INVITED REVIEW

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Breaking-up is hard to study: A review of two decades of dissolution research

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Abstract

The dissolution of romantic relationships can be conceptualized in many ways, from a distressing event or a consequential life decision to a metric of a relationship's success. In the current review, we assess how relationship science has approached dissolution research over roughly the past 20 years. We identified 207 studies (from 195 papers) published between 2002–2020 that captured relationship dissolution events and coded the papers for relevant features. The most common methodological approach to studying breakups was a self-report study (92%) in which relationships were tracked over time (72%) and breakups were treated as an outcome variable (79%). These results suggest that most research on dissolution has focused on predictors of it, rather than processes required to uncouple and circumstances surrounding the breakup itself. Coding revealed heterogeneous theoretical approaches, with the most common perspective across papers—social exchange/interdependence theory—

Statement of Relevance: In the past 20 years, researchers have conducted an abundance of empirical work on relationship dissolution. In the current review, we identify the major themes of this research theoretically, methodologically, and demographically in service of explaining the reproducibility and generalizability of dissolution research. We believe this will inform future research on dissolution, choices made by practitioners, and the knowledge base of the general public.

informing only 15% of the papers coded. A majority (61%) of samples were representative of the nations, regions, or localities in which the studies were conducted. Yet, samples still tended to be disproportionately comprised of young, white individuals from Western countries. We conclude by discussing potential avenues for moving our understanding of relationship dissolution forward.

1 | BREAKING UP IS HARD TO STUDY: A REVIEW OF TWO DECADES OF DISSOLUTION RESEARCH

Close relationships are vital for health and well-being (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 2002; House et al., 1988; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). When a central relationship such as a romantic union dissolves, it can strongly impact health and well-being (e.g., Davis et al., 2003; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1987; Waite et al., 2009). Breakups can be construed as deeply painful or even traumatic life events (e.g., Chung et al., 2003; Kross et al., 2011), particularly from the perspective of partners who do not initiate them. They can also be construed as consequential decisions (e.g., Joel et al., 2018; VanderDrift et al., 2009), particularly from the initiators' perspective. Breakup can have financial ramifications (e.g., when the couple was married or cohabiting; Finnie, 1993) as well as downstream consequences for children (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). The experience of relationship dissolution also varies by culture (e.g., Affifi et al., 2013; Yuan & Weiser, 2019); for example, individuals from more collectivistic cultures tend to hold less favorable attitudes toward divorce (Toth & Kemmelmeier, 2009). Twenty years after the greening of relationship science (Berscheid, 1999), how much progress have we made toward understanding this important relationship turning point?

Sprecher and Fehr (1998), reviewing the dissolution literature from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, addressed not only romantic relationships (dating and married) but also friendships. These authors examined processes of dissolution (i.e., stages of discord and distancing, leading to the possible severing of ties), noting that "relationship dissolution is much more complex than an either-or distinction" (p. 100). They reviewed strategies initiators use to inform their partners of their intentions to break up, and post-breakup distress and coping. This earlier research on breakup strategies presaged today's methods of how people end relationships, such as "ghosting" (discussed below). In addition, Sprecher and Fehr reviewed prominent theories, research designs, and findings from dissolution research at the time. Social exchange and related conceptions such as interdependence, investment, and equity were the most frequently used theories of the late 20th century, whereas commonly used research designs included demography (looking specifically at nationally representative datasets for demographic correlates of dissolution), prospective, and retrospective. The strongest predictors of dissolution were found to be relationship satisfaction, commitment, and love (negatively associated with the breakup), and exchange/interdependence-related variables. Quality

of alternatives was the most consistent correlate of breakup. Finally, Sprecher and Fehr cited two early studies of same-sex couples, an underrepresented group on which we follow up (below).[1]

In what ways has dissolution research progressed in the 25 years since Sprecher and Fehr (1998)? In the current paper, we review the last two decades' empirical findings on romantic relationship dissolution through the lenses of (a) theory, (b) methodology, and (c) sample diversity (a particularly important element of methodology for our purposes). The notion of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989)–examining multiple statuses within the same person (e.g., an Asian woman; a queer disabled person) with regard to "forms or systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination" (Lincoln, 2016, p. 226)–holds great potential for advancing relationship science. In fact, Few-Demo (2014) foresees that "Intersectionality and intersectional analysis are the future of mainstream family science" (p. 169). As examples of where intersectional approaches can illuminate relationship processes, Few-Demo cites feminist theorizing on "power within the gender relations of close relationships" (p. 173); the continued holding of "White, heterosexual, American born, and middle class" (p. 174) as the standard normative family and others as deviant; and greater attention to LGBT, immigrant, and other underrepresented populations. As revisited in the Discussion, however, intersectionality currently is only a *potential* lens for dissolution research and a way to extend our consideration of demographic diversity. It is not yet a perspective that has actually been implemented empirically in the context of relationship dissolution. Relatedly, Sprecher and Fehr (1998) noted that studies of demographic predictors of dissolution available to them 25 years ago were largely atheoretical. Hence, another benefit of an intersectionality lens is that it would lend theoretical heft to the consideration of multiple demographic characteristics.

Regarding specific aspects of dissolution, we review emotional reactions to and highlight some predictors of, breakup, as well as on-and-off relationships. We do not review the effects of parents' breakup on children or on psychopathology, how individuals seek new partners after a breakup, or a comprehensive list of dissolution's predictors, as reviews on these topics have been published since Sprecher and Fehr's (1998) review (e.g., Cherlin, 2009; Le et al., 2010; Rodrigues et al., 2006; Sbarra & Beck, 2013; van der Wal et al., 2019; Whisman et al., 2022). We address questions such as the following. Which theories are most commonly drawn upon to inform dissolution research? Do different theoretical perspectives and disciplines approach the topic differently? Which methodological approaches are currently most conventional? Finally, how are samples composed in terms of race, gender, age, nationality, socioeconomic status (SES), and relationship types, including same-sex relationships? Whose breakups are we studying, and who is still underrepresented? In addressing these issues, we will weave through the empirical findings of this work to provide a current snapshot of the knowledge base regarding dissolution. Finally, via this review, we identify outstanding theoretical questions and empirical gaps in our understanding of relationship dissolution for the next generation of relationship scientists to fill, as well as suggest how future studies can implement an intersectionality perspective.

2 | OVERVIEW AND METHOD OF THE PRESENT REVIEW

The goal of the present review was to systematically review the published literature on dissolution in the top relationship-science journals to ascertain the following: (1) How are we studying breakup? (2) Whose breakups are we studying? and (3) What are we finding? This means that we coded the published papers for information pertinent to the disciplinary, theoretical, and

methodological approaches in the work, as well as the major findings of that work. We also examined sample characteristics and how important they are for understanding dissolution.

We first collected the full table of contents, abstracts, and article information for 2002–2020 from *Communication Monographs (CM), Human Communication Research (HCR), Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin (PSPB), Journal of Marriage and Family (JMF), JSPR, and PR,* per recommendations from the latter two journals' editors for this Decade in Review series. To those, we added two similarly high-impact journals that feature dissolution research: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (JPSP)* and *Journal of Family Psychology (JFP)*. We then searched the abstracts and titles for the following terms: break*, dissol*, divorc*, stay-leave behavior, relationship status, separation, terminat*, uncoupling, and split. When we detected one of those terms, we reviewed the abstract and determined whether the paper was appropriate for the review. Breakup needed to be within the scope of the data collection, or if not, data had to have been collected about the breakup itself. To mitigate subjectivity, two of us authors searched each journal and made yes/no decisions on article inclusion. One author reviewed all binary decisions, and if two coders disagreed, that author broke the tie.

We initially identified 238 studies (including multiple studies from the same article). However, 31 were excluded for not investigating dissolution as an independent or dependent variable (24), assessing responses to hypothetical rather than real breakups (3), providing a literature review or commentary rather than empirical study (2), focusing on *perceived* stability of on–off relationships (1), and examining "friends with benefits" relationships (1). The resulting collection, therefore, contained 207 studies from 195 articles. In addition, there were four instances of multiple datasets being used within the same self-contained study (e.g., a comparative study using both the German Socio-Economic Panel and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics for the U.S.; Bellani et al., 2018). As a result of this, 211 total datasets were used. Of the 207 retained studies, 80 were published in *JMF* (39%), 38 in *JSPR* (18%), 33 in *JFP* (16%), 25 in *PR* (12%), 18 in *JPSP* (9%), 12 in *PSPB* (6%), one in *CM* (<1%), and 0 from *HCR*.

These 207 studies were next coded by a team of undergraduate coders, all of whom were directly trained by one of the authors of this paper, on dimensions listed below. All papers were double-coded, with discrepancies between coders resolved by one of the authors. The coding instructions and results are available on our Open Science Framework page: https://osf.io/sdbzh/.

3 | CODED VARIABLES

3.1 | Theoretical perspective

Coders noted whether a specific theory was named (yes/no) within each paper, and if so, which one(s). Coders also noted the primary discipline of each article's corresponding author by using the listed departmental affiliation on the paper at the time it was published. If a paper did not provide the authors' department, or it was ambiguous as to their discipline, the coder searched for the author online and used their current departmental affiliation instead.

3.2 | Treatment of breakups

Coders indicated whether breakups were focal versus ancillary to a study and whether breakup status was used as a predictor variable (yes/no) or outcome variable (yes/no). They also noted

any additional details reported about the breakup (e.g., who initiated it, the medium over which the initiator announced the breakup). For those papers in which details about the breakup were collected, we reviewed the details specifically.

3.3 | Empirical findings

Coders copied the statement from the abstract that summarized the key breakup-relevant results from each paper. The authors studied these summaries for themes.

3.4 | Methodological approach

Coders recorded the design of each study as "qualitative", "experimental", "quasi-experimental", "correlational", "observational", "naturalistic", "archival/public records", "meta-analysis", "methodological contribution," or "other" (described). Later in the process, we determined that additional information would be useful, so one of us coded all papers for whether a public dataset was used (if relevant), the location of data collection, and the type of sample (e.g., nationally representative, local representative, local non-representative, university-based). A document containing all of the samples used, including details about their representativeness and which papers they were used is available on our OSF page: https://osf.io/sdbzh.

3.5 | Recruitment

Coders recorded studies' recruitment methods as "online", "in-person", "paid", "subject pool", "volunteer", "targeted" (e.g., seeking particular populations), or "non-targeted".

3.6 | Sample features

We coded all studies (potentially multiple per article) for sample size, type (couples vs. individuals), nation, and aggregate characteristics (averages or percentages) including sex-gender, race-ethnicity, age, income, education, relationship length, mixed versus same-sex couples, monogamous versus non-monogamous couples, and married versus unmarried couples.

Then we reviewed the coded data and empirical findings to extract and synthesize major theoretical and methodological themes, and to gain a better understanding of the diversity of the samples under investigation. The full set of empirical findings, organized by topic, is available on our Open Science Framework page here: https://osf.io/sdbzh/.

4 | AUTHORS' POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

All three authors identify as cis-gender women who grew up in WEIRD nations (Canada, Germany, US), are married, and are early-mid career academics. Two currently reside in the US and one in Canada. The authors' doctoral training is in social psychology and human development and family sciences (HDFS) programs and they are currently employed in these kinds of

departments. The author team has been conducting work on dissolution for a combined 45 years and has published 23 papers on the topic.

5 | THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO STUDYING BREAKUPS

What does it mean for a romantic relationship to end? Relationship dissolution—also referred to as breakups, divorce, or termination—has been examined from a variety of theoretical lenses. In our review, we found that of the 207 studies, 125 (60%) named a specific theoretical perspective informing the work. These theories depended in part on authors' discipline, with the most common being social psychology (58, 28%), sociology (55, 27%), human development and family sciences (HDFS; 27, 13%), clinical psychology (27, 13%), and communication studies (13, 6%).[2] These disciplinary affiliations provide a rough guide to some of the vantage points from which investigators have examined relationship dissolution. The most common theoretical perspective was that of social exchange and interdependence theories (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; 31 studies, 15%). We combined these categories due to their partial conceptual overlap (Van Lange & Balliet, 2015). The next most common was attachment theory (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987; 17, 8%). Over 40 other perspectives and models were named, but no other theory was central to more than four studies. Authors conceptualized the phenomenon of dissolution somewhat differently depending on their theoretical lens.

6 | DISSOLUTION AS A DISTRESSING EVENT

Several theoretical perspectives conceptualize relationship dissolution as a disruptive and stressful life event requiring coping and recovery. One such perspective is attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982), which posits that humans' biological systems motivate them to seek out close others in times of distress. Within this framework, romantic love is an attachment process whereby people come to rely on romantic partners as a key source of emotional support and validation (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Breakups, in contrast, involve the severing of that attachment bond. Thus, attachment theory frames relationship dissolution as a highly distressing experience, comparable to other kinds of relational loss or bereavement (see Fraley & Shaver, 2016, for review). This perspective has inspired considerable research on how people respond to and recover from relationship dissolution, finding that those with insecure attachment, upon breakup, feel greater distress (Borelli et al., 2019), and are more likely to experience an increase in religiousness (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2003), and exhibit higher blood pressure when thinking about their breakup (Lee et al., 2011).

Self-expansion theory is another framework that lends itself to a conceptualization of breakups as disruptive life events. Building on the idea that romantic partners incorporate each other's traits and perspectives into their own self-concepts (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1997), it follows that breakups may generate distress in part by destabilizing those self-concepts (Lewandowski et al., 2006; Slotter et al., 2010). Indeed, rediscovering a sense of self that is separate from the ex-partner has been associated with better breakup recovery (Larson & Sbarra, 2015) and breakup-related growth (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). Models of stress and coping have similarly inspired research on people's experiences of both negative (e.g., posttraumatic stress symptoms, Chung et al., 2003), neutral (e.g., lasting personality changes do not seem to occur as a

result of a breakup; Allemand et al., 2015), and positive (e.g., stress-related growth; Owenz & Fowers, 2019; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003) outcomes following a breakup. Finally, limited work has drawn on narrative approaches to examine how people make meaning out of the dissolution of their relationships (e.g., Boals & Klein, 2005; Frost et al., 2016).

7 | DISSOLUTION AS A DECISION

Other perspectives frame relationship dissolution as a decision one actively makes based on the rewards and costs of the relationship. Perhaps the most prominent such perspective is interdependence theory, which offers formal principles for how partners become dependent on each other to meet important needs (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). In particular, the investment model builds these principles into a model for how one evaluates their commitment to a romantic relationship, or their intention to remain in the relationship long-term (Rusbult, 1980). The investment model, which has received considerable empirical support (e.g., Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008; see Le & Agnew, 2003, for a meta-analysis), invites researchers to conceptualize relationship dissolution as a decision that a person actively arrives at after considering both the positive and negative qualities of the relationship and the partner. Consistent with this idea, low-commitment individuals appear to undergo a period of active deliberation prior to exiting their relationships (VanderDrift et al., 2009). People who are thinking about ending their relationships can generally articulate many reasons for wanting to do so, even as they simultaneously tend to have many reasons for wanting to stay in the relationship (Joel et al., 2018). Likewise, recently divorced individuals can provide specific reasons why their marriages ended (e.g., Amato & Previti, 2003; England et al., 2016; Nakhaee et al., 2020), and there are some systematic patterns to the reasons. For example, having low commitment and deficits in interpersonal competencies are more commonly cited reasons than stress, even when all three reasons are present (Bodenmann et al., 2007).

8 | DISSOLUTION AS A PROCESS

Yet other perspectives emphasize that relationship dissolution is not a single, finite event, but a series of events, phases, or stages that gradually unfold (see Rollie & Duck, 2006; Sprecher & Fehr, 1998; Vangelisti, 2006; for review). In such models, relationship dissolution is organized into distinct phases (Duck, 1982) or trajectories (Baxter, 1984). Stage models invite researchers to consider specific aspects of the breakup process that may otherwise be overlooked. For example, once a partner has decided that they wish for the relationship to end, they need to communicate that intention to their partner. By drawing attention to this aspect of the breakup process, stage models have helped to inspire research on different strategies that people use to communicate their breakup intentions (e.g., Sprecher et al., 2014), as well as the consequences of not communicating those intentions at all (ghosting; e.g., Koessler et al., 2019). More broadly, stage models have been helpful in understanding social media and mobile-phone behavior in the context of relationship dissolution (LeFebvre et al., 2015; LeFebvre & Fan, 2020). It was not until late 2007 and early 2008 that text messages began to exceed phone calls among US mobile subscribers (Nielsen Mobile, 2008), opening new avenues of communication (or non-communication) between spouses and romantic partners and, correspondingly, new lines of research into technology and relationships. Finally, although researchers typically depict stage models

linearly for simplicity, their framing of dissolution as a process rather than a finite event leaves open the possibility that couples cycle or oscillate between stages (e.g., Battaglia et al., 1998). Indeed, a growing body of research suggests that on-again/off-again relationships–in which couples cycle through multiple breakups and renewals–are quite common (e.g., Dailey et al., 2009; Dailey et al., 2020; Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013; Vennum et al., 2014).

9 | DISSOLUTION AS AN OUTCOME METRIC

Perhaps most often, relationship dissolution is conceptualized not as a distressing event, decision, or process in and of itself, but rather as an outcome measure or metric by which to evaluate other relationship constructs and processes. In our review, breakup served as an outcome variable in 164 of the studies (79%). The question of what makes a particular relationship good or bad is of central interest to relationship science. However, relationship quality is a fuzzy and arguably multifaceted construct (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2000), typically captured with highly subjective self-report items (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your relationship?"). A case could be made that relationship longevity—that is, whether the relationship lasts, and for how long—is a more concrete, behavioral indicator of a relationship's quality. Indeed, relationship dissolution has served as a metric to help evaluate and refine a wide range of theoretical models on close relationships. These include models pertaining to inclusion of others in self (IOS; Frost & Forrester, 2013), dominance (Bryan et al., 2011), positive illusions (Miller et al., 2006), perceived regard (Derrick et al., 2012), partner knowledge (Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2004), partner similarity (Becker, 2013), physical attractiveness (Ma-Kellams et al., 2017), perceived partner commitment (Joel et al., 2018), and many others (see Le et al., 2010, for a meta-analysis of predictors of non-marital relationship dissolution).

Despite the utility of relationship dissolution as an outcome measure, there are also disadvantages to conceptualizing breakups this way, as relationship longevity is a highly imperfect stand-in measure for relationship quality. Although it is true that happier relationships tend to last longer (e.g., Le et al., 2010), low-quality relationships can also be surprisingly stable (e.g., Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Slotter & Finkel, 2009).[3] At its most problematic, using relationship longevity as an indicator of relationship success can imply that all relationships *ought* to last; that dissolution is an outcome to be avoided and that variables that predict stability are inherently forces for good. However, a variable can predict divorce not because it damages good relationships but because it increases barriers to leaving bad relationships. For example, one study found higher divorce rates among individuals who had their own health insurance coverage compared to those who were insured through their partners' plans (Sohn, 2015).

10 | SUMMARY OF THE THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO STUDYING BREAKUPS

In sum, relationship dissolution is a complex phenomenon that can be studied from a variety of lenses. Four themes emerging from our review characterize dissolution as a distressing event, decision, process, and outcome metric. Importantly, these themes are non-exclusive; a single study could simultaneously frame dissolution as both a distressing event and as an outcome metric, for example. Over 40 theories have been used to frame studies of relationship dissolution, and the precise theoretical specification of what dissolution has implications for what the

field understands about it. Collectively, these theories encompass general orientations to relationships (attachment theory), partners' perceptions of positive and negative aspects of relationships (social exchange), and barriers in people's immediate social network and/or the larger economic structure to leaving bad relationships (interdependence and investment models). Individual theories generally do not incorporate all of these areas. The great frequency with which social exchange theory undergirded studies in our collection matches what Rodrigues et al. (2006) found in their review. Other leading theories cited by Rodrigues and colleagues (i.e., crisis/ABC-X and vulnerability-stress-adaptations) did not play a large role from 2002–2020. Discussion (below) considers the integration of different perspectives to develop larger, more predictive models.

11 | HOW ARE WE STUDYING BREAKUPS? METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Trying to capture dissolution empirically poses unique methodological challenges. One might be tempted to conceptualize breakups as an event that either did or did not occur. It seemingly does not require participants to reflect much on their subjective state. Indeed, breakups are psychometrically simple when captured as a binary event, as nearly all the studies we reviewed did. On the other hand, breakups are not generally observable in a laboratory setting, they are dyadic, and they are not necessarily discrete events that unfold identically for every couple. The choices researchers make about how to handle these issues methodologically have implications for the conclusions they draw. The following sections concentrate on measurement and research design (e.g., dyadic vs. individual data). We consider the representation of different populations and groups–particularly underrepresented ones–to be of great importance, so we examine the sampling aspect of the methodology in its own later section.

12 | PROSPECTIVE OR RETROSPECTIVE REPORTING

Because breakup is not observable in laboratory settings, researchers must rely on participants' self-report. Correlational (self-report) surveys were the dominant methodological approach of our review, used in 185 of the studies reviewed (92% of studies for which relevant information was available). No other method appeared in more than 2% of studies.[4] Breakups can be captured by self-report prospectively by collecting a large sample of participants and waiting for breakups to occur within that sample. Alternatively, they can be captured retrospectively by collecting data from those whose relationships have ended already and asking them to reflect on the breakup. Both methods have important disadvantages that must be navigated by researchers.

Prospective studies allow tests of association between a predictor variable from an earlier wave and an outcome variable at a later wave; if significant, such an association demonstrates temporal precedence between variables. Controlling for potential "third variables" increases the plausibility of a causal claim. Studies with three or more waves also permit the use of growth-curve modeling and other techniques that are not available with only two waves. These are valuable because for most predictors, joint consideration of both their initial levels and their change over time best forecasts dissolution (Kurdek, 2002). For example, divorce rates vary with different satisfaction trajectories in the early years of marriage (Lavner & Bradbury, 2010), and

people whose commitment varies day-to-day have greater dissolution odds than do those with more stable trajectories (Ogolsky et al., 2016).

However, prospective studies are an expensive way to study breakups, as they require significant oversampling to ensure there will be enough people in relationships who then break up to conduct meaningful analyses (breakup rates range from 2% to 77%; Le et al., 2010). Nevertheless, over the past 20 years, prospective/longitudinal studies were more common (149 studies; 72%) than retrospective studies, despite their cost. Many researchers have taken advantage of the free availability of large, representative datasets for their work, as will be described below.

Retrospective studies, on the other hand, are less expensive because the group of interest (i.e., those who have experienced a breakup) can be recruited specifically. However, these studies rely on participants' accurate memory and honesty about the breakup, neither of which is guaranteed. People use storytelling regarding their breakup to diffuse self-blame associated with initiating a breakup (Baumeister et al., 1990) and to resolve ambiguity associated with having been left (Blackburn et al., 2014). Judgments about breakups become biased in the direction of participants' stories (McGregor & Holmes, 1999), explaining the ex-appraisal bias (i.e., rating one's past relationship quality more negatively in retrospect after a breakup than what one had reported at the time; Smyth et al., 2020). Thus, retrospective memories and judgments about breakup are not necessarily providing an unfiltered reality.

13 | THE DYADIC NATURE OF DISSOLUTION

Relationships involve at least two people, which means that the outcomes derived from the relationship may be due to the actions of one or both of the partners. In the case of dissolution, either partner (or both) can engage in the behaviors needed for a breakup, but the outcome ultimately befalls both. In that case, in any given analysis predicting dissolution from a prospective study, it is possible that predictors about the participant are used to predict an outcome that someone other than the participant enacted (i.e., if their partner broke up with them). To address this problem, many researchers choose to collect dyadic data. Among the 203 studies with information on units of analysis we reviewed, 63 (31%) involved couples, whereas 140 (69%) involved individuals without participating partners. Among disciplines with the largest numbers of studies, the most- to least-frequent users of dyadic data were: clinical psychology (11/27, 41%), HDFS (10/26, 38%), social psychology (19/57, 33%), sociology (14/53, 26%), and communication studies (1/13, 8%). Obtaining data from both spouses or partners did not guarantee, however, that any kind of dyadic behavioral interaction was studied.

Compared to studies examining only one partner per couple, those including both partners additionally allow richer measures to be constructed. These include indices of couples' behaviors and spoken content during dyadic interactions, idealization (perceiver's rating of a target, relative to the target's self-rating), and partners' concordance/discordance on certain variables (e.g., asymmetric commitment, Stanley et al., 2017; stress perceptions, Stephenson & DeLongis, 2019). However, dyadic data are not without disadvantages. Beyond the cost, research suggests that couples in which both partners agree to participate differ from those in which only one member does so (Park et al., 2021). Studies with co-participating partners have a statistically and practically significantly lower breakup rate than those with only one participating partner. This effect remains significant even after controlling for many known breakup predictors, including commitment and conflict, suggesting that couples with co-participating partners differ from those in which only one member agrees to participate not only in

statistically controllable baseline characteristics but also in their level of breakup risk or the dynamics underlying the baseline characteristics (which cannot be controlled for; Park et al., 2021). This calls into question whether dyadic breakup studies generalize to the whole population (Farrell et al., 2016).

As it may be prudent to not exclusively rely on dyadic data to study dissolution, other solutions are needed for determining how much statistical responsibility for dissolution a participant should be assigned. Many studies ask participants to answer who "initiated" the breakup (e.g., Sbarra & Emery, 2005). However, there is ambiguity surrounding the word "initiates"–if one partner says "we should break up" because their partner betrayed them, which partner initiated the breakup? One solution to this issue is to ask the question using several verbs (e.g., who initiated/was responsible/decided) and create a composite to assess how much "responsibility" each person had for the end of the relationship (see VanderDrift et al., 2009; VanderDrift et al., 2012). Even still, any measure of initiation/responsibility, no matter how specific, may be inaccurate due to a variant of the self-serving bias, which holds that when individuals are asked to estimate their percentage of contribution to a group outcome, the total nearly always is greater than 100%. We found significant evidence that this does occur for breakup. In the 12 papers that assessed responsibility for breakup in our review, most participants claimed to be the initiator of the breakup, with the next largest group claiming mutual responsibility. When dyadic data existed, it was very rare for both partners to claim initiation, but it was also rare for both partners to agree on responsibility. The most common finding was that one partner said they were the initiator whereas the other said it was mutual.

14 | THE MEASUREMENT OF DISSOLUTION

Dissolution can be captured as a single binary outcome variable: is the relationship intact or dissolved? Indeed, in our review, most studies (176, 85%) reported no additional breakup information beyond its occurrence. The most common details collected and reported involved responsibility for the breakup (13 studies), reasons for it (3), or other summary information (4). The remaining studies collected but did not report breakup details.

Despite its apparent simplicity, designing even a single dissolution item can involve important measurement decisions. Studies of divorce must grapple with issues such as what to consider the official date of breakup: legal separation date, physical separation date, date divorce papers were initiated, date divorce papers were finalized, the self-reported date of the end of the relationship, and so forth. Depending on the research question, different metrics might be more or less useful (e.g., if considering the impact on children, perhaps physical separation is more meaningful, whereas if considering the emotional sequalae for the former partners, perhaps self-reported end is). Whereas these milestones toward breakup are not as salient in nonmarital breakups, similar considerations are relevant. And indeed, partners do not always agree on the date their relationship ended (or with objective data–in one study, for example, one-third of participants provided a divorce date estimate that was 6 months or more away from the actual date; Mitchell, 2010). In fact, in some studies, participants do not even agree on whether their relationship ended. In a study by Dailey et al. (2009), couples in which one member of the dyad reported the relationship had ended were sampled, and 35% of those had a partner who did not say the relationship had ended. These findings suggest that, at least in some relationships, an uncoupling process unfolds that is more complicated than a single event.

Together, these findings highlight the potential value of collecting more details about the process of breakups. For example, depending on the research question, it may be relevant to consider whether a couple's breakup is official after the first discussion of it, or after several discussions (perhaps spanning days or weeks). Whether it was broached first via a mediated-communication platform or in person, whether the partners were alone or with others, whether the former partners remained friends or sex partners after the dissolution and others may all be relevant considerations, especially in light of findings that suggest the nature of the post-breakup relationship predicts the relationship's likelihood of rekindling (Dailey et al., 2020). Most of the work to date that has examined these details has been descriptive in nature, retrospectively asking participants to describe their breakups so more is known about the normative patterns. A logical next step may be researchers doing prospective work looking at whether there are theoretically-relevant variables that predict not just *whether* a breakup will occur, but *how* it will occur.

15 | THE TIMING OF DISSOLUTION

Another important methodological consideration for prospective breakup studies is the lag between data collection points. The results of breakup studies can be strongly shaped by their time course. For example, one meta-analysis we reviewed concluded that if a sample had been dating for 6 months on average at the first data collection period, a researcher could expect 37% of the sample to have broken up 6 weeks later. If they waited 156 weeks instead, they could expect that 49% of the sample would have broken up (Le et al., 2010). This modest increase in breakup rate over time demonstrates that time elapsed itself is a predictor of breakup. Beyond that, some predictors of breakups may appear more robust in one study versus another due to the timeframe. Scant research has examined what predicts the immediacy of dissolution, but in one such study, it was found that commitment does predict whether a breakup will occur, but not when, whereas actively thinking about a breakup predicts both whether and when a breakup will occur (VanderDrift et al., 2009). For that reason, active thoughts about breakup might be a stronger predictor in a study with a shorter time lag, whereas commitment might be so in a design with a longer lag between waves.

Relatedly, research that has followed breakups over time has shown that not all breakups persist (Dailey et al., 2009; Dailey et al., 2020). For this reason, some researchers require a full year of marital separation before concluding that a breakup has occurred (e.g., Rogers, 2004). When breakup is used as a primary dependent measure, it is important for researchers to conceptualize it not as the ultimate end of the relationship (e.g., as health researchers do when they use death as the outcome), but rather as the status of the relationship at a particular moment (e.g., as health researchers do when they measure symptoms).

In our review, with regard to wave spacing in longitudinal work, there was relative homogeneity. Common designs included two waves separated by 1 year (9, 6% of the 149 longitudinal studies); four annual waves (7, 5%); two waves 4 months apart (5 studies, 3%); two waves separated by 4 years (5, 3%); and eight waves 6 months apart (5, 3%). Note that these counts do not necessarily represent *independent* decisions by multiple researchers to use a given assessment schedule. Instead, a high count could reflect multiple studies from the same original project. Twenty-four studies had 10 or more waves (16%), although sometimes these many waves existed only in a technical sense (i.e., the investigators did not necessarily interview participants that many times). With survival analysis, researchers can define an observation period with

numerous temporal units (hypothetically, from January 2015 to December 2019, which includes 60 months), but potentially interview participants only once at the end, asking married participants if they divorced during the study period and, if so, in which month. Time intervals in survival analyses would thus be better characterized as *quasi*-waves. In addition, it is important to note that many studies with multiple waves and quasi-waves assessed the variables held as predictors of breakup at only the first wave, and assessed only breakup at subsequent waves (e.g., the predictor of interest was time-invariant, such as whether the couple cohabited prior to marriage). The literature would benefit from varying lags and collecting predictors at multiple time points to learn both what signals an impending dissolution and what earlier signs presage a breakup further down the road. To this end, it may behoove researchers to frame their work in terms of "breakup within *x* timeframe" if they measured a consistent timeframe for all participants or contextualize their predictors in terms of the specific temporal window for which their results provided the most predictive power.

16 | SUMMARY OF THE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO STUDYING BREAKUPS

Our review shows the bulk of the studies to have been correlational and longitudinal, with roughly one-quarter dyadic. This frequency may not seem large, but given the difficulty of securing the participation of both partners, it is noteworthy. Challenges in the measurement of dissolution (e.g., pinpointing its timing and what the precipitating event was) were noted.

In comparison to a recent review of the relationship science literature (Williamson et al., 2022), we identified some different results, which help differentiate dissolution research from the field of relationship science broadly. The two reviews only partially overlapped in publication outlets and years, but it is noteworthy that whereas we found 31% of studies to have collected dyadic data, they found that 42% had. On the other hand, we found considerably greater use of longitudinal methods (72%) than did Williamson et al. (24%). These differences make sense, as breakup, perhaps more than other topics within relationship science, lends itself to longitudinal follow-ups to detect dissolution and what predicts this outcome. Another design-related issue is the use of data from both partners in a couple versus from only one partner. Relationship researchers tend to prefer dyadic data, as they provide richer perspective on the relationship and permit the study of partners' mutual influence on each other (e.g., Actor-Partner Interdependence Model; Kenny et al., 2006). However, studies with dyadic data reveal systematically lower dissolution rates and couples closer to breaking up may be more hesitant to participate in a study together. Thus, the relative abundance of samples with individuals in dissolution research (relative to other topics within relationship science) may in some cases be intentional or strategic.

17 | WHOSE BREAKUPS ARE WE STUDYING? SAMPLING AND GENERALIZABILITY

Social sciences, such as the study of relationship dissolution, are necessarily context-dependent. Studies are conducted among certain groups of people, in certain geographic locations and cultural contexts, and in certain historical eras. Only by diversifying the participants, locations, cultures, and historical eras over a large number of studies can researchers get a true sense of

the generalizability of their findings. The publication dates of the studies we review are relatively narrow in scope (2002–2020), but *in principle*, could represent a broad range of participants, locations, and cultures. Yet, a recent review found that relationship science more broadly has overwhelmingly focused on the experiences of white, middle-class, college-educated Americans in heterosexual-presenting relationships (Williamson et al., 2022). Have researchers who study relationship dissolution, more specifically, collected diverse, representative samples that would allow us to make generalizable claims? Or, does this subfield similarly tend to repeatedly capture the experiences of the same narrow subsets of the population? Given the samples used, can we speak to issues of culture or intersectionality?

18 | SAMPLING/RECRUITMENT APPROACHES

Dissolution is an event to which all couples are vulnerable, yet there is no reason to expect that the predictors, processes, and outcomes of dissolution will be consistent among different segments of this population. As such, diverse samples are crucial for understanding this event. We have uploaded a document describing the samples with more details on OSF (https://osf.io/sdbzh/) and provide a summary of those details below.

We found that sampling quality was impressive, with nearly half of the 211 datasets in our reviewed studies (85, 40%) attaining or approaching national representativeness. All of these 85 datasets were fully nationally representative, with the exception of seven that were nationally representative of *certain segments* of the population (e.g., the Fragile Families study represented unmarried parents in US cities of 200,000 or more). Studies using terms such as "probability sample" or "random-digit-dial" were considered representative, although they may fall short of full representativeness if there is differential nonparticipation by demographic subgroups. However, even these representative samples were overwhelmingly recruited from "WEIRD" (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) societies (Henrich et al., 2010). Only three national studies with representative samples were from non-WEIRD nations (two from China, one from India).

Another 35 datasets (17%) included locally or regionally representative samples. All were from the US except for the Chitwan Valley Family Study in rural Nepal and one in Puerto Rico (a US territory rather than a state). The collection also included 18 non-representative local or regional samples (9%), which were assembled via newspaper and radio ads, support groups, family courts, daycares, preschools, doctors' offices, and Craigslist, and so forth. Twelve such samples were the US, whereas the others were from British Columbia, Canada; Kent, UK; Munich, Germany; Norway (specific location unspecified); South East Queensland, Australia; and Stockholm, Sweden.

Forty-three datasets (20%) consisted of university students (40 US, 3 Canada). Another 21 datasets (10%) used miscellaneous methods such as online surveys (7 mentioning Amazon's Mechanical Turk specifically), purposive sampling (1), meta-analysis (3), and content analysis of blog posts (1) or had unclassifiable methods. Finally, nine studies (4%) used archival statistical data, either exclusively (e.g., analyzing divorce rates) or partly (analyzing archival divorce information while also using human judgment to code target individuals' physical attractiveness).

Investigators' disciplines were heavily linked to their sample types. Of 55 studies led by sociologists, 50 (46 nationally, 4 locally/regionally) samples were representative (91%). Likewise, of 27 studies led by HDFS scholars, 21 (15 national, 6 local/regional) used representative samples

TABLE 1 Typical sample demographics by discipline (k = number of samples, M = million)

	Sociology (k = 55)	Social Psy (k = 58)	HDFS (k = 27)	Communication (k = 13)	Clinical Psych (k = 27)	Other (k = 27)	Total (k = 207)
Sample *N*							
Median	4460	216	1732	208	284	838	746
Range	335 – ~5.7 M	59–65,911	30–74,167	43–335	40–4850	100–9147	30 - ~5.7 M
Average Age							
Median	26	24	24	22	27	27	26
Range	17–58	16–45	21–40	20–34	19–45	19–62	16–62
% Married							
Median	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	96%	93%
Range	0–100%	0–100%	0–100%	0–25%	0–100%	0–100%	0–100%
% Women							
Median	60%	53%	54%	58%	53%	54%	55%
Range	0–100%	0–90%	46–100%	50% - 64%	0% - 100%	40–100%	0–100%
% White							
Median	75%	83%	59%	72%	80%	75%	75%
Range	39–100%	32–95%	0–90%	58–88%	12–100%	0–100%	0–100%
% Black							
Median	15%	5%	18%	12%	4%	14%	8%
Range	5–53%	0–53%	1–100%	1–15%	0–27%	0–100%	0–100%
% Asian							
Median	2%	7%	3%	6%	2%	2%	4%
Range	0–100%	0–52%	0–100%	0–13%	0–14%	0–6%	0–100%
% Hispanic							
Median	12%	4%	14%	6%	12%	9%	8%
Range	0–100%	0–27%	0–26%	0–21%	0–76%	0–63%	0–100%

(78%). In contrast, of 58 social-psychology studies, 26 used college students (45%) and 14 (6 national, 8 local/regional) used representative samples (24%). Communication studies also had a high rate of college-student samples (7 of 13, 54%). Finally, clinical psychologists (who contributed to 27 studies) tended to use local/regional samples (11 of which were representative [41%] and 7 of which were not [26%]); this finding may stem from clinicians' need to have participants nearby to conduct in-person assessments.

A breakdown of the most commonly measured demographic variables, aggregated across studies by discipline, is presented in Table 1. We summarize the findings below.

19 | AGE

Many studies examined specific parts of the lifespan (e.g., National Longitudinal Survey of Youth; Health and Retirement Study). To what extent were all stretches of the lifespan covered? Consistent with Williamson et al. (2022), younger mean ages predominated. Of the 135 samples providing age data, 47% covered adolescence through young adulthood (mean ages from 16–25). Because many studies of university students did not provide age information, coverage of the early twenties is likely even more prevalent. Another 36% of studies had mean ages from 26–35; 13% had mean ages from 36–45, and 4% had mean ages from 55–62.

20 | SEX-GENDER

Given many studies' use of mixed-sex dyads, male–female ratios of 50/50 were common (26% of the 170 datasets containing sex-gender information). Single-sex datasets, such as the National Survey of Family Growth (initially only women) and studies of men within incarcerated (Lopoo & Western, 2005) and military populations (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008) were rare (2% all men, 12% all women). Women predominated (i.e., comprised 51–90% of the samples) in 53% of studies, whereas they were in the minority (i.e., 38–49%) in only 6% (percentages do not add due to rounding). Non-cisgender identifications appeared only twice. LeFebvre and Fan (2020, Study 2) reported 0.6% of their MTurk sample to be "gender variant/non-conforming" (p. 447), whereas Owenz and Fowers (2019) found 2% of university students to be transgender.

Having robust gender-sex diversity is important, as the results of these studies have revealed that there are meaningful differences when it comes to predicting dissolution. Namely, women, compared to men, were found to be more reliable at identifying their relationship problems (Williamson et al., 2016), their levels of commitment were more predictive of breakup than were men's (Sprecher, 2001; Stanley et al., 2017), and they were more likely to initiate separations due to their or their husband's social characteristics (e.g., religiosity, parental divorce, access to economic resources; Hewitt et al., 2006).

21 | RACE-ETHNICITY

Estimated trends for samples' representation of different racial-ethnic groups (White, Black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latinx) over time appear in Figure 1. Because of differences in articles' reporting of racial-ethnic categories and the fact these subgroups may be less common outside
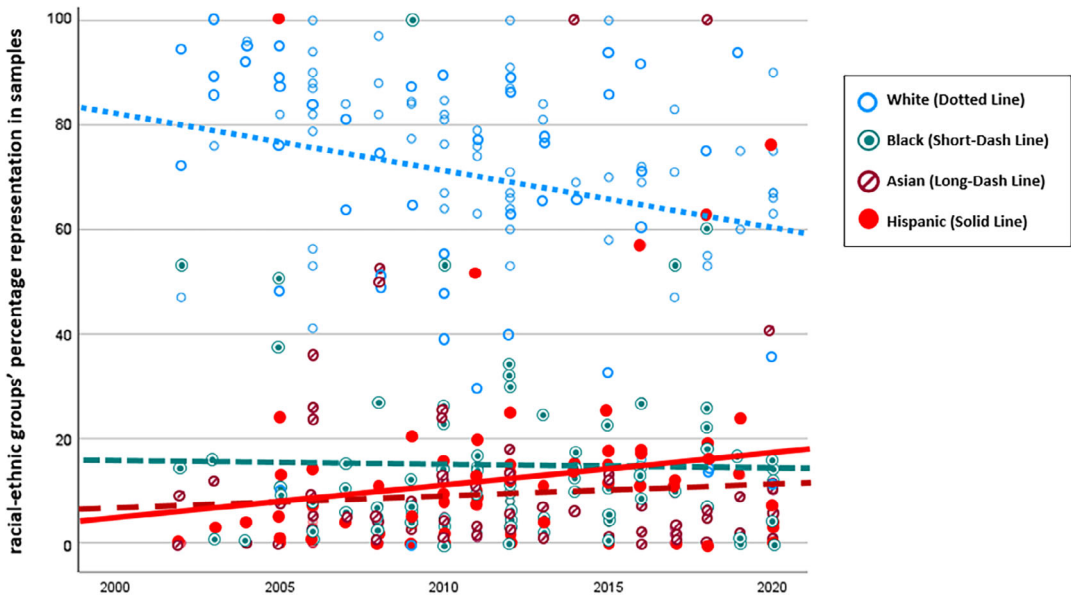

FIGURE 1 Percentage representation in samples for different racial-ethnic groups (data-points and best-fit lines) by year of publication

the United States, the trends are only approximations. The most prominent trends show that samples have included progressively fewer white participants (down to an estimated 60% by 2020 according to their best-fit line, closely matching the 2020 Census figure of 61.6%; US Census Bureau, 2021) and progressively larger percentages of Hispanic/Latinx participants. Excluding the study by Oropesa and Landale (2005) in Puerto Rico (with 100% Hispanic participants), the Hispanic slope would rise more sharply than depicted in Figure 1. Hispanics participants comprised somewhat below 20% of participants in the reviewed studies as of 2020, closely matching the 2020 Census figure for Hispanic/Latinx Americans (18.7%). The 2020 percentage for Black participants appeared to exceed slightly the 2020 Census for Black Americans (12.4%), whereas the 2020 percentage for Asian participants slightly exceeds the 2020 Census figure for Asian Americans (6.0%).

This trend toward greater diversity in race-ethnicity is vital, in terms of monitoring the inclusion and exclusion of different groups and the larger question of whose voices are being heard (the same holds for representation of same-sex couples, depicted in Figure 2). These steps are necessary to move toward a greater focus on intersectionality, which requires considering multiple identities at once (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). In our review of the results, relatively few papers addressed even a singular identity such as how racial experiences might shape dissolution experiences, let alone multiple identities at once. Those that did address racial experiences found that structural factors like race exert an influence on dissolution rates, above and beyond interactional characteristics of the relationships (Orbuch et al., 2002). Insofar as researchers are beginning to have greater racial diversity in their samples, the field will benefit from a greater understanding of how race and racism impact dissolution which can be expanded to view how other identities intersect as well.

22 | SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS (SES)

Details on participants' SES, based on education (12 reports; 6%) and/or income (40 reports; 19%), were rare. College students (samples of whom comprised one-fifth of our studies) are economically heterogeneous. Students from the top 1 percent of the US household income distribution are represented disproportionately on some campuses (Upshot, 2017), but roughly 45% of students nationally have received loans averaging around $7000 (Hussar et al., 2020) and 43% of full-time undergraduates simultaneously worked at a job (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Based on the available information, we estimate that more samples were below the typical US household-income level than above it. For a rare sample description of education, see Miller et al. (2006).

Findings suggest that SES is important for understanding dissolution in at least two ways: 1) It appears that being financially dependent on a relationship reduces the likelihood that it will end, and 2) couples with greater financial resources have lower dissolution odds. As such, more uniform measuring and reporting of this variable in future work would be beneficial.

23 | TYPE OF RELATIONSHIP AND RELATIONSHIP OUTCOMES

Of 125 studies with data on relationship statuses, 31 (25%) had no married persons, whereas 61 (49%) consisted entirely of married couples. The remaining 33 (26%) of samples ranged from
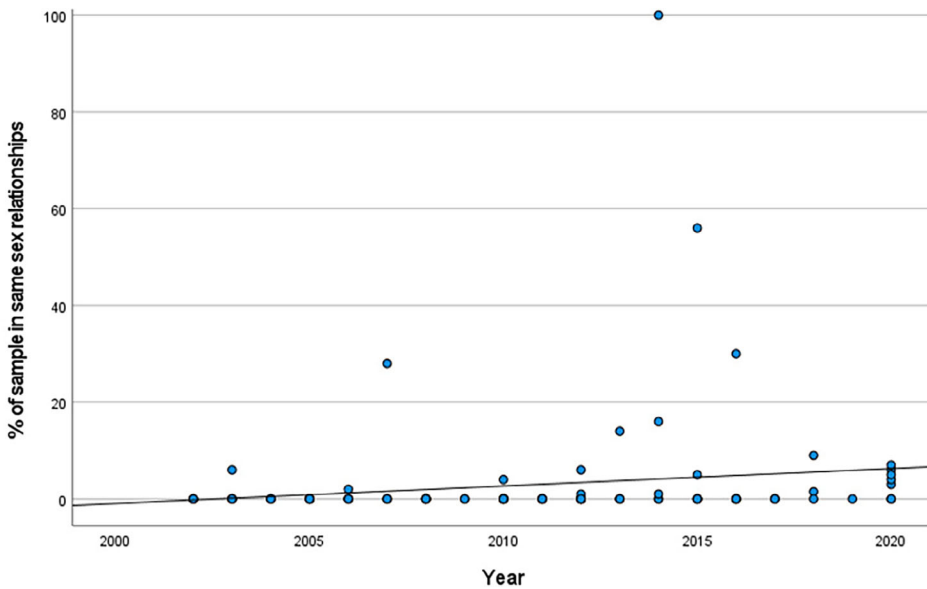
FIGURE 2 Percentage representation in samples for same-sex couples (data-points and best-fit line) by year of publication

having 1–98% of participants or couples married. Our collection of studies, thus, provides a greater balance between marital and non-marital relationships than did the review by Sbarra and Beck (2013). Although there is considerable overlap between the type of relationship examined in a given study and the type of outcome (i.e., divorce being the outcome in samples starting out with exclusively married participants and non-marital breakup being the outcome in samples without married participants), the picture is more complex. For example, a study focused on the predictors or consequences of divorce could have included a sizable share of divorced participants, so that the percent married would be less than 100%. We consulted articles' main results statements from their abstracts (which, as noted above, were part of the coding database) for explicit references to "divorce" or equivalent terms (e.g., "marital dissolution"). A total of 103 studies' abstracts directly mentioned divorce or an equivalent term, including 12 in which the studies simultaneously examined divorce in their subsets of married participants *and* non-marital breakup in their subsets of cohabiting couples. Because the 12 studies containing subsamples both of married and cohabiting participants used the same measures in both subgroups, drew participants from similar geographic areas, and so forth, they offer the best venue for testing whether certain predictor variables are more closely associated with dissolution in marital or cohabiting unions. Review of these 12 studies revealed three differences of note: (a) the association of sexual frequency and dissolution likelihood was more sharply negative within cohabitation than within marriage (Yakibu & Gager, 2009); (b) middle-aged and older partners' informal caregiving to a spouse-partner or other person (potentially a major source of stress) was more strongly linked to breakup in cohabiting than in marital relationships (Penning & Wu, 2019); and (c) conflict was a less potent predictor of dissolved cohabitations than of individuals' trajectories of multiple (marital and/or cohabitation) breakups (Bae & Wickrama, 2019).

Figure 2 presents the trend in our collection of studies for samples' representation of same-sex couples (marital and non-marital) over time in the 99 studies with this information (48% of total studies; note that most studies did not report any same-sex couples, so Figure 2 includes a large number of overlapping dots for 0%). The best-fit line rises from 0 in 2002 to roughly 7–8% in 2020. From 2002–2005, only one study even reported a non-zero percentage of same-sex couples. A Norwegian study had 100% same-sex couples (Wiik et al., 2014), but even without this study, the upward trend is clear. One other dimension examined was partners' self-reported monogamy. LeFebvre and Fan (2020) allowed participants to report (along with married, divorced, etc.) the statuses of casually dating one person, casually dating more than one person, being committed to one person, and committed to more than one person. The latter option was selected by 1.6% and 2.4%, respectively, of these authors' two MTurk samples.

24 | RELATIONSHIP DURATION

Because of the abundance of college student samples and general-population studies of young adults (e.g., National Longitudinal Survey of Youth) or newlyweds (e.g., Los Angeles County marriage-license study; Early Years of Marriage Study), relationship durations tended to be short. Of the 85 available means (84 studies reported means, one study reporting these separately for married and cohabiting participants), 9 (11%) were 12 months or shorter, 32 (38%) were between 13–24 months, 15 (18%) were between slightly over 24 months-48 months, 13 (15%) were from 49–120 months (10 years), 10 (12%) were from 121–180 months (15 years), and 6 (7%) were longer than 15 years (percentages do not add to 100% due to rounding; lengths are usually from study onset, but a few were specified as being at time of breakup).

25 | SUMMARY OF SAMPLING/GENERALIZABILITY

Our review of samples' sociodemographic characteristics showed some encouraging signs. Most notably, the representation of Hispanic/Latinx and same-sex participants increased over the nearly 20-year period examined. Less encouraging, however, is the apparent stagnation of Black and Asian representation in US samples. Similarly, studies were somewhat skewed toward younger-adult populations (also found in a review of relationship studies more broadly by Williamson et al., 2022). Some studies examined lower-income and working-class populations, which is a positive development. Many studies used college populations (20% in our review, 27% in Williamson et al.'s, 2022). Finally, whereas Williamson et al. found white respondents to have been oversampled relative to their share of the US population, we found white individuals' share of dissolution research to be in line with their share of the population.

There were numerous other structural and demographic variables that empirically matter but were not reported frequently enough to code. For example, our results suggest that the presence of children, past relationship experiences (e.g., parental divorce, own previous relationship history), and cohabitation status all play significant roles in predicting dissolution, yet were so uncommonly mentioned in methodological details that we did not systematically code for them. Likewise, there are additional demographic variables that could matter empirically (e.g., disability status) that were neither reported nor directly examined within the papers we reviewed.

26 | DISCUSSION

Our review of the 2002–2020 research literature on relationship dissolution reveals a wide range of theoretical perspectives as well as positive methodological developments. There are both continuities and discontinuities between our review and previous ones (primarily Sprecher & Fehr, 1998, as it precedes our 2002–2020 window, but also Rodrigues et al., 2006; Sbarra & Beck, 2013). As with previous reviews, social exchange, interdependence, and related theories were among those most frequently used from 2002–2020. In contrast, models focusing on stress (vulnerability-stress-adaptation, crisis/ABC-X) were not as frequently invoked in the present studies than they were earlier (Rodrigues et al., 2006). Researchers drew upon attachment more frequently in the present studies than in those covered by previous reviews. Regarding the dearth of attachment research in Sprecher and Fehr's (1998) review, attachment theory as a framework for studying adult romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) was only approximately a decade old, and even into the 1990s, researchers were refining the concept and ways to measure it (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Collins & Read, 1990). In the following paragraphs, we discuss the implications of our findings pertaining to theory and methodology (focusing on populations studied) and offer ideas for future research.

27 | IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

Dissolution has been usefully conceptualized as a distressing event with an emphasis on its consequences, as a decision with an emphasis on its antecedents, and as a process with an emphasis on its mechanisms. Having reviewed the collected studies, we conclude that dissolution is a consequential decision that often evokes significant distress, over either the short or long haul. The ending of a relationship is often preceded by factors that are specific to the relationship (e.g., lack of love, conflict), but also by factors seemingly unrelated to the relationship (e.g., insurance status, the presence of natural disasters). A complete, perfectly predictive model of dissolution that applies to everyone is not possible.[5] However, based on the existing literature, we would expect the most robust models to integrate individual differences (e.g., attachment, parental divorce), relationship-specific experiences (e.g., perceived partner regard, love), structural factors (e.g., race, SES, cultural acceptability of divorce), and environmental contexts (e.g., stressors, global events) (see Niehuis et al., 2006, for an example of such a model). Rodrigues et al. (2006) likewise called for integrative models in their review. The strongest models would also be built on research designs that ensure heterogeneity in demographics (to allow the structural factors to emerge), repeated measurement (to allow variability and change to emerge), a temporally near end-point (to ensure predictors measured are relevant to the outcome), and comprehensive assessment of responsibility for the dissolution (to determine how much each partner's variables should have predicted the outcome).

The theoretical richness evident in the past 20 years' literature may be too much of a good thing, however, as over 40 different theories were cited, collectively, as inspiring the reviewed studies. Thirty years ago, Copeland and White (1991) addressed theory proliferation, urging balance between the consolidation of theories to achieve parsimony and continued diverse theorizing to fit the richness and complexity of family and relationship processes. Now, in the 2020s, it may be time to shift the balance toward greater consolidation of theories. A striking benefit of this would be that as theories with differing views on what it means to break up (e.g., as a decision, as a distressing event) are combined, a richer, more nuanced understanding of the event will necessarily result. However, non-redundant new theories that clearly and profoundly go beyond existing ones should always be welcome.

28 | IMPLICATIONS FOR METHODS

Many favorable methodological aspects have been noted (e.g., longitudinal, dyadic designs, increased representation of same-sex and Hispanic-Latinx couples). These help to elucidate the most robust predictor variables of relationship dissolution. There is space for advancement in other areas of dissolution research, however. First, the current literature is heavily based on younger samples. This skewing is particularly concerning in light of what Brown and colleagues (e.g., Brown & Lin, 2012) have termed the "gray divorce revolution" of relationship terminations in later life. Second, most studies' reporting of SES was sparse. Echoing Williamson et al. (2022), we strongly urge researchers to report their samples' income and educational characteristics more widely than they currently do. Even in college-student samples, which some researchers may view as socioeconomically homogeneous, there is appreciable heterogeneity. Therefore, greater attention should be paid to reporting on students' SES (their own and/or their family's).[6]

Third, modern conceptions of race-ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic, and other forms of diversity should receive greater attention than previously. Few-Demo (2014) and Lincoln (2016) have outlined paths for applying intersectionality to relationship and family research. Lincoln notes that interactions of individuals' biological, cultural, and structural contexts are necessary to understand one's self-perceptions, ways of relating to others, others' perceptions of the focal actor, and other contributing factors to marital and relationship dynamics. None of the presently reviewed studies was couched in terms of intersectionality. However, given the increasing representation in dissolution studies of historically disenfranchised groups, opportunities to probe intersectionality should become more readily available. Conducting intersectionality-relevant studies would seem best accomplished either by obtaining large probability samples (perhaps oversampling from underrepresented groups) to reach people with different combinations of statuses or purposively sampling individuals with patterns of intersectionality of interest to the researcher. Few-Demo notes some of the challenges of conducting intersectional research, such as being able to interpret raw data (numerical or qualitative text) within structural and historical contexts when the latter is not explicitly referenced and deal with interdependent and multidimensional data that intertwine multiple actors and contexts when many quantitative approaches assume independence of observations and additive, rather than synergistic, processes.

Finally, whereas our review did not examine the demographics of the researchers themselves, we also acknowledge that the goal of increasing the diversity of samples is just one step toward a comprehensive understanding of dissolution. Another step needed is to increase the diversity of the researchers and/or for researchers to partner with currently disenfranchised communities to develop research questions and methods. These strategies would help the field move from doing research *on* underrepresented groups to doing research *with* underrepresented groups. This shift in perspective will enable research to fully explain how processes unfold across groups.

28.1 | Benefits of interdisciplinary research

One marked strength of relationship science research from which this review has benefited is its interdisciplinary nature. Although each contributing discipline has its own inherent strengths and weaknesses pertaining to training and goals, the disciplines combine here to

provide a robust understanding of dissolution. For example, our data suggest sociologists use the most diverse, representative samples. This allows them to comprehensively understand the role of structural and historical variables in dissolution. On the other hand, social psychologists have produced work that is the most theoretically organized around central psychological and dyadic processes, with communication scholars studying, among other things, microprocesses of verbal and nonverbal communication. These foci allow social psychologists and communication scholars to understand the proximal predictors of dissolution and devise theoretical interventions to forestall non-imminent dissolutions, if desirable. Finally, family scientists are attuned to issues that make romantic and marital dyads different from any other dyads (e.g., their potentially greater longevity, presence of children in the home, and relations with external family; Copeland & White, 1991). All these disciplines' findings are crucial to understanding dissolution. There undeniably *are* differences in dissolution predictors and outcomes as a result of demographic factors, social structural factors, psychological processes, communication and interaction, and family contexts. Without question, the field would benefit from greater cross-fertilization of these different perspectives (Niehuis et al., 2006).

An interesting future consideration will be to track whether this type of categorization remains viable as the field matures and the benefits of cross-fertilization become apparent. For this review, it was possible to categorize each paper as fitting somewhat comfortably within a discipline. This is because we focused only on the corresponding author and it has been typical for scholars to be situated within discipline-focused departments that match their training. This is not ideal in cases where research teams are interdisciplinary or individuals' training is more diverse. Future work would benefit from expanding our coding scheme to explore the diversity of training present in authors and author teams. Anecdotally, we see greater instances in recent years of interdisciplinary author teams (e.g., one author was trained in one discipline whereas another was trained in a different discipline) and of scholars who obtain interdisciplinary training, either by combining two different experiences (e.g., a PhD in one discipline and a postdoctoral fellowship in another), or by obtaining training in an integrated program (e.g., a training program that is defined by a topic rather than a discipline). As the field continues to change and scholars' identities regarding their disciplines change, this will be interesting data to track. We expect it will improve the prediction of important relationship outcomes, given our findings that the topics to which many different disciplines contribute are those we have the greatest understanding of.

28.2 | Limitations

Although our searching and coding of articles were extensive, inferences from our review are also limited in some ways. First, by focusing on eight prominent journals spanning different disciplines, we likely attained good coverage of the relevant literature. However, articles published in other journals would have been overlooked, even if they yielded noteworthy theoretical or empirical illumination of the breakup process. This includes articles published in languages other than English, which may provide a more global outlook on relationship dissolution. Second, given publication bias and given that we did not seek the inclusion of unpublished datasets, the results we reviewed may appear stronger or more consistent than they really are. Third, whereas longitudinal designs support temporal precedence between predictor variables and dissolution, or between dissolution and emotional responses, experimental evidence is lacking. Having participants respond to hypothetical scenarios (e.g., seeing if participants report

being more likely to end a relationship if one's hypothetical partner committed a transgression vs. did not), though ethically unproblematic and conducive to causal inference, would not capture an actual relationship process. Hence, we excluded hypothetical designs, even though they may help understand the specific mechanisms that underpin breakup processes. Finally, due to the difficulty of capturing breakups in real time, the temporal specificity with which dissolution processes operate remains somewhat fuzzy.

The review of methods used in our studies revealed impressive–though far from universal–implementation of high-quality practices such as using representative samples, dyadic designs, and longitudinal follow-ups. Also, sophisticated statistical tools such as survival analysis were often used. However, repeated use of the same high-quality secondary datasets may also hinder the field in some ways. The available measures may be limited for any researcher's desired use, reliance on the same high-profile datasets may inadvertently limit the perspectives reflected in published articles, and there is the inevitability that the datasets will become dated. On the other hand, few individual investigators have the financial resources to collect nationally representative data with professional interviewers. Smaller-scale dyadic longitudinal studies, therefore, likely represent the short-to-middle range future of the field.

29 | FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our review highlights several important future directions for dissolution researchers to consider. First, there is a clear need for theoretical integration and consolidation. Dozens of theories mentioned in the reviewed studies were drawn upon for only one or two papers; dozens more studies had no theoretical framework at all. A comprehensive model of dissolution might consolidate the most dominant theoretical perspectives (e.g., social-exchange theory, attachment theory), and examine whether they can also help to explain findings that have not yet been considered through those lenses. It would also be worth examining whether less-dominant theoretical perspectives offer unique predictions and explanations that dominant perspectives have overlooked.

Second, there is a need for more research examining breakups as a phenomenon unto itself, rather than as a single binary outcome variable. How do individuals perceive, interpret, and process the possibility of their relationship ending? At the dyadic level, to what extent do partners who undergo a separation have insight into each other's perspectives, and why is it that many couples do not agree on who initiated the breakup? When breakups are mutual, how does that mutuality unfold? Qualitative methods, which were used very rarely in the reviewed studies, may present a particularly useful way to probe dissolution processes. Focusing on process-oriented catalysts that may initiate (or accelerate) relationship decline, such as transgressions (Niehuis et al., 2019) and disillusionment (Niehuis et al., 2015), may also be fruitful.

Third, although dissolution research is perhaps more successful than many subfields at obtaining representative samples, those samples still overwhelmingly come from Western countries (mainly the United States). Mirroring the field of relationship science more broadly (Williamson et al., 2022), there is a pressing need for research on dissolution in other cultures, which often have different scripts and norms around both non-marital dissolution and divorce. For example, countries vary considerably in the ease or difficulty in obtaining a divorce (Cherlin, 2017). There is also a need for more research that intentionally oversamples underrepresented groups to allow enough statistical power to probe for group differences. How might dissolution decisions, experiences, and outcomes be uniquely shaped by different cultural

identities? In particular, very few of the reviewed studies were sufficiently diverse to allow researchers to examine intersectional experiences.

Regardless of methodological approach, researchers should be clear on the implications of their choices for their findings. As we noted, different time-lags between waves may produce what appear to be different "best" predictors of dissolution, and different designs may introduce different predictors as well (e.g., change in satisfaction over time may be the strongest predictor in a study with five waves, but not even possible to assess in a study with two). When incorporating new predictors of dissolution into the literature, our review suggests that the rationale for the methodological choices made is as or more important than the theoretical rationale for the predictors included in terms of understanding the findings.

30 | CONCLUSION

We have reviewed substantive findings on relationship dissolution, both the factors that lead to it and the ways in which individuals cope with it. This review uncovers several theoretical, methodological, and demographic strengths of the current literature. In addition, the results of this review have uncovered several areas for improvement, thus offering a roadmap to future breakup researchers on the most pressing avenues to explore. Based on this review, it appears more of that is occurring recently, likely as a result of the strength of the International Association for Relationship Research and the high quality of its two interdisciplinary journals. The next Decade in Review series will be informative as to how well we have achieved this promise of an interdisciplinary field.

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ENDNOTES

[1] As we review the published work on dissolution, we also acknowledge that the positionalities of the authors of those pieces may have introduced bias into the foci of their work and the conclusions they drew.

[2] Corresponding authors' disciplines may not fully reflect the disciplinary background of a study. For example, Terri Orbuch, a sociologist, has been the lead author of many articles from the Early Years of Marriage Project. However, two of the three original investigators were psychologists.

[3] Rodrigues et al. (2006) identified the question of "Why do some unhappy couples divorce whereas others do not?" (p. 104) as a direction for future research. It is good to see that some research has addressed this question, but opportunities for expanding this inquiry remain.

[4] True experiments that manipulated factors the researcher suspected could induce relationship termination would be unethical, hence the absence of this approach. Three studies (1.5%) were designated by our coders as naturalistic experiments or quasi-experiments (e.g., comparing individuals from intact versus dissolved relationships; Sbarra & Emery, 2005).

[5] Not only is a perfect predictive model impossible, but excessive efforts to account for findings can be deleterious (Silver, 2013). Associations of predictor and outcome variables are virtually never perfectly linear. The introduction of additional parameters (e.g., polynomial or other complex mathematical terms) may well increase the fit between model-predicted values of the outcome (i.e., $\hat{y}$) and the actual values (y). However, it does so at the expense of *overfitting*, making the predictive equation too specific to the present dataset and losing predictive effectiveness with other datasets (Silver, 2013).

[6] Best-practice articles on the assessment of demographic characteristics are available, including for socioeconomic status (Berzofsky et al., 2014), race-ethnicity (Hasnain-Wynia et al., 2011), and gender-minority identifications (Badgett et al., 2014).

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