)	-.06 (.04)	-.06 (.04)
Relationship quality			-.04 (.01)***	-.04 (.01)***	-.04 (.01)***	-.04 (.01)***
Post-partner intercept				-.14 (.05)**	-.14 (.05)**	-.14 (.05)**
Post-partner slope				-.03 (.06)	-.03 (.06)	-.03 (.06)
Serial dating intercept				.00 (.04)	.00 (.04)	
Serial dating slope				.01 (.08)	.01 (.08)	
Simultaneous dating intercept						-.03 (.06)
Simultaneous dating slope						-.02 (.18)
<i>Between-person variables</i>						
Maternal age	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Race	-.27 (.08)***	-.27 (.08)***	-.27 (.07)***	-.27 (.08)***	-.27 (.08)***	-.27 (.08)***
Length of marriage (years)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Length of separation (years)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Number of children	.06 (.05)	.06 (.05)	.05 (.05)	.05 (.05)	.05 (.05)	.05 (.05)
Age of youngest child	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.00 (.02)	.00 (.02)	.00 (.02)	.00 (.02)
Education	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)
Income	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.01 (.01)
Number of partners at baseline	.00 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)
Cohabitation	.02 (.08)	.08 (.09)	.13 (.09)	.16 (.09)	.16 (.09)	.16 (.09)
Remarriage	-.21 (.14)	-.19 (.13)	-.18 (.14)	-.18 (.13)	-.18 (.13)	-.18 (.13)
<i>Model fit</i>						
AIC	5,516.88	5,491.70	5,424.01	5,409.79	5,413.76	5,413.18
BIC	5,524.44	5,500.27	5,433.08	5,419.86	5,424.84	5,424.26



	Baseline Model	Hypothesis 1	Hypothesis 2	Hypothesis 3	Hypothesis 4	Hypothesis 5
$R^2$	.01	.02	.03	.04	.04	.04

Note. Statistics are standardized beta coefficients and presented as  $B(SD)$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 3**  
**Results of models examining the associations of dating, relationship quality, and repartnering transitions with life satisfaction (N = 319)**

	Baseline Model	Hypothesis 1	Hypothesis 2	Hypothesis 3	Hypothesis 4	Hypothesis 5
Intercept	2.68 (.05) <sup>***</sup>	2.60 (.05) <sup>***</sup>	2.60 (.05) <sup>***</sup>	2.55 (.05) <sup>***</sup>	2.55 (.05) <sup>***</sup>	2.55 (.05) <sup>***</sup>
Slope	-.03 (.02)	-.03 (.03)	-.04 (.03)	-.06 (.03) <sup>*</sup>	-.07 (.03) <sup>*</sup>	-.06 (.03) <sup>*</sup>
<i>Within-person variables</i>						
Partnering intercept		.19 (.03) <sup>***</sup>	-.17 (.06) <sup>**</sup>	-.10 (.06)	-.10 (.06)	-.13 (.06) <sup>*</sup>
Partnering slope		-.02 (.03)	-.02 (.03)	.00 (.03)	.00 (.03)	.00 (.03)
Relationship quality			.05 (.01) <sup>***</sup>	.05 (.01) <sup>***</sup>	.05 (.01) <sup>***</sup>	.05 (.01) <sup>***</sup>
Post-partner intercept				.12 (.05) <sup>*</sup>	.13 (.05) <sup>*</sup>	.11 (.05) <sup>*</sup>
Post-partner slope				.04 (.07)	.05 (.07)	.03 (.07)
Serial dating intercept					.08 (.04) <sup>*</sup>	
Serial dating slope					-.03 (.10)	
Simultaneous dating intercept						.13 (.06) <sup>*</sup>
Simultaneous dating slope						-.20 (.11)
<i>Between-person variables</i>						
Maternal age	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Race	.09 (.07)	.10 (.07)	.10 (.07)	.10 (.07)	.10 (.07)	.10 (.07)
Length of marriage (years)	.00 (.00) <sup>*</sup>	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Length of separation (years)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Number of children	.03 (.05)	.03 (.05)	.04 (.05)	.04 (.05)	.04 (.05)	.04 (.05)
Age of youngest child	-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Education	.04 (.02) <sup>*</sup>	.04 (.02) <sup>*</sup>	.04 (.01) <sup>*</sup>	.04 (.02) <sup>*</sup>	.04 (.02) <sup>*</sup>	.04 (.02) <sup>*</sup>
Income	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Number of partners at baseline	.00 (.02)	.00 (.02)	.00 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.02)
Cohabitation	-.06 (.08)	-.11 (.09)	-.18 (.08) <sup>*</sup>	-.20 (.09) <sup>*</sup>	-.19 (.08) <sup>*</sup>	-.20 (.09) <sup>*</sup>
Remarriage	.41 (.13) <sup>**</sup>	.40 (.13) <sup>**</sup>	.39 (.13) <sup>**</sup>	.39 (.13) <sup>**</sup>	.38 (.13) <sup>**</sup>	.38 (.13) <sup>**</sup>
<i>Model fit</i>						
AIC	6,279.34	6,221.45	6,120.85	6,113.83	6,108.78	6,109.54

	Baseline Model	Hypothesis 1	Hypothesis 2	Hypothesis 3	Hypothesis 4	Hypothesis 5
BIC	6,286.90	6,230.02	6,129.91	6,123.91	6,119.86	6,120.63
R <sup>2</sup>	.00	.02	.04	.04	.05	.05

Note. Statistics are standardized beta coefficients and presented as *B(SD)*.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .