

## CHAPTER 6

# Transitions in Intimate Relationships

## *Losses and Opportunities*

Old age is often associated with loss, and paramount among these losses is the death of a spouse or long-term partner. Even after such fundamental losses, there are opportunities for intimacy in later life. As is true of all life stages, those in middle and later life vary in their responses to loss and their views of desirable alternatives for intimacy. This chapter explores usual responses to losing a spouse or long-term partner through death or relationship dissolution and then explores remarriage, cohabitation, living apart together (LAT) relationships, dating, and sexual intimacy in middle and old age.

## Widowhood

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Today's older persons are far more likely to experience widowhood than divorce, and this is especially true for women (see Chapter 2). Widowhood in older age is a transition for most and a status already acquired earlier in life for others.

A feminist life course approach encourages a more complete view of widowhood, taking us beyond an unduly negative view of older widowed women (Chambers, 2005). Incorporating a critical perspective more explicitly includes the experience of men and the cross-cutting of age and gender relations with those of class, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity (see Chapter 1). This combined orientation links the impact of a partner's death on individuals to socially structured practices regarding marital status, gender and age (Chambers, 2005). A partner's

death also occurs in the context of prior life experience and includes both short-term bereavement and longer-term widowhood. The patriarchal values embedded in gender relations have consequences for men and women as they approach life without their long-term partners.

## The Transition to Widowhood

Much of our understanding of becoming and being widowed comes from qualitative research in which in-depth interviews and narratives reveal the process and dynamics of this major life transition.

Widowhood is a different way of life. My husband was frail for several years and needed a lot of attention and care. I had to give up so many things that I was doing before and lost so much contact with so many of my friends. After his death it was difficult for me to pick up the pieces. . . . I was 80 when my husband died. . . . I had a friend who lost her husband when she was young and she had a tiny boy. I remember so well her saying to me, "After my husband died I made up my mind that I was not going to sit around and mope all the time because if I did, I would lose all my friends." You know, I never forgot that. That's what I thought when my husband died. I wasn't going to sit around and mope all the time. It wasn't going to do him any good and it certainly wasn't going to do me any good.

—Widow, aged 92

As was the case for this widow, caregiving often precedes widowhood in later life for both men and women (Wells & Kendig, 1997). Because women remain much more likely than men to be widowed, widowhood is often considered a women's issue, and much of what we know about widowhood is based on their experiences (Martin-Matthews, 1999; Williams et al., 2006).

Reflecting our emphasis on gender relations, when possible, we will examine the unique experiences of men *and* women who have made this transition. Losing a spouse is linked to gendered marital relations in which today's old women are likely to have depended on their husbands for financial support and today's old men are likely to have depended on their wives for emotional support, homemaking skills and links to a larger social network (Carr, 2004b). Thus, gender variations in the response to widowhood reflect socially structured gender relations that are reproduced in traditional marriage. Apparently individual responses to being widowed are linked to the nature of the lost relationship and the broader institutional and structural arrangements in which it was embedded.

The initial stage of widowhood, bereavement, lasts for roughly two to four years. During this time, individuals undergo a period of grieving and mourning characterized initially by profound psychological disorganization (Martin Matthews, 1991). The popularity of a timetable of stages of grief masks the fact that grieving is variable, both in terms of how long it lasts and how severely it is felt. The process of grief and mourning includes shock, intense pain, grief work, and, once ready to

rebuild one's life as a widow or widower, reality testing (Heinemann & Evans, 1990). Joan Didion (2005) describes the year after her husband's death as one of magical thinking during which she felt invisible and understood only by others who were in the same situation. A granddaughter's words capture the initial response of her widowed grandfather:

[My grandparents] had been married for more than sixty years, raised three children together, sometimes fought bitterly, and were inseparable to the end. During the long time that my grandmother was dying, my grandfather . . . didn't hide any of his sorrow or hope from the rest of us. His need for her was raw. Almost to the moment of her death he was adamant that she would get well and on the day of her funeral he refused to join the rest of the family for dinner . . . at a local restaurant. "I was married to her for a long time," he said. "I have a lot to think about." (D'Erasmus, 2004:62–63)

The raw emotions that dominate the initial stages of grief coexist with quite positive feelings of joy, happiness and relief and eventually give way to emotion management that involves feeling numb, willful self-control, faith, distracting oneself through activity or passivity, and sharing feelings with others (Lopata, 1996). Over time, the dead spouse is incorporated into the surviving partner's life through images of heaven, hallucinations, memories, rituals and conversation. Daily functioning may then change as a result of less commitment to previous activities, including work and social encounters, and to declines in health. Eventually, relationships with other persons are altered, becoming either more close or distant, and the bereaved make the initial adjustment to life without a partner.

The comments of an 84-year-old widow in one of my studies exemplify several dimensions of grief as she moved on with her life:

My husband was suffering so much that I eventually got the idea that it wasn't fair to want him to go on doing that. Nevertheless, for about a year, I was absolutely numb. Everywhere I turned, I ran into things that I missed.

However, I have a strong nature. I made up my mind that I couldn't do that, that it wasn't fair to my daughter and it wasn't fair to myself. The last words that my husband said to me were, "Now don't sit down and brood. Make all you can out of the rest of your life." And I have done so. There isn't a day in my life that I don't think about him. But it has developed now into just happy thoughts of the times that we had.

The caregiving experience that often precedes the death of a spouse has implications for the transition to widowhood. Caring for a departed spouse allows some widowed persons to anticipate their loss and to feel some relief in their death (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007). Yet widowed persons who were caregivers continue to feel guilty and depressed, to have sleeping problems, and to report elevated levels of strain (Carpenter & Mak, 2007; Wells & Kendig, 1997). Even the quasi widowhood experienced by those whose spouses are institutionalized (Ross et al., 1997) does not necessarily leave older persons better prepared emotionally for widowhood.

The ambivalence that comes from wishing for a spouse's death as relief from suffering at the same time as wishing for the partner to survive (Kestin van den Hoonard, 2001) underscores the complex of emotions and demands that extended caregiving for a spouse can trigger.

These findings reflect the mixed results concerning whether adjusting to sudden death or death following a long illness is more difficult. Didion's (2005) response to her husband's sudden death was wonder at how life can change in an instant, making it difficult to absorb that her husband had died. Yet despite the greater shock of sudden death, in the short term, greater anxiety occurs among surviving spouses who cared for partners whose death was expected and slow (Carr & Utz, 2004).

Gendered responses to sudden versus anticipated death also occur. Some research finds that men yearn for their deceased wives more if their deaths were prolonged; women yearn for their deceased husbands more if their deaths were sudden (Carr & Utz, 2004). For widowers, however, taking care of spouses provides an opportunity to learn homemaking skills and competence that facilitate adjustment once their wives die, an opportunity that the shock of sudden death does not allow (Moore & Stratton, 2002). Among widows (Kestin van den Hoonard, 2001) more than widowers (Moore & Stratton, 2002), lengthy illness provides an opportunity to talk about the dying partner's death and the future life of the surviving spouse. Once widowed, these exchanges are enmeshed with the experience of being widowed more than of being married; a husband's expressed views of her future are part of a widow's present. On balance, anticipating widowhood through the illness of a spouse tends to make adapting to losing one's partner easier (Martin Matthews, 1991).

The life course perspective's emphasis on the greater ease of adapting to transitions that occur at the expected age (on time) is supported by the finding that losing a spouse in later life softens the loss, regardless of whether or not the loss is sudden (Lopata, 1996). There is more variability in the reactions among old than among younger persons (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007), however, and, some conclude that bereavement is no easier at younger or older ages (Hatch, 2000). The unexpectedness of off-time widowhood at younger ages is offset in extreme old age by a smaller support network and poorer health (Martin Matthews, 1991). A cost of being widowed on time, that is, in older age, is the reduced opportunity for finding a new partner, new job or new social network (Wu & Schimmele, 2007). Thus widowhood has age-related consequences that make it different but not uniformly easier or more difficult to be widowed at a particular age.

Class also shapes the widowhood experience. Widowhood is more clearly and positively defined in working-class than in middle-class and upper-class cultures, thus easing the process of bereavement for working-class women (Walker et al., 1977). The family-based social network typical of the working class is also helpful in the initial stages of bereavement and is generally the primary coping resource of older adults who lose loved ones (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007).

Generally, six months after losing their spouses, women's self-esteem is enhanced, men's self-esteem is lowered, and women experience more personal growth than do men (Carr, 2004b). These outcomes are moderated by features of the marital relationship so that men who depended on their late wives' homemaking skills more

often suffer a decline in self-esteem once widowed. Assuming responsibility for emotional needs in the case of widowers, and of home maintenance and finances in the case of widows, enhances self-esteem and personal growth once widowed. Marital quality also influences the response to widowhood. Those who had warm and interdependent relationships yearn more for their lost partners; those whose relationships were characterized by conflict and strain yearn less (Carr & Utz, 2004). In more extreme cases, a very painful marriage makes widowhood feel like a relief, a situation that should be less likely in the future, as younger couples turn to divorce more readily than today's older persons did (Martin-Matthews, 1999).

Lengthy and serious illnesses may affect the quality of marital relationships and, consequently, the transition to widowhood. For old widowers whose spouses were ill for a long time, decreased sexual activity, separate bedrooms, and different routines often came to characterize their marriages and foreshadowed life as widowed persons (Moore & Stratton, 2002). Seeing someone through dementia also alters the quality of the marital relationship so that a partner's death feels like a relief, as described by an old widower: "When she died, I felt relieved for her. Before that, as a person, she had left me" (Moore & Stratton, 2002:37). Whatever the preceding circumstances, the first night alone at home following the death of a partner marks a dramatic and challenging life transition (Kestin van den Hoonaard, 2001; Moore & Stratton, 2002).

The focus of many widows on surviving and prevailing as they take charge of their lives and become more independent over time suggests that adapting to widowhood represents a transformation rather than a recovery (Martin-Matthews, 1999). An 83-year-old woman, widowed for 14 years, observes, "I became more independent, a lot more my own person. You have to, to be on your own without your husband's help. . . . It makes you a stronger person" (Martin Matthews, 1991:28). For some widows and widowers, the passage of time heightens rather than diminishes grief (Lopata, 1996) and leads to personal changes judged to be negative (Martin Matthews, 1991), but these responses are not typical (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007; Moore & Stratton, 2002).

## **The Impact of Widowhood on Objective Conditions**

What are the longer-term consequences of widowhood? Widowhood is associated with an elevated risk of morbidity and mortality, especially among those who are widowed more than once (Zhang, 2006) and among Whites married to Whites when compared with Blacks married to Blacks (Elwert & Christakis, 2006). These differences reflect the significance of marital history rather than marital status alone (see Chapter 3) and the impact of different marital cultures and contexts among White versus Black couples that have a historical backdrop of structured race relations.

Gender relations that led many of today's old women to rely on their husbands' earnings are reflected in the relative impoverishment of the current cohort of older women following widowhood (Martin-Matthews, 1999), an experience that men typically do not share if their wives die. The financial hardship of widowhood in older age is intractable for many without the support of family and the state, particularly among those groups such as Black and Hispanic widows who experience

very high rates of poverty (Angel et al., 2003; Angel et al., 2007). A majority of Canadian widows depend on government pensions as their key source of income, and the poorest among them are older, less educated, retired from lower-prestige occupations, less prepared for retirement, and more likely to have retired to care for a family member (McDonald, 1997). Similarly, in the United States, unmarried women rely more heavily on Social Security as an income source than either unmarried men or married couples (National Economic Council, 1998).

To date, employment does not guarantee economic security among retired widows, largely because the meshing of work histories and family careers has resulted in intermittent employment in jobs with no or paltry pension benefits (Street & Connidis, 2001). Changes in family form make state-based support more precarious, as growing numbers of women, especially African American women, reach old age without the requisite 10 years of marriage needed to qualify for either spousal or widow benefits (Harrington Meyer et al., 2006). Among Mexican Americans, widows report fewer resources, more financial strain, and greater openness to accepting welfare than their male counterparts (Angel et al., 2003). Some older widows also have limited experience with managing money and making financial decisions. Even among those who are relatively well off, the immediate paperwork and financial arrangements that follow their husbands' deaths, the individual responsibility for making decisions about money and investments, the need to rely on others for financial advice, and the fear of having their vulnerability exploited combine to make financial issues a challenge of widowhood (Kestin van den Hoonaard, 2001).

One outcome of widowhood for some is residential mobility. Although widows and widowers remain in their residences for an average of 15 years, the probability of moving peaks during the first year of widowhood (Chevan, 1995). Good health and higher incomes decrease this probability. Among widows, home ownership is associated with having more close friends in the neighborhood, due largely to length of residency (Bess, 1999). Living alone is more common among widows and widowers and raises unique concerns among older persons with health problems. As one 78-year-old widower observes, "At this stage of the game, I think one of the biggest things that concerns me is health; when you have health problems at this stage, and you have no one here, you're pretty dead in the water if you need help" (Moore & Stratton, 2002:115). In the longer run, being widowed alters living arrangements by increasing the chances of being placed in a nursing home or similar long-term care institution (Lopata, 1996; Wolinsky & Johnson, 1992).

The socially constructed gender relations that limit the financial security of widows have a parallel effect on the social networks of widowers (Blieszner, 1993). Women generally and widows in particular have a more extensive and diverse network of support from family and friends than do their male peers (Antonucci, 1990; Barrett & Lynch, 1999; Bengtson et al., 1996). Widowed men are less likely than married men and than women of all marital statuses to feel needed and appreciated and to have someone to accompany them when engaging in activities outside the home (Connidis & McMullin, 1994). At the same time, widows face challenges in trying to fit into a couple-oriented world and in negotiating support from their friends in the wake of losing their husband (Kestin van den Hoonaard, 2001).

The loss of a wife's homemaking and interpersonal skills requires a major adjustment of most widowed men. Although the traditional skills of a wife tend to be socially undervalued, they are fundamental to daily life (Thompson & Walker, 1989). Thus acquiring the ability to prepare meals and keep dishes, clothes and home clean—or finding someone else to do these tasks—is essential following a wife's death. Older widowed men more readily acquire such skills, however, than older widows acquire such traditionally male tasks as driving a car or house and yard upkeep (Kendig, 1986; O'Bryant, 1991). Widowers make claims to masculinity by labeling themselves as bachelors rather than widowers and by linking their culinary efforts to those of professional male chefs and defining cooking as necessary rather than enjoyable (Davidson et al., 2003; Kestin van den Hoonaard, 2007). Widows enjoy mastering new skills, such as learning to drive, making household repairs, and using home entertainment equipment (Kestin van den Hoonaard, 2001), without the apparent need to claim femininity as a result of doing so.

Children, especially daughters, are the central individuals in the family network of widowed men and women (Kestin van den Hoonaard, 2001; Moore & Statton, 2002), and contact with them is higher among the widowed than the married (Barrett & Lynch, 1999; Martin Matthews, 1991; see Chapters 7 and 8). This relationship represents considerable familial stability for widowed parents, particularly in the initial stages of bereavement when contact with children is very helpful. Widowed men and women are more likely than their married counterparts to confide in at least one child (Connidis & Davies, 1992), indicating that both the quality and extent of interaction with children increase when widowed. Mothers engage in more reciprocal relationships with their children than do fathers following the death of their partners (Carr & Utz, 2004). Children are more inclined to offer instrumental support and financial advice to their widowed mothers than widowed fathers, and mothers are more inclined than fathers to offer emotional support to their children following the shared respective loss of their husbands and fathers.

Widows also work to maintain reciprocity in their relationships with children by offering to babysit or cook meals and to maintain balance by resisting their children's help when it becomes overprotective and by limiting their own expectations for support (Kestin van den Hoonaard, 2001). Gender differences should not diminish the value of family to widowers, however. Research from the United Kingdom finds that widowed men tend to socialize more at home, primarily with family, and to depend more heavily on their children than old men of other marital statuses (Davidson et al., 2003). They also enjoy a special tie with their grandchildren. There can be too much of a good thing; if support comes only from children, the benefits of filial support are diminished (Martin-Matthews, 1999).

Widowhood also may prompt more involved ties with siblings, especially between widows and their sisters (Martin Matthews, 1991; see Chapters 12 and 13). For those whose relationships with siblings change following widowhood, most observe greater emotional closeness, improved ties, and more frequent and supportive contact (Connidis, 1992). Qualitative research suggests that widowers have close relationships with brothers and sisters, and as peers, siblings may encourage involvement with others outside the family, including potential mates (Moore & Stratton, 2002). The benefits of sibling contact are also evident among rural widows for whom

sibling contact staves off loneliness (Dugan & Kivett, 1994). Among childless widows, siblings compose a larger portion of the confidant network than is true of childless wives (Connidis & Davies, 1990). Although widowed persons receive more help from siblings than do married persons (Barrett & Lynch, 1999), siblings tend to be important socioemotional ties rather than sources of instrumental help (Connidis, 1994b).

Friends emerge as important network members in widowhood (Lopata, 1996; Martin Matthews, 1991). Both widowers and widows are more likely than the married to consider a friend both a confidant and a companion, and friends occupy a larger portion of these networks among widowed persons (Connidis & Davies, 1990, 1992). Widows tend to have more friends than do widowers and are more likely to confide in them (Connidis & Davies, 1992; Martin Matthews, 1991). Having friends and neighbors reduces loneliness and worry among widowed women (Lee, Willetts et al., 1998), illustrating the benefits of maintaining and establishing personal relationships beyond family. The value of friends for support after losing a spouse is noted by an 83-year-old widow:

I think it's very important that people have friends who can help you at that time [of becoming widowed], because your children can't. And I realized they couldn't help because they're dealing with their own feelings. If I hadn't had all these kind friends, I would have been much worse off than I was. (Walter, 2003:72–73)

Men also benefit from a greater sense of personal fulfillment as widowers when there is more support from an active social network (Carr, 2004b). The relative scarcity of fellow widowers and of late-life male friendships in general (Moore & Stratton, 2002), however, leaves men more isolated than women and may partially explain their higher remarriage rates.

The greater reliance of working-class persons on a homogeneous network focused on relatives puts the working-class widow at greater risk of isolation if her children do not live nearby (Walker et al., 1977). A family-based network can also be counterproductive when the widow is ready to establish a new way of life with new activities and people. The more dispersed networks and higher education of middle-class widows put them at a relative advantage for making this transition (Lopata, 1996). Yet widowhood is more disruptive among the more highly educated women of the middle and upper classes because their relationships with their husbands were typically more interdependent.

In sum, the gendered experience of widowhood mirrors the gendered relations of our society. Women experience greater economic hardship and men greater isolation on the loss of spouses. The fact that the older widows who are best able to self-sufficiently perform male- and female-associated tasks spent the most years in the labor force (O'Bryant, 1991) suggests the benefits of changing social structural arrangements in the areas of family and work. The greater involvement of today's younger women in the labor force and younger fathers in the lives of their children may have long-term benefits for their social networks in old age. This has been a gradual shift, and the extent of its impact remains to be seen. The cumulative

negative effects of working in jobs that do not include pension benefits, that are part time, and that are intermittent and of earlier divorce and prior widowhood on the financial security of married and widowed persons do not bode well for upcoming cohorts of women.

## The Subjective Impact of Widowhood

An initial reaction to widowhood is a sense of lost identity (Kestin van den Hoonaard, 2001). Particular triggers, like having to fill out marital status on a form, or being introduced as someone's widow, or the sudden self-realization of being a widow, start the process of acquiring a personal and social identity as a widow (Kestin van den Hoonaard, 2001)—the move from becoming to being a widow (Martin Matthews, 1991). This process is described by an old widower: "I have to recreate my life, have to recreate my thinking" (Moore & Stratton, 2002:87).

As the earlier discussion of marital status and its effects showed, widowed persons have lower levels of psychological well-being than the married (see Chapter 3). One of the longer-lasting consequences of widowhood is elevated levels of loneliness (Dugan & Kivett, 1994; Moore & Stratton, 2002). On balance, men appear to experience greater psychological suffering than women when their spouses die (Lopata, 1996; Martin Matthews, 1991). Both men and women tend to underestimate their chances of being widowed (Holden & Kuo, 1996), but women are more inclined to expect widowhood and to imagine how they would handle it, a process referred to as *anticipatory socialization*, which aids adjustment (Martin Matthews, 1991). Among men, the expectation that they would be the first to go by virtue of being men is one element of the unexpected that widowers must negotiate (Moore & Stratton, 2002). Men typically spend a shorter time than women in the widowed state, and psychological well-being does improve with time (Lee, Willetts et al., 1998). Yet even when length of widowhood is considered, widowed men remain significantly more depressed than widowed women. This difference may be because the higher rates of remarriage among men are selective, leaving a pool of widowers who are particularly depressed (Lee, Willetts et al., 1998).

Gender differences in objective conditions are directly related to variations in life satisfaction (Stevens, 1995). When compared with widows, widowers enjoy less financial stress, more education, fewer somatic symptoms, and more frequently have new intimate relationships, all factors that typically enhance life satisfaction. The one relative advantage for widows is more regular contact with friends. Yet when all of these factors are taken into account, widows are still more satisfied than widowers (Stevens, 1995). Women's virtuosity in nurturing a range of relationships (see Chambers, 2005; Dykstra, 1990) clearly has benefits when meeting the challenges of widowhood.

Chambers' (2005) feminist life course exploration of widowed lives in the United Kingdom puts the various responses to losing a spouse in the context of individual, social, and cultural contexts over a lifetime. Her qualitative study of widows aged 55 and over and widowed for at least five years identifies three groups: those who emphasize loneliness and despair, those who get on with their lives, and

those who experience widowhood as a transition. The first and smallest group of widows combines feeling lonely with a loss of confidence, a sense of someone missing, confusion, feeling different, limited pleasure in life, and a bleak view of the future. A larger group that got on with their lives accepts the inevitable, holds on to good memories, has few regrets, enjoys being alone, deals with financial and health challenges, feels validated by others, keeps busy, and faces the future one day at a time. The largest group experiences widowhood as a transition, parallel to Martin Matthews's (1991) description of the long-term negotiation of widowhood as a transformation. These widows, though sorry to have lost their husbands, experience new self-awareness, making themselves a priority for the first time, freedom, new relationships, interdependence with others, new interests and opportunities, and an optimistic forward-looking stance toward the future.

The three dominant narratives of widowhood are fluid so that women may alternate their view of being widowed even though one of the narratives dominates (Chambers, 2005). Thus even those who see widowhood as positively transformative sometimes lapse into a focus on widowhood as lonely and bleak. Also, these subjective accounts of being widowed shape the impact of objective circumstances, cautioning us against treating similar conditions as similar in their effects. For example, one widow for whom widowhood is a time of loneliness and despair views poor health as an impediment to being socially engaged; other widows who either get on with their lives or experience widowhood as a transition view poor health as a challenge to be surmounted. The response to being widowed is shaped by a life course of experience, a history of making and turning to friends, high self-esteem, and a positive view of one's capacity to deal with change that feeds a positive response to being widowed.

## The Death of a Same-Sex Partner

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How does the experience of widowhood compare with losing a long-term same-sex partner? Marital status is a basis for distributing privilege (see Chapter 3), so that those who lose a spouse have their loss legitimated and their grief recognized. In contrast, both opposite-sex and same-sex partners who were not married often experience disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002a; Walter, 2003); as official outsiders to family networks, their right to grieve goes unacknowledged even though the bereavement process is similar (Shernoff, 1998). Because homosexual unions are generally not recognized as marriage, sympathetic allowances in the work place and among acquaintances are fewer, professional support services are limited, and financial difficulties may follow the loss of a partner (Doka, 2002a; Whipple, 2006). Family members, particularly those of the deceased partner, may not be supportive, sometimes to the point of intervening in funeral and subsequent arrangements or discounting the relationship entirely (Fullmer, 1995; Peplau et al., 1996). Estrangement from other potential sources of support, such as religious institutions, may heighten the sense of loss that follows a partner's passing (Fullmer, 1995).

Sadly, the disenfranchisement of gay and lesbian family members may extend to their exclusion following the deaths of others, as the following experience relayed by a clergy person illustrates:

There was a family in my parish . . . who had a son, Chris, who was gay. The . . . father was clearly very uncomfortable about his son's friends—especially his lover, Sean—mixing with . . . extended family. . . . I suggested he tell his family and friends that the visitation was on Monday night and tell his son's friends to come on Tuesday. Monday night his mother (Chris's grandmother) seemed annoyed. "I cannot believe," she told her son, "that Sean's not here—they were lovers, you know." It turned out that the two would visit her often. (Doka, 2002b:142)

This account reminds us not to assume that it is the old members of a family who are most likely to be offended by new situations. Such exclusion motivates gay and lesbian persons to create their own funeral rituals (Whipple, 2006).

Death due to AIDS adds additional stresses to losing a partner, most commonly among gay men, because of the stigma associated with the illness, the fact that death often occurs at younger ages, and, in some cases, survivor guilt (Doka, 2002c; Peplau et al., 1996; Shernoff, 1998; Walter, 2003). As well, the loss of an intimate partner often occurs in the context of multiple losses due to AIDS within a closely knit community (Mullan, 1998). As the treatment protocols for HIV/AIDS continue to improve, and as more gay and lesbian adults form open, long-term relationships, their experience of losing partners later in life will become a more common public occurrence. In the words of a lesbian widow, "As the rest of the world begins to understand our love as something more than a sexual attraction that can be satisfied by any one-night stand, but rather as fully committed and lovingly intimate relationships, they may also come to recognize the extent of our grief, the depth of our loss" (Whipple, 2006:6).

The intersection of gender with sexual orientation is part of identity negotiation over time, as lesbians and gay men negotiate being women and men as well as lesbian and gay in their relationships and after they are gone. This can mean both additional challenges and unique advantages. As an example of the latter, when compared with straight women following widowhood, the more egalitarian relationships of lesbian couples mean that lesbian widows typically do not have to learn new skills previously performed by their partners (Walter, 2003; Whipple, 2006).

Despite the significant differences based on sexual orientation, a qualitative study of persons 1 to 16 years past the time of losing their gay, lesbian, or straight long-term partners reminds us of the common human experience of such loss, regardless of marital status or sexual orientation (Walter, 2003). A frequent experience after losing a partner is the ambivalence of simultaneously wanting to hang on to the lost partner's memory *and* wanting to avoid the painful feelings of losing a partner that such memories might trigger. The shift from "we" to "I" that characterizes acquiring a widowed identity occurs among lesbian widows as well (Whipple, 2006). On the second anniversary of the death of her 31-year partner, Pat reflected,

This was a critical time for me to review our life together and to find myself outside of our relationship. . . . Because I was brought up to put my personal desires secondary to those of my mate, our relationship worked well for Betty. Essentially it worked for me as well, at least until I no longer had a mate. Then I had to learn a new way of living. (Whipple, 2006:152- 53)

There are also signs of change evident in findings that lesbian women who are out about their sexuality and their relationships do receive family support after a partner dies (Whipple, 2006). However, for those who are not out, there is the further isolation that comes from ignorance of what the relationship meant to them or the decision to come out.

In sum, the initial loss of a long-term partner or spouse is an intensely personal period of bereavement. The link between negative objective outcomes, such as financial setbacks and reduced social involvement, and the subjective feelings of widowed persons means that there is the potential for social policy intervention (see Chapter 14). Many of the consequences of widowhood reflect socially constructed relations of gender and sexual orientation in the social domains of work and family. Changing these relations is fundamental to ameliorating core problems faced by those whose long-term partners die.

## Divorce

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As the figures in Chapter 2 showed, a relatively small proportion of today's older persons—7% of Canadians and 8% to 9% of Americans—is divorced. The risk of divorce is greatest in the first few years of marriage, and younger persons account for the majority of all divorces (Hiedemann et al., 1998). Those who divorce in middle age, however, are less likely than those who divorce at younger ages to remarry, resulting in growing numbers of individuals who will reach old age unattached due to divorce (Wu & Penning, 1997).

The current risk of divorce by the 30th wedding anniversary for all marriages is 44% for Americans and 38% for Canadians (Ambert, 2005; Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006). These figures include redivorces for one or both spouses, making the risk of divorce for first marriages lower. The percentage of divorces that are redivorces is 16% in Canada and 33% in the United States. Marriages that ended in divorce in recent years lasted an average of 14 years in Canada and 11 years in the United States.

U.S. divorce rates peaked in 1990 and have stabilized since that time (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006), in part because increased cohabitation decreases the opportunity to officially divorce. Less stabilization has occurred among Black than White women, and the more common practice of separating but not formally divorcing among African Americans means that divorce data underestimate marital disruption among them (Sweeney & Phillips, 2004). The greater dissimilarity in attitudes between spouses among African American than non-African-American couples (Clarkwest, 2007) and the socially created racial barriers to economic success that create marital financial conflicts for inner-city Black men aged 65 and over (Barker et al., 1998) help to account for their higher risk of divorce.

More people are entering and will enter old age with marital histories that include one or more divorces. Because divorce usually occurs at younger ages than is true for widowhood, the experience of divorce in later life more often concerns the long-term consequences of long-ago events and relationships. Older divorced persons are a particularly diverse group, based on when they divorced (Ambert, 2005). In this chapter, we focus on the subjective and objective consequences of divorce and relationship dissolution for older persons. Unfortunately, we must often extrapolate from data regarding younger couples. In Chapter 11, we consider the impact on intergenerational relations of both a parent's and an adult child's divorce.

### **The Transition From Marriage to Divorce: The Subjective Impact**

Divorce is a process, not a discrete event, that begins during the marriage and ends years after the divorce papers are signed (Amato, 2007). Including the separated in discussions of divorce, especially concerning older persons, is essential to accurately assessing the extent of marital breakup and the process of adjustment that follows. Although separated persons may not divorce, all divorced persons were once separated, and separation marks a significant phase in the emotional and physical break with a partner. As well, among older individuals there may be fewer incentives to actually divorce (e.g., no other marriage prospects), even when the separation is considered a permanent rather than a temporary arrangement.

Unlike widowhood, divorce often means a profound loss not only in the present but also of the marriage's past (Katz, 2006). The circumstances of divorce may prompt a revision of a marriage's history as spouses question what they thought it had been. Also, unlike widowhood, divorce is considered a choice by at least one partner, potentially revocable, and possibly the 'fault' of one party, in which case a critical eye rather than sympathetic ear may follow (Froschl, 2006). The first year of separation is marked by feelings of ambivalence that combine a sense of longing with a feeling of relief, regardless of which spouse triggered the separation (Cherlin, 1992). For most separated persons, the heightened anxiety, periodic depression, and personal disorganization typical of this period are followed by several years of reorganization during which a new identity and lifestyle are negotiated (Cherlin, 1992).

Most older divorced men and women went through this transition earlier in their lives. For older women, the transition to divorce often meant making another key transition from being a homemaker to being a paid worker (Connidis, 2003a). On balance, women appear to experience greater psychological distress than men following divorce and to feel more lonely, angry, sleepless, guilty and anxious (Sev'er, 1992). Some of this variation may simply reflect gendered responses in how and when distress manifests itself. Men tend to react later and sometimes more severely in the form of higher rates of suicide, accidents, and psychiatric care. Divorce has a cumulative effect so that those who have divorced two or more times have higher depression scores than those who have divorced once (Kurdek, 1991).

Although both men and women aged 50 and over tend to see their lives after divorce as either the same as or better than life during the year before separation, women are more likely than men to note improvement in their social life and overall

happiness and in being a parent (Hammond & Muller, 1992). Two to three years after a divorce, men are more likely than women to feel friendly toward and pre-occupied by their ex-spouses and to have lower well-being (Masheter, 1991). Such responses are shaped by the nature of the marriage before divorce (Amato, 2007). Research on couples of various ages who divorced in the early 1990s finds that those who suffered through very difficult marriages due to alcoholism, violence, or constant conflict experience relief, improved well-being and happiness after divorce. Those who were moderately content and thought they could do better than their current marriages are often disappointed and experience a decline in well-being following divorce. Thus, when a poor marriage prompts divorce, greater happiness is likely to ensue; when a weak commitment to marriage is the motivator, divorce dampens happiness (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007).

Race also has an impact on subjective responses to divorce. Blacks adjust better and feel less stigmatized by divorce than Whites four years after separation (Kitson et al., 1989), and Black women experience less strain than White women following divorce (Pudrovska et al., 2006).

### **The Objective Situation of Older Divorced Persons**

As we saw in Chapter 3, divorced persons do not compare favorably with married adults in various measures of health and well-being (Amato, 2000). There is some evidence that middle-aged women are vulnerable to the health threats of emotional distress and socioeconomic status that accompany divorce (Zhang & Hayward, 2006). With regard to psychological well-being, however, parents with young children living at home experience greater declines than do older persons following divorce (Williams & Dunne-Bryant, 2006).

Referring to divorce as economic suicide for women captures the dramatic financial consequences that a marital breakup can have (Dailey, 2006). Although both men and women feel a sense of relative deprivation (Holden & Kuo, 1996), the financial impact of divorce is far greater for women (Sev'er, 1992). Two key factors that characterize the lives of today's older persons account for this difference: following divorce, men are more likely to be in the labor force and in better-paying jobs and women to have custody of children. Even for those women in the labor force, interrupted employment, primarily to engage in family responsibilities, lowers earnings and benefits in old age (Daily, 2006; Street & Connidis, 2001). Despite advances in education and employment, women continue to suffer major economic costs of divorce (Sayer, 2006).

Men also suffer a financial hit when they divorce, but this is primarily true for the economically disadvantaged (Sayer, 2006). For men, divorcing later rather than earlier in life has greater economic consequences because they can no longer make significant financial gains in the work world to compensate for the expenses of dissolving a marriage (Keith, 1985). For both men and women, the financial setback of divorce carries over into the preretirement years, even following remarriage (Holden & Kuo, 1996). This helps account for the fact that divorced women in their 50s are more likely to work and to expect to retire later than their widowed and

married peers (Morgan, 1992). Reduced financial circumstances following divorce, particularly among women, heighten the challenge of living alone. The increasing numbers of women who will be reaching old age after many years of being divorced and its attendant socioeconomic consequences is a significant social issue. Persistent poverty is most likely among female-headed households, especially Black female-headed households (Cherlin, 1992), a reflection of the greater economic costs of divorcing among Black than White men and women (Sayer, 2006).

Recent research suggests that the relative earnings of husbands and wives are influential regarding marital stability. Women are generally more likely to initiate divorce (Sweeney, 2002), but among couples with an average age in the mid-30s, those couples in which spouses make similar economic contributions to the household are more likely to divorce, and divorce is as likely to be initiated by the husband as by the wife (Rogers, 2004). Equal dependence appears to make both members of the couple confident that they can each survive on their own. These findings suggest some protective effects on marriage of a traditional division of paid labor, but research in the Netherlands finds that such effects only hold when wives hold traditional gender values (Kalmijn et al., 2004). As well, among dual-income couples, when wives perceive inequality in household labor, divorce is more likely to follow (Frisco & Williams, 2003). These findings suggest that, although economically egalitarian marriages are more likely to end in divorce, marriages in which nonegalitarian economic and household arrangements persist appear to protect marriage only when partners hold values in support of them. Traditional arrangements will not keep partners together when women are committed to egalitarian relationships.

In the period immediately following separation, both younger (under 50) and older (50 and over) men and, more so, women rely on multiple sources of emotional support, particularly parents, siblings, friends and children (Hammond & Muller, 1992). Among parents divorced after at least 19 years of marriage, mothers rank their children as their most supportive tie during the early stages of divorce, whereas fathers rank their friends and parents above their children (Wright & Maxwell, 1991). Ongoing, supportive ties with former in-laws following divorce are unusual despite widespread normative support for them (Finch & Mason, 1990). Generally, older persons rely less on others for emotional support following separation than do younger men and women.

Divorce erodes the support network, especially ties with married friends, more than widowhood does, in part because the role of kin and friends is ambiguous, and the normative expectations for self and others are less clear and uniform (Brubaker, 1990; Martin Matthews, 1991). Nonetheless, the likelihood of receiving help from friends is greater among the divorced than the married (Barrett & Lynch, 1999). Although the social networks of divorced older women remain sizable, they are also homogeneous and are characterized by a tendency to rely on one close friend to satisfy most needs for emotional support (Gibson & Mugford, 1986).

Although women are improving their economic independence, some argue that “in old age, as family relationships based on marriage and parenthood grow in importance, it is males who are at risk” (Goldscheider, 1990:531). Currently, divorced men receive considerably less support from their grown-up children than do divorced women (Barrett & Lynch, 1999), and old, divorced men have

less involved and more strained relationships with their adult children and grandchildren than do married and widowed men (Davidson et al., 2003). This relative social isolation of divorced men reflects a customary lack of involvement with their young children following a divorce earlier in life and could be lowered if men became more directly involved with their children (see Chapter 11). Ongoing disparities in paid work and family involvement will make it some time before men and women share enough common experience in the labor force and at home to have dramatic effects on support networks and economic security among older divorced persons (Lampard & Peggs, 2007; McDonald, 1997).

“Divorce . . . ends a marriage, not a relationship” (Doka, 2002c:156), distinguishing it from widowhood. The far reach of a former spouse is indicated by the grief that some feel years later upon the death of their ex-spouse (Doka, 2002c). Such grief is more likely among those who do not resolve the initial loss of the relationship through divorce. Among older persons today, especially women, their future depended so much on marriage that when marriage did not work out, the pressures of independence and single motherhood could be the basis for a lifetime of strain and regret (Connidis, 2003a). The greater acceptance and frequency of divorce may improve the ability of older persons to successfully negotiate divorce in the future.

In sum, the stress of divorce manifests itself in different ways for men and women. The greater initial personal trauma experienced by women motivates them to make greater changes in their lives, which, in the longer run, appear to leave them better adapted and more content in later life. However, one dilemma of comparing long-term divorced men and women rests on the fact that remarriage rates are higher among men. Thus there is a greater selection effect among men than women, potentially distorting the results of comparisons between men and women beyond the initial stages of separation.

## **Dissolution of Same-Sex Relationships**

There are fewer barriers to dissolving relationships among same-sex couples in the absence of legal and religious foundations for marriage or impediments to breaking up, along with the less supportive stance of families toward same-sex than toward opposite-sex unions (Kurdek, 1998). Despite this, the likelihood of breaking up over an 18-month period among longer-term couples (10 years or more) is very similar for straight, gay, and lesbian couples (Peplau et al., 1996). Unfortunately, the long-term effects of dissolving same-sex partnerships have received scant attention. One might expect, however, some parallels to the impact of divorce.

The benefits of marriage extend to divorce; those who are unable to marry legally do not enjoy the attendant protections of divorce (Allen, 2007a, 2007b). This is a serious concern for long-term gay and lesbian partners who, for example, find themselves denied access to nonbiological children by the biological parent and without recourse to the courts to resolve the situation. The isolation created by not having the loss of the partner relationship acknowledged—another case of disenfranchised grief (Martin, 2002)—is multiplied by also not having one’s parental relationship with a child recognized (see Chapter 11).

The absence of legal marriage for same-sex couples has paradoxical consequences: At the same time that partners are not bound together in a bad relationship, they are also not encouraged to work out difficulties by the barrier to easy separation created by marriage (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). Cultural heterosexism and fewer successful role models also create special challenges to the survival of same-sex relationships (Hunter, 2005). Generally, however, both the reasons for separation (desire for independence, differences in interests and in attitudes about sex, partner problems, including affairs) and its consequences (feelings of loneliness, anger, guilt, and confusion coupled with relief, happiness, and independence) are similar for same-sex and opposite-sex partners (Peplau et al., 1996).

The following words of a 62-year-old woman about her lesbian partner could as readily have been spoken by a woman about her husband:

When D said she wanted out of the relationship, to be with a younger woman, I was really devastated. I knew that things hadn't been going all that well for a while, but I really thought that after 22 years we would stay together forever. . . . I can't imagine who would want me now or where the hell I would ever meet anyone. (Auger, 1995:110–111)

There are two key differences between the dissolution of same-sex versus straight relationships, however. First, same-sex couples experience the complexity of being gay or lesbian in a heterosexist society as a reason for breaking up (Peplau et al., 1996), a factor that is irrelevant to heterosexual couples. Second, gay and lesbian couples may be more likely than straight couples to renegotiate their relationships with ex-partners as friendships, possibly in part because they share and invest in a smaller and more closely knit community of chosen families (Diamond, 2006). An older gay respondent observed, "My sister has gone through three husbands and I have gone through three lovers. The difference is that I have remained good friends with all of my ex-lovers" (Berger, 1996:155).

There is much to be learned about the dissolution of same-sex marriages. The introduction of civil unions in some states and marriage in two of them (see Chapter 14) raises the question of their impact on relationships and their dissolution. In Vermont in 2003, 85% of those who obtained civil unions there came from elsewhere (Diamond, 2006), and some have since discovered that they must return in order to dissolve the union.

## Options for Intimate Relationships and Intimacy in Middle and Later Life

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Staying single or losing a partner does not necessarily mean not having an intimate partner, either presently or in the past. As we saw in Chapter 5, middle-aged and old single persons have a range of reasons for not marrying, including having other types of partners. Cohabiting, living apart together (LAT), or having a series of intimate relationships without committing to one partner challenge the concept of *ever single* as meaning any more than not getting married. Taking us full circle in the

issue of how to define and label singles (see Chapter 5), middle-aged and old persons who are involved in romantic relationships tend to view themselves as unmarried rather than as single (Koropecj-Cox, 2005).

Because old men are more likely to be married and to benefit from being married, it is old women who are more likely to be the catalysts for creative alternatives to marriage (Connidis, 2006). Less confined by the demands of being good wives and mothers, old women may be especially open to new ways of doing things.

## Remarriage

Since the 1970s, remarriage following divorce and widowhood has declined (Cherlin, 1992; Goldscheider, 1990; Lee Willetts et al., 1998; Uhlenberg et al., 1990), and cohabiting following divorce has increased (Ambert, 2005; Cherlin, 1992). Among couples with one previously married partner, remarried couples are more likely than cohabiting couples to be White and to have higher incomes (Wineberg & McCarthy, 1998). Following widowhood, men are about five times more likely than women to remarry (Lee Willetts et al., 1998), partly because more unattached women than men result from women living longer and marrying older men. Generally, remarriage is more common following divorce than widowhood, largely because divorce usually occurs at a younger age than widowhood. About three-quarters of men and women in the United States remarry following divorce (Cherlin, 1992), with lower rates of remarriage among Hispanic and especially Black Americans (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001; Cherlin, 1992).

At the younger ages when divorce usually occurs, socioeconomic status affects the chances of remarriage for divorced women but not divorced men. High socioeconomic status discourages remarriage among women aged 25 at the time of divorce but makes remarrying more likely among those divorced at age 45 (Sweeney, 1997). Similarly, women with a university education are more likely than high school graduates to remarry (Sweeney, 2002). These findings suggest that women who remain divorced as they enter old age are particularly prone to face financial difficulty and that, although women's greater economic independence may threaten marital stability, it does not lead to a negative attitude toward marriage itself.

If remarriage does occur in old age, it is more likely after widowhood than after divorce, but both widows and widowers express reluctance to remarry (Kestin van den Hoonard, 2001; Moore and Stratton, 2002). Men are more inclined to remarry in old age, but increasing age makes remarriage less desirable and likely for men and women, and most old people do not remarry and prefer not to remarry (Carr 2004b; Davidson, 2004; Mahay & Lewin, 2007; Stevens, 2004; Uhlenberg et al., 1990; Wu, 1995). The lower inclination to remarry in old age is explained by objective limitations (scarcity of older men, poorer health, reduced mobility, poorer finances), the absence of incentives common to younger ages (being pregnant, wanting children, proving adulthood, conformity to life cycle timing), a short future (making it harder to justify the necessary changes brought about by marriage), and the social pressure to protect one's estate (Talbot, 1998; Treas & Van Hilst, 1976). Losing a former spouse's pension and the perceived threat to children's inheritance are unique financial impediments to remarriage later in life (Moore & Stratton, 2004).

Among men and women in advanced old age who have formed new relationships, women do not want to marry, whereas widowed men typically do (Wilson, 1995). Past experience with marriage influences attitudes about remarrying. Among widows aged 61 to 85, those whose previous marriages were particularly good or bad were least interested in remarrying, whereas those whose marriages were generally positive but flawed were most open to considering remarriage (Talbot, 1998). Many older widows, most of whom had very traditional marriages, are reluctant to give up their independence, to return to taking care of a man, and to risk losing another partner (Davidson, 2001, 2004; Heinemann & Evans, 1990). For example, a 66-year-old widow in one of my studies says she would not remarry because

I am enjoying my freedom too much now. I brought up my children, and I looked after my husband to the best of my ability. I cared for my parents until they died, and it was a joy and I liked it, but I am enjoying the freedom now of not having to account to anybody for what I do.

An 81-year-old widow is even more direct:

I wouldn't get married again for all the tea in China. . . . Oh no . . . I am set in my ways, and I wouldn't want a young fellow running around all the time, and I wouldn't want an old man with one foot in the grave either. Then stop and think that you would have to wash for them, you would have to iron, you would have to have meals to suit them. Now, if I feel like eating, I eat, and if I feel like going out, I go out.

A qualitative study of widowers indicates that old men are aware of being a liability when they have health problems or disabilities; said a 100-year-old man, "What would I have to offer a woman—two years of taking care of me, and then I would die?" (Moore & Stratton, 2002:137). There are also women who miss the companionship of a man and assume that any woman who claims that she is not interested in remarrying must be lying (Talbot, 1998). This is, however, still the minority view among today's older women.

Among those who do remarry, marriage occurs far more quickly after widowhood in later life than at earlier ages (Lopata, 1996). When remarried couples aged 30 to 45 years are compared with remarried couples aged 60 to 75 years, women in both age groups are equally satisfied with life, but the older men are more satisfied with life than are the younger men (Bograd & Spilka 1996). This difference may be due to the fact that remarriage more often follows divorce for the younger group and widowhood for the older one, situations that we have seen create quite different life course outcomes for men's social networks and ties to children.

Remarriage in later life is negotiated in the context of a lifetime of accumulated experience that is quite different from the circumstances of a first marriage. In a qualitative study of women aged 55 to 90 years (Hurd Clarke, 2005), those who remarried happily later in life often negotiated power, resources and household responsibilities with their husbands more effectively, resulting in more balanced marriages than the first time around. A number of women who had poor first

marriages describe their current marriage as the one that they wish they had had all along; those who had been happily married before find that their present marriage meets their changing needs in old age. Describing her first and second marriages, a 90-year-old woman reflects,

Second marriages are different . . . For one thing, you're mature. You're much older and sex is never a driving force in a second marriage . . . We did things together . . . It was a very pleasant interlude in my life and it was for him, too. (Hurd Clarke, 2005:35)

Other differences are noted by remarried widowers in the Netherlands who observe that partners in a second marriage have "a whole life behind them" at the same time that they "know it can never last long. If I live to be 80, then we have 10 years together. If I make it to 85, we'll have 15 years. . . . It's a totally different relationship" (Stevens, 2004:55).

Although discussions of family networks in older age often focus on losses, remarriage is a potential basis for enhancing one's kin network. Over time, remarriage can form the foundation for close family ties (see Chapter 11), as in the case of a 71-year-old man in my community study:

I hear a lot of people around my age being lonely. Well, I don't know what it is to be lonely really. I have two sons and their families and my daughter. I have eight grandchildren . . . We also have five great-grandchildren. I was married twice. I was married very young and then that marriage broke up, and my present wife and I have been married 31 years. Mary is the present wife's daughter and the other two are my first wife's sons. We see the boys frequently, and I am very happy that they are fond of my present wife, so we get along very well . . . We are a very close family.

## **Repartnering Among Unattached Gays and Lesbians**

One outcome of exclusion from mainstream life among gays and lesbians, especially for younger cohorts, is investment in building strong, familylike communities (Walter, 2003). Such communities create supportive networks for negotiating new relationships following the loss of a partner and foster a different response from that in straight relationships. Among lesbian widows in a small qualitative study, for example, talking about their deceased partners with new lovers and receiving support rather than jealous insecurity in return is common (Whipple, 2006). This is attributed to the general inclusion of ex-lovers, whether through death or relationship dissolution, in lesbian and gay communities. The inclusion of ex-lovers and reference to past relationships potentially enhances continuity in community involvement and ongoing friendships among those who find new partners.

Some argue that middle-aged and older lesbians have unique advantages for finding sexual partners, should they want to, because they do not experience the decline in their pool of possible partners that straight women do, and they do not

experience the same threat of younger competitors that straight women and gay men do (Garnets & Peplau, 2006).

Staying sexually active is considered an important part of healthy sexual identities and satisfying relationships among gay men (Wierzalis et al., 2006). But like their straight peers, those who lose long-term partners may not be interested in finding new ones. A man of 72 comments on losing his partner:

It was very hard. My gay retirement group and my friends helped me get through it. I'm not over him. I wouldn't want to be over him. I don't look at other people, I'm not remotely interested in another relationship. Nobody could come up to his standards. (Bergling, 2004:182)

Given that legal marriage is generally not an option for other than heterosexual unions in the United States, the concept of remarriage does not apply. In many respects, this makes gays and lesbians leaders in negotiating arrangements that are experienced as relatively novel among straight couples and individuals.

In sum, a relatively small percentage of today's older individuals either marry in later life or enter old age remarried, but these numbers are growing in the wake of elevated divorce. A lifetime of experience influences decisions about remarriage, including accumulated ties to other family members, particularly children; the quality of previous marriages; gendered experiences of caring for a spouse; and financial circumstances. There is still much that is unknown about remarriage in later life and its impact on other family relationships. The increase in divorce has changed the dynamic of remarriage because now more remarriages follow divorce rather than widowhood. (In Chapter 11, the impact of divorce and remarriage of either older parents or their adult children on relationships between parents and their children and between grandparents and grandchildren is explored.) We now turn to consider alternatives other than remarriage for intimate relationships in later life.

## Cohabitation

Much of the research on cohabitation focuses on its incidence, its stability when compared with marriage, and younger populations. By the turn of this century, one million persons, comprising 4% of the U.S. population over the age of 50, were cohabiting (Brown et al., 2006). Mixed findings regarding cohabitation and its success are in part due to the variety of motivations for and types of cohabiting unions. The relatively monolithic cultural view of marriage does not guarantee that everyone will experience it in the same way, but it does enhance sharing a common view of an ideal marriage. Despite changes in practice, the symbolic importance of marriage remains high (Cherlin, 2004). In the case of cohabitation, there are multiple ideal types that provide an important context for gauging research on cohabitation and its merits for different age groups and in comparison with other union statuses, particularly marriage.

Six ideal types of cohabitation are these: (1) marginal, in which a cultural proscription against cohabitation prevails; (2) cohabitation as a prelude to marriage, in which cohabitation is a testing ground; (3) cohabitation as a stage in the marriage

process, in which living together is a normalized step toward marriage; (4) cohabitation as an alternative to being single, in which living together is preferred to living apart among young people who want to postpone forming a family; (5) cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, in which case cohabiting is preferred over marriage but the intent to form a family is parallel; and (6) cohabitation as indistinguishable from marriage in which case couples are indifferent to marriage because cohabitation is a culturally acceptable alternative with parallel privileges (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004). As cohabiting becomes a more normative arrangement that approximates marriage, it appears to become more stable. For example, in areas of Canada where cohabiting is more normative, such as Quebec, stability of cohabiting relationships has increased over time (Ambert, 2005; Le Bourdais et al., 2004).

These ideal types of cohabitation are useful for placing the cohabiting patterns of a particular country in context and for establishing an appropriate basis for comparison with marriage. In the United States, cohabiting as an alternative to being single prevails but with some evidence of an increase in cohabitation as a prelude to or stage of marriage (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004). For these types, expecting cohabitation to mimic marriage is questionable. Only when cohabitation is entered into with expectations similar to those of marriage does comparing their respective outcomes as stable unions make sense.

A striking feature about these ideal types of cohabitation is their focus on younger couples and family formation. Yet they can also be useful for better understanding old people and their entry into cohabiting relationships. In the absence of family formation as an objective, cohabiting among older couples can be seen as both an alternative to being single (but without the intent to form a family later) and as an alternative to a second or subsequent marriage. Among old couples, cohabiting is rarely a prelude to marriage or a stage in the marriage process, as it is entered into for its own sake rather than as a trial period for getting married (Chevan, 1996). Instead, cohabitation is more likely to follow than lead to marriage. Comparisons of younger with older (over the age of 50) persons in cohabiting unions confirm that older persons are more likely to see their unions as an alternative to marriage and younger persons as its precursor (King & Scott, 2005).

In the United States, 90% of cohabiting adults over the age of 50 were previously married (Brown et al., 2006). Most of these persons have children and may be concerned about the implications of remarriage for their children's inheritance. In this context, cohabiting rather than remarrying is a method of protecting, not threatening, the well-being of their children. The disconnection between couple and family formation among old couples also creates some freedom from social censure regarding cohabiting later in life. Already marginalized due to age relations, the marginality of cohabiting is less of a social concern regarding older than younger couples because dependent children are not involved. This age-based context for understanding cohabitation is echoed by a race-based context in which cohabitation is more often a prelude to marriage among Whites and more often a substitute for Blacks and Hispanics (Phillips & Sweeney, 2005).

Older men are more likely than women to cohabit, as are the very poor, the young-old, those who have divorced or separated (a number that we know is also growing), and residents of the Sunbelt states, where a seniors subculture free of outside (family)

influence is more likely to have emerged than anywhere else in the United States (Chevan, 1996). Comparisons of remarried, cohabiting, and unattached middle-aged and older (over the age of 50 years) persons indicate a greater impact of union status on the lives of women than men (Brown et al., 2006). Women who cohabit have lower incomes than remarried women, are no more likely than unpartnered women to own their homes, and are more likely than both groups to be employed full time. In combination, these findings indicate the greater economic disadvantage of cohabiting women, but being employed full time may also indicate the greater egalitarianism of cohabiting relationships.

Indeed, the gender inequality of marriage makes cohabitation an attractive option for many women (Cunningham & Antill, 1995). Differences in gender relations in the two union types are evident in findings about what leads them to succeed. When married couples engage in a more traditional, specialized division of labor, risk of divorce is diminished (Brines & Joyner, 1999). For cohabiting couples, however, equal employment and earnings between partners lowers the risk of relationship dissolution; inequality, particularly in favor of the woman, increases the risk of breaking up. The perceived value of being in a union is often greater among older than younger men, creating a more equal footing between men and women who choose to cohabit later in life (Ambert, 2005). Comparisons of older with younger adults confirm the significance of age to understanding cohabiting relationships. Older cohabiting couples report higher levels of fairness and relationship quality and fewer disagreements, heated arguments, and concerns about their relationships' future than do younger ones (King & Scott, 2005). With respect to marital status, cohabiting and married middle-aged and old women share similar levels of well-being (Brown et al., 2005).

In sum, gender, age, class and race relations combine to create different contexts of cohabitation across the life course. In old age, with a history of intimate relationships and family formation behind them, cohabitation offers a more egalitarian relationship than marriage and better protects the interests of adult children. Cohabitation also provides a financial cushion for those with less economic security, particularly women, through the sharing of expenses and appears to have a positive impact on well-being. In the context of more egalitarian gender relations, cohabitation may be more accurately viewed as an adaptive alternative to marriage than as an indicator of a declining commitment to intimate relationships (Connidis, 2006).

## Living Apart Together

LAT is an alternative intimate relationship in which both members of the couple continue to live in their one-person households and intermittently share their households with one another (de Jong Gierveld, 2004a). This option is increasingly popular in Europe and Scandinavia (Borell & Ghazanfaraeon Karlsson, 2003; Ghazanfaraeon Karlsson & Borell, 2004; de Jong Gierveld 2004b; Moore & Stratton 2004; Stevens 2004). A consensual union, living apart together has features that resemble marriage and cohabitation. Couples who live apart together have a long-term commitment to one another, publicly acknowledge their love for each other, are publicly known as a couple, and are sexually active (Stevens, 2004). Like the pure relationship described by Giddens, living apart together focuses primarily on

the emotional bond between the couple and “depends fundamentally on the mutual satisfaction generic to the relationship, rather than on structural bonds” (Borell & Ghazanfaraeon Karlsson, 2003:59). In the absence of clear rules, couples who live apart together negotiate the boundaries and understandings of their relationship, balancing intimacy with autonomy and companionship with independence (Davidson & Fennell, 2004).

As with cohabitation, LAT relationships reflect the impact of intersecting age, gender and class relations, as well as the life course perspective’s emphasis on life stage. In comparisons of different age and marital status groups, living apart together is especially appealing to old persons and those with previous long-term relationships (de Jong Gierveld, 2004a, 2004b). In a study in the Netherlands, when compared with previously married persons who were younger than 55 when their last relationship ended (due to death or divorce), those who were 55 years or older were three times more likely to be in a LAT relationship (de Jong Gierveld, 2004a). In addition to appealing to older persons who have marriages and children behind them (life stage), LAT is a class-based option available to those who can maintain two households.

Gender relations are also behind the unique appeal of LAT relationships among older women. Living apart together allows women to escape the gendered expectations of marital relations in which they have more responsibility for cooking, housework and caring (Borell & Ghazanfaraeon Karlsson, 2003). A separate household ensures desired boundaries around the relationship and enhances the often new-found independence. A 63-year-old Dutch woman in a LAT relationship observes, “I’m very happy with him but I don’t want him here all the time. Then I’d lose the freedom I have now.” (Stevens 2004:53). Living apart together is an established couple form among same-sex partners and leads to underestimating the extent of committed same-sex relationships (de Vries, 2007).

Both men and women note the potential risks to health of advanced old age and the challenge that it would present to a partner who is also old. Said one man in a LAT relationship, “At our age it’s impossible to care for a sick partner” (de Jong Gierveld, 2004b:101). Living apart together is an effective way of negotiating an intimate tie that also limits the untenable demands that declining health may impose on a partner. Age relations and life stage also apply to those who are parents. Even more than cohabitation, which can come to be defined as a legally binding relationship that makes a long-term partner a beneficiary, living apart together is seen to protect children’s inheritance (de Jong Gierveld, 2004b).

As is true of those who cohabit, LAT relationships also come to an end through death or dissolution. At the age of 89, Ida lost a partner with whom she had lived apart together for 12 years. She says,

You feel like you’ve lost a part of yourself. You feel like you’ve lost quite a bit. And the older you are, the more you feel you’ve lost because you’re not as active. He called me every morning and every night, to see if I was all right and to let me know he was all right. . . . You do think about your good times . . . but you think about how they’re gone and not coming back. Gone for good. And then you think, when you’re ninety years old, what companionship are you going to have now? (Walter, 2003:105–106)

Ida's comments raise the question of how one finds intimacy in old age in the absence of an intimate relationship and the particular challenges of doing so as a woman in advanced old age.

## Dating and Steady Companions

For lack of a better word, we will use the term *dating* to refer to going out with or seeing someone. Growing numbers of old persons and internet matchmaking services have drawn more media attention to romance in later life, but there is not much research on this topic. Gender and age relations combine to shape the dating experience (Connidis, 2006). For both men and women, the likelihood of dating declines with age (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991). Among women and men who do date once a month or more, almost half describe themselves as being involved in steady dating. The timeless experience of meeting and falling in love are evident in the comments of a 75-year-old man:

We met five years ago at a single's dance. I saw her across the room. I thought she was the most perfect creature, extremely lovely to look at. I could tell that she found me attractive as well. When our eyes met, we both knew it was destiny. (Neugebauer-Visano, 1995:22)

The ongoing significance of sexual attraction also shines through in a 72-year-old woman's observations: "My love and I are very attracted to each other. Oh definitely, he is very handsome and distinguished looking. He does it to me" (Neugebauer-Visano, 1995:22).

Despite these similarities among age groups, like cohabitation and living apart together, dating is not part of a mate selection process for older persons (Chevan, 1996). For daters aged 40 to 69 years, the main incentive by far for dating is to have someone to talk to and do things with, and those in their 60s are both happier and more hesitant about getting married than the younger daters (Fisher & Montenegro, 2003). These differences suggest the *greater* significance of dating in old age as a source of intimacy in its own right.

Men are far more likely to report dating later in life (Carr, 2004c), in part due to the greater availability of suitable partners for men, given women's longer lives and men's involvement with younger women. Among unattached Americans aged 40 to 69 years, one-third has an exclusive dating relationship, two-fifths have not had a date in a year (Fisher & Montenegro, 2003), and over one-third of those in their 50s have "not been kissed or hugged in the last six months" (Mahoney 2003:2).

Trepidation about dating and intimacy among those who have been out of the dating scene is shared by younger and older persons, men and women. Some older widowers comment on the usual challenges of dating someone, such as avoiding hurt feelings and not wanting to get too involved too fast (Moore & Stratton, 2002). Women and men in their 50s share a dislike for dates who have a lot of baggage or who want to get too serious too quickly (Fisher & Montenegro 2003). Some older widowers describe entering the dating game as "akin to an hour on the rack" and "my worst nightmare" (Moore & Stratton, 2002:145). Possible intimacy is also intimidating. Baby

boomers “find getting naked in front of someone new a difficult transition” (Mahoney, 2003:2). Neither men nor women escape the negative views of aging bodies in an ageist society that holds up youthful ideals of masculinity and femininity as the standards against which people of all ages are measured (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001).

Some older persons prefer platonic relationships with people of the opposite sex, described in research in the Netherlands as *steady companions* (Stevens, 2004). Such relationships involve shared affection and mutual helping but do not extend to being defined as couples. These arrangements are more likely to be favored by women; older men in such relationships may prefer more involvement, as was the case for this 72-year-old man: “I’m alone every night. That’s not easy. I’m quite healthy and capable of living intimately with a woman. But, I don’t get a chance” (Stevens, 2004:58). Nonetheless, having a steady companion is as good as having a consummate partnership for staving off loneliness.

### **Sexual Intimacy Among the Unattached in Later Life**

A challenge in discussing opportunities for sexual activity among unattached older persons is striking a balance between avoiding ageist assumptions that characterize old people as asexual and avoiding being part of the claim that old age is great as long as it is just like being young (Connidis, 2006). The pressure to perform that is captured in the proliferation of male sex-enhancing drugs and to look forever young that is captured in the relentless hawking of cosmetics and cosmetic surgery, especially to women, now carries into old age (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Gott & Hinchliff, 2003). Optimistically, this may signal greater equalization in age relations. Cynically, it may simply mean going after an aging market. In either case, a focus on never-ending performance and youth reproduces particular views of masculinity and femininity that are embedded in current gender relations and extends them into old age. At the same time, viewing old unattached individuals as sexless beings was described years ago as “unfair and oppressive” (Felstein, 1970:123).

As I mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4, today’s old people did not necessarily associate sex only with marriage when they were young. Research from earlier times shows that among those who are now in their 70s, 80s and 90s, almost a quarter of women had had sex with someone who they did not eventually marry, and over half of unattached White men in their 20s had had sex with “a nice girl” (Hohman & Schaffner, 1947:503). However, old women face limited opportunity for sexual activity due to a shortage of men available to them, old or young. One study reports that among those aged 70 or more, older married men are two and a half times more likely than unmarried men (31%) to be sexually active, but married women are 11 times more likely than unmarried women (5%) to engage in sexual activity (Matthias et al., 1997). Among those who do not have regular sexual partners, less than 1% of women and 6% of men aged 60 and over have intercourse once a week or more (AARP, 1999c). In a sample aged 70 and over, 31% of men and 3% of women had had sexual relations in the past month (Matthias et al., 1997). These studies focus on specific forms of sexual activity and do not address how activity compares with desire for sexual encounters.

A growing clientele of middle-aged and old people for online matchmaking and dating services suggests a more open interest in sexual activity in later life. A very public example of a woman in pursuit of a sexual partner is Jane Juska (2003). Referring to herself as a round-heeled woman, an old-fashioned term for a prostitute, Juska (2003:20) details her search for sexual partners, initiated by a want ad which stated, “Before I turn 67—next March—I would like to have sex with a man I like.” After sorting through responses to her ad, a number of trysts followed. As exhilarating and satisfying as these liaisons proved to be, Juska (2003:272) asks, “Once you’ve had a lot of sex with a man you like, how do you stop wanting him?” Her query addresses the connections among sex, love, and commitment and, for women, the particular challenge of separating them.

Although gender relations put more pressure on women than men of all ages to associate sex with commitment, aging and the experience of a long-term relationship may make both men and women reluctant to engage in sex outside a committed relationship. Some older widows and widowers continue to associate sex with marriage (Kestin van den Hoonaard, 2001; Moore & Stratton 2004). This is one reason that the merits of nonsexual companionship should not be underrated. Some widows enjoy the physical contact of dancing while out with a man (Kestin van den Hoonaard, 2001), and some widowers enjoy the companionship of steady dating without sex because they do not feel sexually attracted to other women, they are impotent, or they feel too old for a more involved relationship (Moore & Stratton, 2002). With changing sexual mores a part of their cultural and social landscape, older persons may discover new ways of finding and enjoying sexual fulfillment, as in the case of a 77-year-old widow who discovered the pleasures of a sex aid (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003). Her discovery reminds us to move beyond counts of sexual intercourse as a measure of sex in later life and to consider the broad range of sexually satisfying activities available at all ages. We should also appreciate that very fulfilling lives can be led without being sexually active.

## Summary and Conclusion to Part II

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Intimate relationships are important across the life course. The need and desire for intimacy, including sexual relations, continue into old age, but venues and methods for its expression may change. A more inclusive view of intimate relationships encourages us to consider the intimate ties of older people outside as well as within marriage. In an ideal world, a more inclusive view of intimate relationships would be supported in law and social custom, enhancing the prospects for intimacy by increasing the range of venues available for its realization (Geller, 2001).

Long-term couples, whether married or cohabiting, whether gay or straight, tend to derive considerable satisfaction from their relationships. Interdependence between partners is heightened in later years as a consequence of being together more of the time, sharing household tasks (primarily along traditional lines in the case of married couples), and the declining health of one or both partners. Such symbiosis permits older couples to live independently.

Providing care to an ill spouse for a long time can lead to isolation of both partners. This may leave a newly widowed person poorly prepared for dealing with life alone. Nonetheless, most old persons make the transition to widowhood successfully. Although widowhood is more common among women, it has repercussions for both men and women. Men are less likely to experience some of the objective losses, such as income, that are a consequence of widowhood for many women. However, subjective losses seem to be greater for men, in large part because of their more exclusive reliance on spouses for intimacy and sharing confidences. Women tend to turn to other family ties following widowhood, whereas men are more inclined to turn to another mate.

Although a relatively small proportion of older individuals have ever divorced, the numbers are increasing, and growing numbers are either reaching old age having divorced earlier in their lives or are divorcing later in life. Both men and women, but women much more so, experience financial costs to divorcing. Women in particular tend to discover advantages to being alone, including increased self-worth and newly gained independence. As in the case of widowhood, following divorce, women more typically seek and receive support from family and friends, whereas men more often find support through remarriage. Divorced older men appear to be more isolated than other men and than women of all marital status groups.

Relatively small numbers of old people remarry, but remarriage among today's older persons is generally successful. Remarriage rates among all age groups have declined over the past two decades, largely because cohabitation is more common. For some older persons, cohabitation and living apart together provide good options for those who both want a partner and value independence. The more egalitarian arrangements of both alternatives are particularly appealing to women. Cohabitation and living apart together are both seen as methods of protecting children's inheritance. The ongoing advantage in life expectancy for women reduces the availability of opposite-sex relationships of all kinds for women. Women are also less interested than men in finding a committed relationship.

Recent research indicates the continuing significance of sexual intimacy in old age. We need to learn more about the intimate ties of those who are unattached, especially given that sexual relations are no longer seen as the exclusive domain of marriage.

Contrary to common conceptions, older single persons, particularly women, are not isolated. Although their social networks are smaller, this is due to having fewer kin. Single women tend to cultivate lifelong friendships that complement their smaller family networks. They also develop closer attachments to some of their own kin, especially siblings and their families (see Chapter 9 on childlessness and Chapters 12 and 13 on siblings). Nonetheless, the single rely more on formal support services than the married and the widowed with children. As is true of the widowed and divorced, single women are more satisfied than single men. The consistency of these differences indicates the propensity of men to depend on spouses, whereas women develop broader familial networks. These proclivities by gender are also evident in intergenerational ties, the subject of the next five chapters.

## **PART III**

# **Intergenerational Relations**

