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**Re-considering Re-partnering: New Insights about Gender and Sexuality in the Study  
of Second Union Formation**

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## Abstract

Past studies have established the existence of a persistent gender gap in re-partnering, wherein women are less likely to re-partner than men in the general population. Existing theories and explanations focus on women's and men's socio-demographic characteristics as mechanisms determining their opportunities, needs, and attractiveness in the re-partnering process. However, this work assumes people are heterosexual and overlooks sexual minorities despite growing scholarly interest in union formation and dissolution among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) people. We investigate whether and how the gender gap in re-partnering intersects with sexual identity to highlight the role of gender relations as a social force that shapes union formation outcomes among both the heterosexual and LGB population. We use retrospective data on cohabitation and marriage histories from the British Understanding Society survey (UKHLS) to estimate event history models. We confirm the existence of a gender gap favoring men among heterosexuals but find that lesbian women are more likely to re-partner than gay men. We do not observe a gender gap among bisexuals. Results are robust to accounting for compositional differences between groups using exact matching techniques. These findings suggest that the persistent gender gap found in past studies is not as universal as previously presumed and that sexual identity plays a vital role in re-partnering outcomes. Therefore, sociologists should explicitly incorporate the gender relational context into models and theories that explain gender differences in union formation outcomes.

## Introduction

People's experiences with union formation have changed significantly over time. Amid increasing cohabitation rates and high levels of union instability, people are increasingly more likely to re-partner, i.e., form multiple co-residential unions, via marriage or cohabitation, over their life course (Eickmeyer and Manning 2018). Demographic research on the occurrence and predictors of re-partnering is flourishing (Raley and Sweeney 2020), often focusing on a specific type of re-partnering; re-marriages (Choi and Tienda 2017; de Graaf and Kalmijn 2003), cohabitation after marital dissolution (Song 2021), or serial cohabitation (Bukodi 2012; Lichter and Qian 2008). This impressive body of work has two consistent features. First, studies find a re-partnering gender gap, wherein men re-partner more and faster than women (Brown et al. 2019; Reynolds 2021; Wu and Schimmele 2005). Second, studies exclusively assume heterosexuality and different-sex partnering.<sup>1</sup> In this exploratory study, we extend existing research by incorporating sexual identity into the study of the re-partnering gender gap. We investigate whether and how the gender gap in re-partnering, i.e., forming a second union (marriage or cohabitation) after dissolving the first union, intersects with sexual identity using retrospective union histories data from the United Kingdom.

Incorporating sexual minorities in the study of re-partnering is empirically overdue and theoretically warranted. First, family scholars have recently called to study re-partnering more broadly, i.e., not limiting analyses to re-marriages or serial cohabitation (Raley and Sweeney 2020). Expanding the definition of re-partnering is vital for the inclusion of sexual minorities. Although many countries have legalized same-sex marriage, including the United Kingdom, not enough time has passed to focus on different types of re-partnering following marital dissolution among sexual minorities. Second, the exclusion of sexual minorities from the study of re-partnering stands in striking contrast to the growing scholarly attention to the formation and stability of same-sex unions (Carpenter 2020; Joyner, Manning, and Bogle

2017; Manning, Brown, and Stykes 2016; Ruiz-Vallejo and Boertien 2021). This lacuna is primarily due to data restrictions that over-rely on existing couples that can be identified based on their co-residence and relationship status but not on self-reported identity (Manning and Payne 2021; Reczek 2020). Recently, large-scale nationally representative surveys, such as Understanding Society in the United Kingdom, started incorporating questions about sexual identity in addition to collecting partnership histories. This provides a unique opportunity to investigate re-partnering among sexual minorities. Therefore, our first goal is to provide empirical estimates of re-partnering by gender *and* sexual identity, namely among lesbian, gay, and bisexual women and men.

Theoretically, including sexual minorities in the study of re-partnering shifts the focus towards the role of gender as a social force that shapes demographic outcomes like union formation. The most prominent theoretical explanation for the consistent gender gap in re-partnering is the Marital Search Theory, an exchange-based perspective that focuses on demographic characteristics as mechanisms that predict the attractiveness, opportunity, and needs of women and men in the “marriage market” (de Graaf and Kalmijn 2003; Di Nallo 2019; Gałęzewska, Perelli-Harris, and Berrington 2017; Qian and Lichter 2018; Song 2021). Although people have partner preferences that could signal opportunities or needs regardless of their sexuality, this approach overlooks the social context of romantic relationships which is crucial for understanding gendered patterns in re-partnering across sexual identities. Marital Search Theory and other exchange-based explanations implicitly assume heteronormativity, i.e., that partnerships happen between different-sex partners and that people partner primarily to procreate. As such, this framework often translates attractiveness, opportunity, and needs from the perspective of men toward women and vice versa. Moreover, studies based on this framework often do not consider that the process of forming a second union can differ from the process of forming the first union, thus overlooking how the

relationship context of past unions shapes the occurrence of future ones. We argue and demonstrate that people's sexual identity is a key contextual factor in that regard.

In this study, we propose the Gender as Relational (Thomeer, Umberson, and Reczek 2020) as an alternative framework to theorize about re-partnering outcomes. We argue that the demographic process of re-partnering differs from forming the first union because previous relationship experiences shape people's likelihood to partner again after union dissolution and that considering people's sexuality is crucial for understanding the gender re-partnering gap. The Gender as Relational framework focuses on how people's gender, their partner's gender, and the relational context shape people's expectations and experiences in relationships. We argue that this perspective can also be extended to the case of re-partnering and help understand how re-partnering outcomes differ by gender and sexual identity. Therefore, our second goal is to apply a new sociological perspective to the demographic study of re-partnering to enhance our understanding of romantic unions through a critical and inclusive approach.

## **Re-partnering, Gender, and Sexuality**

### The Demographic Context of Re-partnering

We start our theoretical section by discussing whether and why we would expect the re-partnering gender gap to differ by sexual identity and how existing theories and frameworks explain these differences. Generally, LGBs are less likely than heterosexuals to be in a co-residential union, but there are gender differences within the LGB population (Black et al. 2000; Carpenter and Gates 2008). Lesbian and heterosexual women have similar partnership rates in the US. However, rates are considerably lower among gay men, bisexual men, and bisexual women when compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Badgett,

Carpenter, and Sansone 2021). Moreover, same-sex unions are more likely to end in separation than different-sex unions in some countries (Kalmijn, Loeve, and Manting 2007; Kolk and Andersson 2020; Lau 2012; Manning, Brown, and Stykes 2016). Dissolution rates of co-residential unions are higher among women in same-sex couples than among men in same-sex couples (Kolk and Andersson 2020; Lau 2012), although the opposite has been found in a study that also considered non-residential relationships (Joyner, Manning, and Bogle 2017). If re-partnering reflects general differences in union formation and dissolution, we can expect that re-partnering will be gendered among LGBs and will differ between LGBs and heterosexuals.

Although the prevalence of union formation and dissolution could hint at re-partnering patterns, they do not explain *why* re-partnering might differ across gender and sexuality. Marital search theory, assortative mating frameworks, and other exchange-based explanations for union formation can provide expectations about differences in re-partnering by gender and sexuality, although these expectations go in multiple directions. These frameworks underscore differential desires for relationships and partner characteristics (i.e., attractiveness), as well as different needs and opportunities to (re)partner (de Graaf and Kalmijn 2003; Di Nallo 2019; Gałęzewska, Perelli-Harris, and Berrington 2017; Kalmijn 1998). From this perspective, differences in re-partnering can arise if desires, needs, and opportunities are not only gendered but also vary by sexuality.

The desire to have a long-term committed relationship is similar across sexual identities (Tate, Patterson, and Levy 2019). However, gay men assign relatively less importance to the value of being in a long-term relationship (D'Augelli et al. 2007) and express a weaker desire to marry (Baiocco, Argalia, and Laghi 2014) than lesbian women, possibly explaining why union formation rates are lower among gay men compared to lesbian women. LGBs also have fewer opportunities to meet partners than heterosexuals. Although



online dating facilitates connections between LGBs more easily (Brown 2020), gay and lesbian individuals have a smaller pool of potential partners because fewer individuals identify as LGB than heterosexual (Ellingson et al. 2004). This could particularly impact gay men's opportunities because non-heterosexual identities are more prevalent among women (England, Mishel, and Caudillo 2016; Gilroy and Kashyap 2021). Bisexual people can also face a smaller dating pool due to biphobia and erasure from both heterosexuals and gays/lesbians, which impacts bisexual men more than bisexual women (Morgenroth et al. 2022).

Partner preference is another factor that shapes union formation outcomes. The underlying argument of exchange-based frameworks is that certain demographic and socio-economic characteristics affect people's prospects in the "marriage market" by signaling their status (that could be exchanged) and their attractiveness, opportunities, and needs (de Graaf and Kalmijn 2003; Di Nallo 2019; Gałęzewska, Perelli-Harris, and Berrington 2017; Kalmijn 1998; Song 2021). However, preferences for partner characteristics vary by gender and sexual identity (Buggs 2017; Stacey and Forbes 2021). We focus on parental status and age, which are the characteristics that family demographers consistently investigate to explain re-partnering in the general population (de Graaf and Kalmijn 2003). People become older and are more likely to be parents as they transition across unions. Moreover, parental status and age are also key demographic differences between heterosexuals and LGBs (Badgett, Carpenter, and Sansone 2021; England, Mishel, and Caudillo 2016).

Studies consistently find a parenthood "penalty" for re-partnering in the general population, which is more pronounced for women than men (Di Nallo 2019). However, there is also evidence that fathers might have an "advantage" for being involved parents when seeking new partners. Men's parental bonus results from a social construction wherein men receive accolades for participating in parental and domestic responsibilities (Luhr 2020;

Thébaud, Kornrich, and Ruppner 2021). Re-partnering is more challenging for parents because time constraints and responsibilities form obstacles to seeking a partner, especially for women who are more likely to reside with their children after union dissolution (Cano and Gracia 2022; Ivanova, Kalmijn, and Uunk 2013; Stewart, Manning, and Smock 2003). Moreover, people generally have mixed feelings about the prospects of becoming step-parents, and men express less willingness to marry a partner with children than women (Goldscheider and Kaufman 2006).

Parental status could also pose re-partnering challenges for LGBs. The apprehension of becoming a step-parent and the time constraints of dating as a parent are not unique to heterosexuals. However, re-partnering might be further complicated for LGB parents because divorce and custody laws are not as legalized and formalized as marriage (Van Eeden-Moorefield et al. 2011), and children's living arrangements and relationships with ex-partners are potentially more complicated (Potârca, Mills, and Neberich 2015). Moreover, children of same-sex parents still face stigma, which could require more involvement from the new partner. These challenges are further complicated by a lack of institutional and social support (Carroll 2018; Van Eeden-Moorefield et al. 2011). Therefore, re-partnering might be less attractive for LGB parents compared to heterosexual parents of the same gender.

However, it is less clear whether the “parental penalty” will be gendered the same way among LGBs. Although parenthood rates are lower among same-sex couples than different-sex couples (Gates 2012; Kolk and Andersson 2020), these rates are considerably higher among lesbian and bisexual women compared to gay and bisexual men (Badgett, Carpenter, and Sansone 2021). Therefore, although being a parent might incur a re-partnering penalty for all LGB parents, LGB women might be less likely to re-partner because they are more likely to be parents and live with children than LGB men. On the other hand, parenthood might not penalize sexual minority individuals because of the different

relationship dynamics and expectations that LGB parents navigate vis-à-vis their (potential) partners (Baumle 2009; Carroll 2018; Moore 2008).

Another important characteristic for understanding re-partnering by gender and sexual identity is age. Overall, the odds of re-partnering decline with age (Song 2021; Wu 2017) and the re-partnering gender gap continues in older adulthood following grey divorce (Brown et al. 2018; 2019). Some scholars would attribute this pattern to a decline in perceived beauty and attractiveness (England and McClintock 2009) but also a signal of health status and potential future care needs (McWilliams and Barrett 2014; Watson and Stelle 2011; Harris 2023). Because LGB identities are more prevalent among younger birth cohorts (Badgett, Carpenter, and Sansone 2021), this could lead to relatively high re-partnering rates among LGBs. However, age homogamy is lower among same-sex couples than among different-sex couples (Schwartz and Graf 2009; Verbakel and Kalmijn 2014), which could reduce the impact of age on re-partnering among LGBs and could lead to smaller gender differences.

### The Relational Context of Re-partnering

Marital search theory and other exchange-based theories focus on people's demographic characteristics as the main force that promotes or hinders union formation. However, partners also exchange love, intimacy, and support (Lamont 2020; Rosenfeld 2005; Umberson et al. 2015; Umberson and Kroeger 2016). An alternative perspective to studying re-partnering draws attention to people's experiences within romantic relationships. The experience of a previous union could lead people to adjust their expectations for future relationships or opt out of forming another union (Dalessandro and Wilkins 2017). Studying re-partnering among sexual minorities requires an explicit consideration of how relationship dynamics might vary based on the couple's gender composition.

The Gender-as-Relational (GAR) theory offers a useful framework for hypothesizing about re-partnering differences by gender and sexuality. GAR theory focuses on the gendered dynamics in romantic relationships, which are shaped by people's gender, their partner's gender, and the relational context of the relationship (Thomeer, Umberson, and Reczek 2020). The main argument is that the gender composition of the couple shapes people's expectations, experiences, and outcomes in relationships (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999; Thomeer, Umberson, and Reczek 2020; Umberson et al. 2015). This approach shifts the focus to what people invest and receive in relationships beyond status and how these experiences are gendered and shaped by sexuality (Lamont 2020; Loscocco and Walzer 2013; Umberson et al. 2015).

Different-sex romantic relationships are characterized by gender inequality. Women in different-sex relationships invest more in emotional, care, and domestic work than men (Bianchi et al. 2012; Strazdins and Broom 2004). This inequality is associated, for example, with lower relationship quality and sexual satisfaction (Carlson, Hanson, and Fitzroy 2016). The most notable unequal outcome for women in different-sex relationships is health. Marriage offers a health benefit primarily to people who partner with women (Umberson, Donnelly, and Pollitt 2018) because women look after their partners' health, regardless of their partners' gender. Women in different-sex relationships are also at greater risk for divorce following illness onset than men (Karraker and Latham 2015). In other words, heterosexual women "get less out of the relationship" than heterosexual men (and lesbian women).

This inequality creates a "cost" for heterosexual women (Strazdins and Broom 2004; Dalessandro and Wilkins 2017). This "cost" could increase the duration of recovery from such a relationship and lower the appeal of forming another union. Even though women might change partners, the social context of their relationship will continue to be unequal

(Ophir 2022; Thomeer, Umberson, and Reczek 2020), thus lowering heterosexual women's desire to form *another* union. In contrast, because men receive more from their relationships, they have a greater incentive to partner again. The gender differences in the costs of being in a relationship could explain the robust finding that (heterosexual) women are less likely to re-partner than (heterosexual) men.

Same-sex relationships, however, are more egalitarian than different-sex relationships in various aspects (Goldberg 2013; Kurdek 2004; Lamont 2020; Sullivan 2004). Although sexual minorities' relationships are not conflict-free (Goldberg and Sayer 2006) and are also impacted by gender norms (Moore 2008), partners in same-sex relationships are more likely to share similar perceptions and expectations for intimacy and the division of labor than different-sex partners (Meier, Hull, and Ortyl 2009; Potârca, Mills, and Neberich 2015; Sullivan 2004). Nonetheless, there are gender differences among LGBs. Women in same-sex unions are more attentive, look after their partners' health more often (Umberson et al. 2015; Umberson and Kroeger 2016), and do more emotional work to deepen intimacy than men in same-sex relationships (Umberson, Thomeer, and Lodge 2015).

### **The current study**

First, we document the gender gap in re-partnering, i.e., forming a second co-residential union (cohabitation or marriage) after the dissolution of the first union, across sexual identities. Marital search theory, assortative mating frameworks, and other exchange-based explanations for union formation offer mixed hypotheses. On the one hand, gay men have fewer opportunities to find partners, so we could expect that gay men will be less likely to re-partner than lesbian women. On the other hand, lesbian women are more likely to have children from previous relationships, which makes re-partnering more challenging.

From the GAR perspective, union formation offers a high-investment, high-reward egalitarian experience for sexual minority women, which makes romantic relationships less

“costly” and re-partnering more appealing for lesbian women than gay men (and heterosexual women). Therefore, we expect that lesbian women will be more likely to re-partner than gay men (and heterosexual women). Predictions are less clear for bisexuals and might depend on their partners’ gender, an issue we are unable to test empirically in this paper. Nonetheless, the majority of bisexual people have a different-sex partner (Herek et al. 2010). In this case, the bisexual gender gap might be more similar to the heterosexual gender gap. Alternatively, although bisexuals have different-gender partners, they might seek more egalitarian or less heteronormative relationships. Moreover, biphobia particularly limits bisexual men’s opportunities to find partners (Morgenroth et al. 2022). Therefore, the re-partnering gender gap among bisexuals might be similar to the gap between lesbian women and gay men.

Second, we explore whether and how age and parental status are associated with re-partnering among LGBs. In contrast to heterosexuals, it is unclear whether being a parent will incur a penalty for sexual minority women or a re-partnering bonus for sexual minority men. Additionally, since age homogamy is lower among same-sex couples, age might not have the same consequences for re-partnering among LGBs.

## **Method**

### **Data and Sample**

We use the Understanding Society (UKHLS) survey data for 2009 to 2019, a representative household panel survey of the UK population (Buck and McFall 2011). The UKHLS is one of the very few large-scale surveys that collect detailed partnering histories and sexual identities of all participants. This unique feature allows us to identify LGB individuals based on self-reported sexual identity instead of inferring their identity based on the gender of their current partner. This enables us to follow their histories as they transitioned into and out of partnerships regardless of whether persons are partnered in a particular wave.

We include respondents who were present in at least one wave where complete retrospective histories were collected (waves 1 and 6)<sup>2</sup> as well as one of the waves where sexual identity was asked (waves 3 and 9).<sup>3</sup> We restrict our sample to people who have been at-risk of re-partnering, i.e., people who have dissolved their first union (Eickmeyer and Manning 2018; Song 2021). We restrict the analysis to respondents born before 1989 with valid information on their gender, sexual identity, partnership histories, and socio-economic characteristics for an analytic sample of 13,274 heterosexual and 387 LGB women ( $N_{\text{lesbian}}=122$   $N_{\text{bisexual}}=83$ ) and men ( $N_{\text{gay}}=128$   $N_{\text{bisexual}}=54$ ).

## Measures

*Sexual identity.* In waves 3 and 9, the Understanding Society survey asked respondents, “Which of the following options best describes how you think of yourself?” with the answer options being Heterosexual/Straight, Gay or Lesbian, Bisexual, Other, and Prefer Not to Say. Sexual identity can change over the life course (Hu and Denier 2023), a feature we cannot capture well due to the retrospective nature of relationship histories.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, we use the last reported sexual identity. Meaning, our analysis indicates whether people have re-partnered in the past depending on their sexual identity at the time of the interview, an issue we reflect on later. We restrict the analysis to three mutually exclusive groups: bisexual, gay/lesbian, and heterosexual/straight. We exclude the categories Other or Prefer not to Say because evidence suggests that these categories include large shares of heterosexuals (Elliott et al. 2019).<sup>5</sup>

We distinguish between women and men based on the question: “*And you are male/female?*” which prevents us from considering other gender identities (e.g., non-binary) or distinguishing between cis and transgender persons.

*Partnerships.* To measure re-partnering, we use the marital and cohabitation history file. In waves 1 and 6, respondents were asked to retrospectively report the starting and ending dates of up to 12 partners with whom they were in a co-residential relationship (marriages, civil partnerships, or cohabiting unions) that lasted at least three months. This information is updated with prospective information annually and has been harmonized by the data provider (Nandi, Menon, and Smith 2020). We use the start and end dates of each union to construct a person-month file with a dummy variable indicating whether, in each month, the person co-resided with a partner.<sup>6</sup>

In the main analysis, we do not distinguish between cohabitation and marriage. Same-sex marriages were not legal for much of the observation period, and the motivations to marry differ between different-sex and same-sex couples (Bosley-Smith and Reczek 2018). These issues complicate comparisons in the likelihood of marriage between LGB and heterosexual people. Nonetheless, we run additional analysis distinguishing between re-partnering via marriage or cohabitation.

*Other covariates.* In the regression analyses (elaborated below), we controlled for demographic and socio-economic characteristics that represent opportunity, attractiveness, and needs, which previous studies found as primary characteristics predicting re-partnering. We control for age at dissolution, birth cohort, race, education, and parental status (residing with at least one child under age 18). Missing values on education were replaced with the sample's average. For categorical variables, we kept missing values by merging them with the smallest category (e.g., race). This approach was necessary to maintain as many cases as possible, especially in the small LGB sample. All variables are time-constant, and measured in the last wave of observation, except for parenthood status, which is time-varying. Due to the retrospective nature of our data, we were unable to include other time-varying measures



such as income or health. Table 1 describes the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the sample by gender and sexuality.

[Table 1 here]

### **Analytic strategy**

To describe the occurrence and pacing of re-partnering, we use event history analysis starting the clock from the month of first union dissolution. The clock stops when people form a second union. Cases are right-censored if they have not formed a second union by their last available interview, a respondent reached age 65, or ten years have elapsed since the first union dissolution. We present Kaplan–Meier cumulative estimates. To understand the sociodemographic characteristics associated with re-partnering, we used continuous-time event history models with an exponential duration function and report hazard ratios.

One concern is that the samples of heterosexuals and LGBs differ to such an extent that controlling for covariates is insufficient. Table 1 shows that this could be the case for age and parenthood. For example, if first unions are shorter among younger, childless respondents, and LGBs are more likely to be younger and childless, this could systematically change the costs and benefits incurred from dissolving the relationship. In that case, the determinants of re-partnering will function differently across groups in ways that are not easily captured by control variables. To address this issue, we ran several robustness checks to see whether compositional differences in age and parenthood could drive results.

First, we tested the robustness of our results among a sub-sample of respondents that were never observed as residential parents. Second, we used an exact matching approach where we matched heterosexual respondents to lesbian and gay respondents of the same gender, age at first union dissolution, and parental status. We elaborate on the procedure later, but the logic behind this robustness analysis is to exclude age and parenthood differences as

the responsible factors for our results. Using matching ensures we compare LGBs to a heterosexual sample that has the same age structure and the same rates of parenthood. Because selection into parenthood is different for heterosexuals and sexual minorities, any change in results in these robustness checks could be hard to interpret. Accounting for parenthood in the models through matching captures both differences in composition but also possibly captures other mechanisms connecting sexuality to re-partnering. However, if results remain unchanged, we can be more confident that compositional differences in age and parenthood are not driving the results.

## Results

### The re-partnering gender gap

Figure 1 shows the cumulative proportions of people who partner by the number of months that elapsed since the dissolution of the first union. Table 2 shows the point estimates. Starting with heterosexuals (Figure 1 Panel A), the results show a gender gap in the expected direction – heterosexual men are more likely to re-partner than heterosexual women. This gap starts diverging after two years and remains consistent during the ten-year observation period. Within ten years after the first union dissolution, 73% of the heterosexual men in the sample re-partnered compared to 61% of heterosexual women. This pattern confirms findings from past studies using other data from the general population assuming heterosexuality. The gender gap among heterosexuals is statistically significant, controlling for socio-economic characteristics (Table 3). The heterosexual gender gap is also statistically significant when excluding parents (see Tables S1 and S2 in Online Supplementary Materials for full regression results).

[Figure 1 here]

Figure 1 shows different results for the gender gap among lesbian and gay respondents (Panel B). Lesbian women are more likely to re-partner and re-partner faster than gay men; 28% of lesbian women have re-partnered within a year compared to 19% of gay men. Within ten years of the first dissolution, 75% of the lesbian women in the sample re-partnered compared to 68% of gay men. The gender gap between lesbian women and gay men is statistically significant controlling for socio-economic characteristics (Table 3) and when excluding parents (Table S2).

[Table 2 here]

We find a smaller gender gap among bisexuals: 19% of bisexual women re-partnered within the first year after the first dissolution compared to 15% of bisexual men. At later durations, trends are noisier with a pronounced descriptive gender gap, wherein bisexual women are more likely to re-partner than bisexual men. However, by ten years since the first union dissolution, 69% of bisexual women and men in the sample re-partnered. The gender gap among bisexuals is not statistically significant controlling for socio-economic characteristics (Table 3), or when excluding parents (Table S2). It is important to note that the sample size for bisexuals is small. Figure S1 shows results for a pooled sample of all LGBs (results are robust).

[Table 3 here]

### **The re-partnering sexuality gap**

Table 2 also shows a sexuality gap in re-partnering, namely among women. Descriptively, lesbian women were more likely to re-partner than heterosexual and bisexual women. This gap is evident within the first year after union dissolution, wherein 28% of lesbian women have re-partnered compared to 13% and 19% of heterosexual and bisexual women, respectively. By ten years, 75% of lesbians have re-partnered compared to 61% and 69% of

heterosexual and bisexual women, respectively. Regression results in Table 4 suggest that the differences are statistically significant between lesbian and heterosexual women (see Table S3 for full results). Meaning, lesbian women are more likely to re-partner than heterosexual women, controlling for socio-economic characteristics. Additional analysis showed that this gap is visible but not statistically significant when the sample excludes parents (Table S4). We find substantively similar results when comparing heterosexual to bisexual women, but differences are not statistically significant.

[Table 4 here]

The results of Table 2 show small descriptive differences among men, wherein heterosexual men are more likely to re-partner than sexual minority men. By ten years, 73% of heterosexual men re-partnered compared to 68% and 69% of gay and bisexual men, respectively. Regression results suggest that these differences are statistically significant in the general sample (Table 4) but not when excluding parents (Table S4).

### **Predictors of Re-partnering (exploratory analysis)**

Table 5 shows regression analysis predicting re-partnering stratified by gender and sexual identity to compare whether the typical model in the literature is useful for predicting re-partnering in the LGB sample. We present the results for the pooled LGB sample by gender because of the small sample size (for results by sexual identity see Table S5). Interpreting the results should be done with caution, but we also present several robustness checks. The first column shows that the predictors are statistically significant and in the expected direction among heterosexual women. Mothers with co-resident children are less likely to re-partner than women without resident children. Age at dissolution is negatively associated with re-partnering. Overall, these results reinforce past studies using samples from the general population. These relationships were not statistically significant for sexual minority women.

Notably, however, the relationship between parental status and re-partnering is negative, i.e., sexual minority women who reside with a child were less likely to re-partner than sexual minority women not living with a child. Table S5 suggests that this result might be driven by the lesbian women in the sample.

[Table 5 here]

The predictors are also statistically significant and in the expected direction among heterosexual men. Fathers with co-resident children are *more* likely to re-partner than men without resident children. Age at dissolution is negatively associated with re-partnering. These results reinforce past studies using samples from the general population. In contrast, the variables are not statistically significant for sexual minority men, which is reasonable given the small sample. However, descriptively, parental status is negatively associated with the likelihood of re-partnering for sexual minority men, meaning sexual minority men in the sample who resided with a child were less likely to re-partner than sexual minority men who were not living with a child. Table S5 further shows that the negative association might be driven by gay men. The association is positive among bisexual men, i.e., bisexual fathers with co-resident children are more likely to re-partner than bisexual men without co-resident children. In summary, age and parental status were not statistically significant predictors in our sample, but the direction of the associations suggests that age and especially parental status might operate differently among LGBs.

### **Robustness Analyses**

In this section, we summarize the results for multiple robustness analyses (tables and graphs are available in the online supplementary materials). First, we ran the analyses for a sub-sample of people who were never observed with residential children because parenthood may moderate the relationship between gender, sexuality, and re-partnering. We already reported

these results in the main text but briefly summarize them here again. The re-partnering gender gap was robust, with a gender gap favoring men among heterosexuals and a gender gap favoring women among gay/lesbian people. However, the sexuality gap was not statistically significant when excluding parents (Tables S2 and S4).

Second, we used a more complex but encompassing matching approach. We matched a sample of heterosexuals on age at dissolution (5-year interval), parenthood status, and gender to the lesbian and gay samples<sup>7</sup> using two drawing approaches. In the first approach, we drew 20 heterosexuals for each LG respondent with exact matching characteristics, wherein each heterosexual respondent could appear in only one matched sample, yielding 20 unique samples. We re-ran our main analysis (Tables 3-5) replacing the heterosexual sample with the 20 unique samples of matched heterosexual individuals (See Tables S6-S8). In the second approach, we randomly drew a set of 1000 samples of matched heterosexuals, wherein each heterosexual respondent could appear in multiple samples to maximize the use of available information. We re-estimated our main analyses for each of the 1000 samples and report the distribution of the gender and sexuality coefficients across these 1000 models in the supplementary materials (Figures S2-S4).

Regardless of the matching procedure, we find that the heterosexual gender gap in re-partnering is robust. Heterosexual men were more likely to re-partner than heterosexual women even in heterosexual samples that match our lesbian and gay samples on age at dissolution and parenthood (Table S6 and Figure S2). The sexuality gap is also robust to using alternative sets of matched heterosexuals. Lesbian women are more likely to re-partner than heterosexual women, and there are no significant differences between heterosexual and gay men (Table S7 and Figures S3). Finally, predictors of re-partnering were generally robust when using the matched heterosexual samples (Table S8).

We also checked whether the results are robust when distinguishing between re-partnering via marriage or cohabitation. If heterosexuals are more likely to marry than LGBs, and if preferences for marriage are gendered, our results could depend on the operationalization of re-partnering. We ran competing-risk event-history models for both the heterosexual and the gay/lesbian subsamples where the possible outcomes were remaining single, entering cohabitation, or marriage (Tables S9-S10). Even though significance levels dropped, we observed the same substantive results: heterosexual women are less likely than heterosexual men to enter cohabitation and marriage after first union dissolution, whereas the opposite gender difference is observed among the gay/lesbian sample.

## **Discussion**

Studies have established a persistent gender gap in re-partnering (Brown et al. 2019; Raley and Sweeney 2020; Wu and Schimmele 2005). Using retrospective partnership histories from the British Understanding Society (UKHLS), we found that the re-partnering gender gap, wherein men are more likely to re-partner than women, is limited to people who identify as heterosexual. We find that the re-partnering gender gap goes in the opposite direction among lesbian women and gay men, i.e., lesbian women are more likely to re-partner than gay men. We did not find evidence for a gender gap in re-partnering among bisexuals. The results also suggested that lesbian women are more likely to re-partner than heterosexual women. Our study shows that the re-partnering gender gap is not as universal as previously presumed; our understanding of the re-partnering gender gap seems to be driven by heterosexuals and does not seem to apply to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

What can explain our results? The re-partnering gender gap between lesbian women and gay men reflects overall differences in union formation and dissolution patterns, wherein lesbian women are more likely to be in a co-residential relationship than gay men (Badgett,

Carpenter, and Sansone 2021). However, this observation does not inform us about the mechanisms that explain why this gender gap exists. Mainstream marital search theory and other exchange-based explanations for re-partnering would emphasize demographic and socio-economic characteristics as social markers of attractiveness, needs, and opportunity that result in different re-partnering outcomes across groups. Previous research found that parental status and age are key demographic characteristics that shape the odds of re-partnering, in general, and the gender gap in re-partnering, in particular (Di Nallo 2019; Ivanova, Kalmijn, and Uunk 2013). However, the lesbian women in our sample were more likely to re-partner than gay men after controlling for parental status, age, and other socio-economic characteristics.

The results were robust among a sub-sample of lesbian women and gay men who were never observed as residential parents. Furthermore, the heterosexual gender re-partnering gap was remarkably consistent even in a sub-sample of heterosexuals who were not observed as parents and in a sub-sample where heterosexuals were matched with lesbian women and gay men on age and parental status. Explanations based on age and parenthood are, therefore, unlikely to explain why the gender gap varies by sexual identity.

It is possible that other unobserved characteristics reflecting attractiveness, needs, and opportunities explain the results. First, we were unable to include time-varying socio-economic and health characteristics due to the retrospective nature of our data. Socio-economic status is an important factor in people's decisions to (re)partner. However, lower levels of homogamy among same-sex couples (Schwartz and Graf 2009; Verbakel and Kalmijn 2014) can also indicate that partner selection based on other characteristics might be more prominent among sexual minorities. For example, geographic context is a crucial determinant of sexual minorities' opportunities and needs. Studies on same-sex couples suggest that these considerations are gendered among the LGB population (Poston et al.



2017; Wimark and Fortes De Lena 2022). Moreover, different geographic contexts vary in the levels of stigma or support LGB people navigate, which could shape desires to (re)partner (Potârca, Mills, and Neberich 2015).

From a gender-as-relational approach, it could be that the relational context of relationships varies across sexual identities, wherein lesbian women might have more relationship-related incentives to re-partner than gay men (and heterosexual women). Scholars should focus more on understanding people's expectations and experiences before, during, and after relationships (Lamont 2020; Harris 2023; Dalessandro and Wilkins 2017). Doing so from a perspective that intersects gender and sexual identity (and other axes of social stratification, such as race and class) will allow us to update our current heteronormative models and offer new ways to theorize about re-partnering and union formation processes more broadly.

How does this explanation apply to the null results among bisexuals? First, it is important to exercise caution in interpreting these results given the small sample size. In our sample, we did not find evidence of a gender gap, even though bisexuals mostly have different-sex partners. This null result likely stems from the small sample size, but the absence of a gender gap among bisexuals could also suggest that having had relationship experiences with both men and women or generally rejecting heteronormative ideas about gender and relationships equalizes relationship experiences and expectations for both women and men, i.e., not making it “costly” nor “extra appealing” compared to men. Future research should test this hypothesis by applying the GAR theory to study bisexuals' union formation and re-partnering processes. An ideal research design would investigate bisexuals' experiences and expectations before, during, and after relationships with different- and same-gender partners. Doing so would dramatically enhance our understanding of how gender and sexuality jointly shape re-partnering outcomes.

A limitation to our analysis is that UKHLS does not collect partners' gender/sex in the cohabitation and marriage histories, nor do we have time-varying information on sexual identity. This information could have helped us empirically distinguish whether and how the first partner's gender impacts re-partnering outcomes, a mechanism central to our GAR theoretical argument. Information on partners' gender was available for a small sub-sample of respondents who re-partnered prospectively. Most lesbian and gay respondents consistently partnered with same-gender partners. Therefore, our assumptions about the gender relational context of these relationships, which demonstrated the most consistent reversed gender gap in the expected direction, seem reasonable. This limitation highlights the relevance of including questions about partners' gender during relationship history collection. Our study offers a benchmark for future studies to empirically replicate and theoretically expand our argument. The lack of time-varying information on sexual identity warrants future research, as changes in sexual identification could impact re-partnering outcomes.

Our descriptive results also show differences in re-partnering by sexuality among men and women. We found that lesbian women re-partner more than heterosexual women and gay men re-partner less than heterosexual men. However, the results were not robust when excluding parents. These results are probably driven by the small sample size that prevented us from drawing firm conclusions regarding the determinants of re-partnering among the LGB sample. Nonetheless, although parenthood status seems to moderate the sexuality gap among women, it did not moderate the results for the gender gap among heterosexuals or lesbian/gay samples. Therefore, although the evidence for a sexuality gap among women and men is weaker, it does not undermine the results for the differential gender gap across sexual identities. Future research should replicate our results using larger samples to enhance our understanding of how gender and sexuality shape partnering behavior.

To conclude, in line with recent research on other outcomes like education (Mittleman 2022), our study underscores the importance of systematically incorporating sexual identity in social science research. Because minoritized groups take on relatively small shares of the population, studies and conclusions based on the general population will primarily reflect the lives of majority groups, in our case, heterosexual people. In the case of union formation and re-partnering, we suggest incorporating sexuality and the gendered relational context of relationships. Existing models and theories may not predict or explain well re-partnering patterns when sexual minorities are explicitly incorporated in the analysis. Explanations that draw attention to past relationship experiences and which focus on the gender of both partners and the relational context of the romantic relationship (i.e., GAR perspective) provide hypotheses consistent with our results. We, therefore, suggest that family scholars should consider gender as a relational force that systematically and unequally shapes the context of romantic relationships when explaining (re)partnering behavior.

### Data Availability

The data underlying this article were provided by UK Data Service repository and are available in a public, open access repository. Partnership histories are available through University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2023). *Understanding Society: Marital and Cohabitation Histories, 1991-2021*. [data collection]. 4th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8473, <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8473-4>. Information about sexual identity is provided under a UK Data Service special license. University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2022). *Understanding Society: Waves 1-12, 2009-2021 and Harmonised BHPS: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009: Special License Access*. [data collection]. 16th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 6931, <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6931-15>.

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Table 1. Sample characteristics by gender

	Women		Men	
	Heterosexual	LGB	Heterosexual	LGB
Sexuality (%)				
Lesbian/Gay		58.0		70.8
Bisexual		42.0		29.2
Age (years)	39	33	38	37
Birth cohort (%)				
Before 1945	20.2	3.0	17.4	8.6
1945-1964	43.3	33.8	46.0	44.9
1965-1979	29.2	43.3	28.7	35.4
1980-1989	7.3	19.9	7.9	11.0
Race (%)				
White	88.3	85.0	90.3	92.2
Black	5.5	5.3	4.7	1.5
Asian	3.7	2.5	2.9	3.6
Multi. Racial/Else	2.4	7.1	2.0	2.8
Resident parent (%)	40.8	24.7	17.6	5.8
Education (years)	13	14	13	14
N	8,039	205	5,235	182
Person-years	513,757	10,292	291,590	10,855

Source: Understanding Society (UKHLS) 2009-2019

Table 2. Cumulative Kaplan-Meier estimates of proportion re-partnered by duration since union dissolution, gender, and sexuality

Months since dissolution	Proportion Re-partnered					
	Heterosexual		Gay/Lesbian		Bisexual	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
12	0.16	0.13	0.19	0.28	0.15	0.19
24	0.30	0.24	0.27	0.42	0.30	0.31
36	0.40	0.33	0.34	0.51	0.40	0.45
48	0.48	0.40	0.41	0.56	0.46	0.50
60	0.55	0.45	0.50	0.62	0.52	0.55
72	0.60	0.49	0.53	0.65	0.56	0.58
84	0.64	0.53	0.61	0.66	0.56	0.63
96	0.68	0.56	0.65	0.70	0.59	0.66
108	0.70	0.58	0.66	0.75	0.64	0.66
120	0.73	0.61	0.68	0.75	0.69	0.69
N	5,235	8,039	128	122	54	83
Person-months	291,590	513,757	7,687	5,969	3,168	4,323

Source: Understanding Society (UKHLS) 2009-2019

Table 3. Continuous-time event-history models for the gender gap in re-partnering by sexuality

	Heterosexual	Lesbian/Gay	Bisexual
	Hazard Ratio (SE)	Hazard Ratio (SE)	Hazard Ratio (SE)
Women (ref. men)	0.75** (0.02)	1.49* (0.24)	0.91 (0.22)
Observations (person-months)	805,347	13,656	7,491

\*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05

Note: Table S1 in Online Supplementary Materials shows full regression model results. Control variables included are age at dissolution, birth cohort, ethnicity, parenthood, and education. Source: Understanding Society (UKHLS) 2009-2019.

Table 4. Continuous-time event-history models for the sexuality re-partnering gap by gender

	Women (ref. Lesbian)	Men (ref. Gay)
	Hazard Ratio (SE)	Hazard Ratio (SE)
Heterosexual	0.80* (0.09)	1.26* (0.14)
Bisexual	0.78 (0.14)	1.11 (0.23)
Observations (Person-months)	524,049	302,445

\*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05

Note: Table S3 in Online Supplementary Materials shows full regression model results. Control variables included are age at dissolution, birth cohort, ethnicity, parenthood, and education.

Source: Understanding Society (UKHLS) 2009-2019.

Table 5. Continuous-time event-history models for re-partnering by gender and sexual identity

	Women		Men	
	Heterosexual	LGB	Heterosexual	LGB
	Hazard Ratio (SE)	Hazard Ratio (SE)	Hazard Ratio (SE)	Hazard Ratio (SE)
Age at dissolution	0.96** (0.00)	1.02 (0.01)	0.98** (0.00)	1.00 (0.01)
Birth cohort: before 1945 (ref. 1980-1989)	0.53** (0.04)	0.80 (0.45)	0.68** (0.05)	0.15* (0.12)
Birth cohort: 1945-1964	0.70** (0.04)	0.72 (0.20)	0.76** (0.05)	0.57 (0.20)
Birth cohort: 1965-1979	0.90* (0.04)	0.99 (0.24)	1.04 (0.06)	1.11 (0.33)
White (ref. BAME)	1.62** (0.09)	2.60** (0.91)	1.32** (0.08)	0.80 (0.27)
Resident parent (ref. no children in household)	0.83** (0.03)	0.65 (0.15)	1.16** (0.05)	0.92 (0.39)
Education (years)	1.00 (0.00)	1.01 (0.02)	1.01** (0.00)	1.01 (0.02)
Constant	0.03** (0.00)	0.00** (0.00)	0.02** (0.00)	0.01** (0.01)
N	8,039	205	5,235	182
Person-months	513,757	10,292	291,590	10,855

\*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05

Source: Understanding Society (UKHLS) 2009-2019. BAME includes Black, Asian, Multiracial, ethnic minorities self-identified as Else, and missing values.

Figure 1. Kaplan-Meier Cumulative Estimates of Re-partnering by Sexuality and Gender

Source: Understanding Society (UKHLS) 2009-2019

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Studies often compare different- and same-sex couples or study women and men assuming heterosexuality. We use the terms “different-sex” and “same-sex” to represent the operationalization in the studies we review and to distinguish them from studies where sexual identity was measured (i.e., heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual). Although individuals in different-sex relationships can have a variety of sexual identities (e.g., bisexual), the general assumption in the literature is that different-sex couples represent heterosexual people.

<sup>2</sup> Wave 6 collected relationship histories from individuals who did not complete their histories in Wave 1.

<sup>3</sup> New respondents who reported their sexual identity in waves 5 and 7 are also included.

<sup>4</sup> Most respondents reported the same sexual identity across waves. Among self-identifying Gay/Lesbian in Wave 3 - 5% changed their answer to Heterosexual, and 2% changed it to Bisexual in Wave 9. Among self-identifying as Bisexuals in Wave 3 - 41% changed to Heterosexual, and 6% changed to Gay/Lesbian in Wave 9.

<sup>5</sup> Other measurement issues include whether individuals disclose their sexual identity in surveys and the potential impact of minor coding errors on small groups. The latter issue primarily concerns combining information from different questions to identify same-sex couples using household rosters (Cheng and Powell 2015). The former issue is more challenging to verify, but 93% of partnered Gay/Lesbian respondents had a same-gender partner, compared to 0.02% of partnered Heterosexuals. We cannot address the potential misreporting of partnership status among single people.

<sup>6</sup> We do not have retrospective information on former partners' gender, which precludes us from distinguishing between same-sex and different-sex couples. This information would have helped us to empirically test whether the first partner's gender/sex impact re-partnering probabilities, a mechanism central to our GAR theoretical argument. Based on the prospective information through the household roster, we observe that 93% of partnered Gay/Lesbian respondents and 10% of partnered Bisexual respondents in our sample had a same-sex partner. Among a small subsample of 34 LGBs who were observed *prospectively* in at least two partnerships - 13 of the 17 Gay/Lesbian respondents had a same-sex partner in both partnerships, in contrast to 17 bisexual respondents, of whom 13 had a different-sex partner in both partnerships.

<sup>7</sup> We focused on the lesbian and gay sample because there were no statistically significant differences between bisexuals and other groups.