Serial Monogamy, Partnership Concentration, and Gender Asymmetry

Evidence from NSFH and Extensions to the Post-App Era

1. Research Question

When did gender asymmetry in access to long-term romantic partnerships emerge in the United States, and does this asymmetry predate online dating and smartphone apps?

Specifically: - Did men and women experience symmetric access to marriage and cohabitation prior to the sexual revolution? - If asymmetry emerges, is it driven by increased partner "churn" among women or by exclusion of a growing share of men from partnership altogether? - Do post-app-era data indicate acceleration of an already-existing demographic process?

2. Core Hypothesis

Gender asymmetry in partnership access emerges in cohorts reaching adulthood after the sexual revolution and prior to online dating, implying increasing concentration of partnership exposure among a subset of men via **serial monogamy** rather than concurrent polygyny or generalized promiscuity.

Key implications: - Dating apps amplify but do not initiate the dynamic - The primary action occurs on the **extensive margin** (who partners at all), not the intensive margin (how many partners among participants)

3. Conceptual Framework

Definitions

- **Partnered**: Ever married or ever cohabited (residential union)
- **Serial monogamy**: Sequential exclusive unions over time
- **Concentration**: A smaller subset of men accounts for a disproportionate share of women's cumulative partnership exposure

Accounting Identity

If: - women's cumulative partnership exposure remains high, - male non-participation rises, - conditional partner counts remain similar,

then concentration of partnership exposure is **mathematically implied**.

4. Core Dataset: NSFH Wave 1 (1987–88)

Why NSFH

NSFH Wave 1 is uniquely suited to this question because it: - surveys **both men and women** - includes **full marital histories** - records **residential cohabitation histories** - predates online dating and apps

Sample Definition (Wave 1)

- Respondents age ≤ **35**
- Birth cohorts approximately **1952–1968**
- Separate analyses by sex

5. Variable Construction (Wave 1)

Extensive Margin

- **ever_partnered** = ever married OR ever cohabited

Marriage

- **Number of marriages**: `M95`
  ("Altogether, how many times have you been married?")
- **ever_married** = `M95 ≥ 1`
- **remarried_2plus** = `M95 ≥ 2`

Cohabitation

- **Number of cohabiting partners**: `NUMCOHAB`
- **ever_cohabited** = `NUMCOHAB ≥ 1`

All variables are taken directly from the NSFH Wave 1 public-use microdata.

6. Empirical Results: NSFH Wave 1

6.1 Ever-Partnered Rates by Birth Cohort (Age ≤ 35)

Birth Cohort	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female − Male (pp)
1952–56	92.6	92.1	+0.5
1957–60	88.4	85.8	+2.6
1961–64	82.0	71.2	+10.8
1965–68	56.5	31.6	+24.9

Finding:

Gender parity holds for early cohorts but collapses sharply for cohorts reaching adulthood after the sexual revolution.

6.2 Conditional Partner Counts (Among Ever-Partnered)

Across all cohorts: - Mean number of cohabiting partners is **similar by sex** - Mean number of marriages declines for **both sexes** - Remarriage rates fall with cohort for **both sexes**

There is **no evidence** of runaway female partner accumulation.

6.3 Interpretation

The coexistence of: - sharply rising male non-participation, and - stable conditional partner counts

implies **concentration of partnership exposure among a subset of men via serial monogamy**.

This pattern is already present **before online dating**.

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7. What These Results Do *Not* Claim

- No claim about conscious female strategy
- No claim about concurrent polygyny or "harems"
- No moral judgment about preferences or norms
- No claim that apps caused the initial asymmetry

The analysis is purely demographic and arithmetic.

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8. Extension Plan

8.1 NSFH Waves 2–3 (1992–94, 2001–03)

Goal: - Replicate identical definitions - Test whether asymmetry widens within the same survey design

Key metrics: - Ever-partnered by age ≤ 35 - Cohabitation counts - Marriage and remarriage rates

8.2 Census / CPS (Post-2000)

Goal: - Track never-married rates by sex and age - Establish post-app continuation on the extensive margin

Strengths: - Large samples - Stable definitions - Reviewer-proof

8.3 NSFG (2002–2019)

Goal: - Confirm ever-partnered divergence - Use sexual partner counts cautiously and secondarily

8.4 Pew Research

Goal: - Provide contextual timing of app adoption - Describe environment, not causality

9. Planned Paper Structure

1. Introduction
2. Background and Literature
3. Data and Methods

4. Results (NSFH Wave 1)

5. Extensions (NSFH Waves 1–3, Census, NSFG)

6. Discussion

7. Limitations

8. Conclusion

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10. Target Journals

Primary: - *Demography - Journal of Marriage and Family - Population Studies*

Secondary: - *Population Research and Policy Review - Social Science Research - Journal of Family Issues*

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11. Guiding Principle

This project is demographic accounting, not cultural commentary.

The mechanism is inferred from arithmetic constraints, not anecdotes.

Let the data speak.