

LOVE AND SEXUALITY IN LATER LIFE: WHAT YOUR GRANDPARENTS ARE NOT TELLING YOU

KRIS A. BULCROFT

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/se-2019-0010>

© Ústav etnológie a sociálnej antropológie SAV

© 2019, Kris A. Bulcroft. This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons

Dr. Kris A. Bulcroft, Ph.D, Capilano University, President (retired), 2055 Purcell Way, North Vancouver, British Columbia, V7J 3H5, Canada; email: kabulcroft@gmail.com

In a study of dating in later life, conducted in the Midwest in the United States, in which a sample of people age 60+ were interviewed regarding their dating behaviors and perceived functions of dating at this stage in the life course, preliminary evidence suggests that middle-generation offspring took on the role of gatekeepers of sexual standards of conduct and cohabitation outside marriage. Concomitantly, the older generation displayed modified attitudes about sexuality outside marriage in keeping with the opportunity structures available to them as part of the dating experience. When this paper was published in 1986 there were few studies of later life intimacy and dating, and the focus was on the older daters rather than on extended family or social network implications of dating in later life. Since my study in the mid-1980's, research has flourished on later life dating and intimacy, but the focus continues to be on the dyad rather than exploring intergenerational family relationships and changes that result from re-coupling in later life. This paper will explore the adult child-older parent relationship in which the older person is dating and posit research questions based on two conceptual areas and one theoretical perspective – stereotyping of older people, transmission of values across generations, and social exchange theory – on which to build future studies of intergenerational relationships. This review of the literature will assist in understanding the middle generation's response to an older parent's dating and courtship behavior as well as consider why conflicts about later life dating between adult children and older parents are more likely under certain family conditions. Exploration of the literature on later life dating that has resulted since our 1986 study, coupled with theoretical underpinnings, is intended to help scholars in this area of study conduct research that will be more generalizable and theory-based.

Key words: later life dating; later life intimacy; intergenerational ambivalence; stereotyping; social exchange; transmission of values; family conflict

How to cite: Bulcroft, K. A. (2019). Love and Sexuality in Later Life: What Your Grandparents Are not Telling You.

Slovenský národopis, 67(2), 185–200, <https://doi.org/10.2478/se-2019-0010>

List of abbreviations:
LAT: Living Apart Together

Acknowledgements: The author would like to thank Professor Marta Botiková, Faculty of Philosophy at Comenius University, and Professor Eva Muchová, Faculty of National Economy at the University of Economics in Bratislava for their long-term support of my scholarship and professional development in Slovakia.

INTRODUCTION

Very early in my academic career, I and my co-author, Margaret O'Connor, conducted qualitative interviews with 35 older individuals (age 60 and older) regarding their dating behaviors (Bulcroft, O'Connor, 1986). The interviews were semi-structured and focused on obtaining information about dating practices, motives for dating, and consequences of dating on the quality of life of the older daters. All interviews were held in and around Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States. When this study was published in 1986, at that time virtually no other academic theorizing or research on later life dating or cohabitation had been conducted. Since that time a burgeoning field on later life intimate relationships has come to the fore in social science scholarship but many questions remain about heterosexual relationships in the later stages of the life course. In particular, research into the intergenerational family dynamics associated with later life partner formation is scant and would enhance the growing body of literature on aging and family relationships.

A body of evidence is emerging that focuses on the factors that predict re-partnering following widowhood or late life divorce (Carr, 2004). Qualitative studies have also shed light on the dynamics of dating and courtship in later life, with particular emphasis on gender differences on the antecedents and consequences of later life coupling (Koren, Lipman-Schiby, 2014; Koren, Simhi, 2016; Koren, Lipman-Schiby, Fogel, 2016; Gewirtz-Meydan, Ayalon, 2018). Theoretical work has also been done that begins to lay the foundation for further study of later life intimacy (Carstensen, 1992; Gerwirtz-Meydan, Ayalon, 2018; Koren, Simhi, 2016). Studies focus primarily on the couple dyad, sometimes adding supplemental information about the social networks in which the couple orient their decision-making and social capital (Spalter, 2010; Liao, McMunn, Mejaa, Brunner, 2018). The role of friends and family in partnership formation in later life is not as well studied and has the potential to further elucidate the importance of later life social contact and intimacy. Anecdotal evidence from my work in the 1980's and that of Chaya Koren (2015) suggests adult children and grandchildren most often respond in negative ways to later life coupling. Koren posits that because dating and cohabitation in the later stages of the life course do not conform to the normative family life cycle stages, intergenerational negative reactions may be an attempt to reassert the normative family pattern. While some reactions from younger generations may be positive and supportive, particularly with regard to easing the burden of caregiving and emotional support of older parents (Vinick, 1978; Ron, Lowenstein, 1999), there is an equivocal body of evidence that points to a lack of support from adult children and grandchildren, sometimes escalating into overt conflict, when the older generation dates, cohabits or remarries (Davidson, 2002; De Jong, 2004; De Jong Gierveld, Merz, 2013). This is fertile ground for future work, both theoretical and empirical, as it highlights the importance of intergenerational relationships and family ties as they impact life course decisions for

older men and women who find themselves outside a traditional marital relationship in the later stages of life.

The primary purpose of this paper is to explore the intergenerational dynamics between adult children and their older parents when a dating partner enters the social network. Drawing on previous literature on later life dating and courtship, both theoretical and empirical, three frameworks will be briefly explored and subsequent research questions posited.

My research, conducted nearly three decades ago, raised questions about the intergenerational dynamics of adult children and older parents who were dating but my scholarly direction took me elsewhere. Nonetheless, the qualitative data I collected on later life dating that raised issues about family reaction to dating in life has always lingered in my mind. Perhaps the time has come for someone to explore this topic. Here are two examples from my interviews that set the stage for this paper.

Mary, a widow of three years, was dating a man in his seventies. As their relationship progressed, her boyfriend occasionally spent nights at her apartment and his personal items like toothbrush, clothes, and books began to accumulate in her home. Mary told me that her daughter, a married woman in her late forties, often came by to visit. As Mary put it, "I must hide my boyfriend's shoes whenever my daughter comes." While Mary's friends were aware of the intimate nature of her relationship, her daughter was not. Mary felt strongly that her daughter's reaction to her intimate relationship would be negative and create difficulties between mother and daughter.

Jane, a woman in her early seventies, made plans with her similarly aged boyfriend to travel to Florida to visit her adult son and daughter-in-law. While confirming the travel plans, her daughter-in-law said, "I hope you know that you and your boyfriend will not be sharing a bedroom. After all, what would the children think?" Jane thought this was a particularly odd response on the part of her daughter-in-law since the children were college-age adults and cohabiting with their partners at that time.

These two examples and similar narratives obtained as part of my study raised questions about the role the middle generation played in monitoring, validating, and shaping the experiences of the older generation regarding intimacy and sexuality outside the confines of traditional marriage. Of the thirty-five individuals interviewed in the study, none of the respondents reported highly supportive attitudes or behaviors from their adult children in response to their dating activities. In many cases, the older dater had not revealed to their children or grandchildren that they were involved in an intimate relationship, keeping these relationships 'closeted' from kin. On the other hand, the older daters were not secretive about their relationship with friends, and women, in particular, reported that a dating partner increased her level of personal prestige and status among her friends.

The qualitative data I collected also suggested that older daters had modified values and attitudes regarding extramarital sex to accommodate the circumstances and opportunities they now experienced. Fewer available single partners with whom to form intimate relationships (Burch, Matthews, 1987; Graaf, Kalmijn, 2003), a demographic imbalance of available men to women, shifts in the function of marriage over the life course, and health and economic status impacting the likelihood of partner formation in the later life stages all contribute to a changed set of values and attitudes about sex outside marriage.

In the United States, about a quarter of the divorces in 2010 were among individuals older than age fifty. The result of this trend is that among the elderly, the number of

divorcees now outnumber widows and widowers (Brown, Lin, 2012). Many of these later life divorcees, as well as widows and widowers, would like to have intimate relationships (Calasanti, Kiecolt, 2007) but enter the dating market under markedly different social opportunities than when they were younger. Specifically, the ratio of men to women, as well as workplace connections, alter partner accessibility. Looking strictly at remarriage and cohabitation rates for older individuals, the likelihood of partner formation is radically diminished in later life. In the United States, only 0.6% of those age 65 and older are remarried (Cruz, 2012). Rates of cohabitation among older couples, while increasing over the decades, show that only 4 percent of people in their 60s are cohabitating. The rate of cohabitation drops to 1 percent for those aged 70 and older (Brown, Lee, Bulanda, 2006).

Using 2005-06 data, Susan Brown and Sayaka Shinohara (2013) present a U.S. national profile of older daters. Their data support other studies that find a higher probability of dating for people age 57-85 for men. They also found the probability of dating increased for younger, better educated, healthier, wealthier, and higher levels of social connectedness, as measured by size and frequency of contact of social networks. While a good estimate of the number of older people involved in intimate, heterosexual relationships has not been forthcoming, one can speculate that as greater numbers of people enter the later stages of the life course in good health and as widows/widowers or divorced, the proportion of older people in intimate relationships has and will continue to grow.

Susan Brown, Jennifer Bulanda and Gary Lee (2012) found that sex outside marriage no longer took on negative connotations for older couples, but reasons to marry greatly diminished in the later stages of the life course. Work by Kate Bennett, Lauren Arnott and Laura Soulsby (2013) found that older men who sanctified their former wives were less likely to re-partner. Laura Carstensen (1992) found that older people preferred familiar social relationships to newly formed network ties, which may also account for partner selection within a limited pool or the tendency to decline forming new, intimate relationships in the later stages of life. These findings suggest that it is more than demographic antecedents that predict the propensity of dating in later life and that complex emotional histories of marriage and partnership throughout the life course influence later life intimacy.

Family reaction to later life intimacy and sexuality outside the marital relationship remains a difficult family dynamic, often alienating adult children if made known to them, and more often kept secret from close family ties. Adult children's reactions to their older parent's intimate relationship outside marriage may be the result of concerns about the older parent's emotional vulnerability, concern over inheritance if the relationship resulted in marriage, reaction against values and behavioral changes of the older parent associated with sexuality, or stereotyping of older people in general that sees sexuality and intimacy in later life in negative ways. Research has shown that family change and adaptability, regarding any transition or modification to membership or roles, is most often fraught with interpersonal dynamics and challenges (Nock, 1981).

The role the middle generation plays in monitoring and shaping older couples' sexual practices and living arrangements outside traditional marriage is posited to have a strong influence on the decision-making and behaviors of older individuals. Three areas will be briefly explored as potential sources for developing theory and research questions about intergenerational relationship dynamics between older daters and their adult children and grandchildren. The theoretical areas that will be reviewed include

1) stereotyping of the elderly, 2) transmission of values in the family, and 3) social exchange theory as it relates to family power. Other scholars have endeavored to lay theoretical foundations to explore relationship formation in later life, but the emphasis in this article is to consider intergenerational family relationships and how they might impact partner formation for older couples, as well as decision-making about cohabitation versus remarriage versus living apart together.

Qualitative and quantitative data are scant regarding the interplay between generations in relationship to partner formation in later life, and no studies have found widespread normative patterns of enthusiastic and accepting behavior on the part of adult children or grandchildren when the oldest generation of that extended family is involved in a romantic relationship post marriage (Koren, Lipman-Schiby, 2014). Preliminary evidence suggests, instead, that reaction to the older generation's dating and courtship behaviors are negative and unsupportive on the part of family members, sometimes even undermining and sabotaging the relationship of the older couple (Giervelt, Merz, 2013). Let us consider the underlying reasons for such negative reaction to later life intimate relationships and set the stage for further study about the intergenerational relationships in this context.

My study of dating in later life found that adult children were generally not supportive of the dating relationships of their older parents and that the older daters kept their dating relationship hidden or minimized from extended family interactions. My subjects reported that their adult sons and daughters did not see their dating partner as a valid member of the social network of the family, clearly demonstrating boundary maintenance of the family and attempting to thwart changes to the family structure. Some of the boundary maintenance of adult children seemed to relate to a desire to protect inheritance and access to parental resources. Adding a dating partner to the family structure, and thus allowing the possibility of remarriage, threatened the current exchange system in place in the family. My older respondents also reported that adult children saw their dating behaviors as "silly" or "inappropriate" for their older parent. The stereotypical view that older people, especially older parents are asexual and without emotional need for intimacy, was the dominant response on the part of adult children as reported by my sample of older daters. Lastly, transmission of family values seemed to have been disrupted when an older parent dated. These were older people who instilled the value that sexual relationships outside marriage were wrong, but who were now dating and engaging in sexual relationships that they once taught their now adult children to be outside the norms of society. Changes in former values and attitudes about sexuality outside the marital relationship caused not only the older person, but also their adult children, dissonance. It raised questions for me and my co-author about the evolution of values over the life course and intergenerational responses to those changes in attitude and behaviors. Clearly, there are other conceptual and theoretical perspectives that can serve as valuable frameworks for future studies but these are the ways in which our qualitative data led to our consideration of theories worthy of consideration.

STEREOTYPING LATER LIFE SEXUALITY AND INTIMACY

The concept of "stereotyping" was advanced by the work of Donald Campbell (1967) and has since gone on to assist social scientists in the study of perceived differences between groups of people. Attributes that are considered common or typical of a group are

stereotypes, such as “the elderly are more forgetful than children,” or “gay men are more depressed than straight men.” A stereotype’s accuracy is the extent to which the perceived group’s attributes correspond to the actual attributes of the group (Madon, Jussim, Keiper, Eccles, Smith, Palumbo, 1998). For example, some elders are more forgetful than children, but many are not.

The role that stereotyping plays in shaping attitudes and reactions to later life sexuality has received considerable attention over the past three decades by scholars of gerontology and family life. As early as 1994, Judith Levy noted that “common stereotypes, held by both the young and the old, view sex and sexuality as the prerogative of youth” (Levy, 1994: 287). Since that time, images of the elderly have modified to some extent, and greater attention to healthy aging and positive role models in later life have emerged in both the popular press and scholarship. Yet stereotypes persist, most especially regarding sexuality and romance.

More recent studies show that it is still not uncommon for people to think of older people as asexual (Kessel, 2001). It is particularly problematic that many health care professionals continue to hold such stereotypes (Koren, Ayalon, 2019; Taylor, Gosney, 2011) because they inadvertently reinforce such negative feelings about body image and sexuality among their patients and their family members. Societies in general continue to equate sexual activity to good health, power and youth, making stereotypes about later life sexual activity difficult to overcome (Gott, 2005).

In spite of these stereotypes, many older adults continue to practice and enjoy sexual activity into advanced old age. The nature of sexual relationships may change over the life course, as demonstrated in a large, representative sample of older adults in England (Tetley, Lee, Nazroo, Hincliff, 2018) but both older men and women reported sexual activity to be a source of happiness and wellbeing (Gerwirtz-Meydan, Ayalon, 2018).

Returning to the question of intergenerational reactions to later life sexuality, Gunhild Hagestad and Peter Uhlenberg (2005) found that the younger generation held the most negative attitudes and stereotypes about aging. A study by Ashley Thompson, Lucia O’Sullivan, Sandra Byers and Krystelle Shaughnessy (2014) found that younger people, while showing explicit acceptance of later life sexuality, held implicit biases about the sex lives of older people. Findings about the implicit biases held by the younger generation might suggest the harshest and most stereotypic responses from the youngest members of the extended family. Concomitantly, ties between mothers and daughters are stronger than between sons and adult parents (Sutor, Pillemer, 2006). Thus, the role of adult children, daughters in particular, is pivotal in setting expectations, boundaries, and norms for the older parent with regard to living arrangements and sexual practices. It appears that women continue to face the double jeopardy of ageism and sexism that comes with age, and stereotypes persist across countries, although to varying degree, about sexuality in later life. Coupled with the demographic imbalance of women to men in the later stages of life, it stands to reason that women would be more likely to face family disapproval in the formation of intimate relationships.

Cultural and societal variations should also be considered as they impact attitudes toward later life sexuality. Recent work that examined attitudes toward sexuality in older men and women in four nations in Europe found variation not only by gender but also by country (Bente, Carvalheira, Hald, Theis, Kvalen, 2019). Social change in Western countries sees evolving attitudes and norms about family life, and later life family dynamics is subject to those same social forces that have made changes in sex outside the marital relationship a part of the fabric of family life and dynamics. Further

research is needed to examine the cultural and national differences regarding attitudes toward sexuality in later life.

It seems obvious, based on research about stereotyping of older adults' sexuality, that one primary reason why younger and middle generations cast aspersions on intimate relationships of their single, older parents is that latent vestiges of negative stereotypes of older people and their sexuality color the lens by which later life intimacy and partnership formation are viewed. The extent to which such attitudes, norms and attempts to thwart partner formation impact the decision to couple in later life warrants further inquiry. Specifically, some hypotheses based on research about stereotyping of the elderly and family interaction that could be explored include:

- Grandchildren will hold the most negative stereotypes associated with grandparent's dating and intimate relationships.
- Older women are likely to receive greater levels of family sanctioning against dating and partner formation than are older men.
- Daughters are more likely to sanction dating and courtship of an older parent than are sons.
- Variations in reaction to older parent's dating and courtship will be positively associated with social class, age of the parent, and proximity to adult child.
- In family systems that hold more negative stereotypes of the elderly, greater pressure will be placed on later life dating couples to conform to traditional gender roles and behaviors.
- Comparing later life daters with non-daters, greater stereotyping about sexuality and negative body image will be manifest for those who are not dating.

These hypotheses stem from the literature on stereotyping of older adults' sexual behavior and needs for intimacy, coupled with information about family ties and parent-child relationships in later life.

TRANSMISSION OF VALUES ACROSS GENERATIONS IN THE FAMILY

While the literature on stereotyping of the elderly suggests a positive correlation between stereotyping of older people and sanctions against dating and couple formation in later life, another avenue of research worth considering is the transmission of values across generations within the family. Early theorizing about the transmission of attitudes and values across generations within a family established the idea that value transmission was a linear, top-down process (Elder, 1980). Specifically, parents socialized young children into values at early ages and continued to reinforce those value structures throughout their lives. The role of the grandparent generation was to continue to reinforce their values not only with their adult children but also with grandchildren. The notion that secular trends reflect changes in successive cohorts supports the idea of fixed values that have been shaped by sociocultural conditions unique to that cohort (Alwin, 1990; Putnam, 1996). This perspective sees values as permanent, stable aspects of personality throughout adulthood with little impact from opportunity structures or influence from social networks.

Later work found that the transmission of values and attitudes does not conform to a linear, top-down process across generations. In fact, values appear to be somewhat malleable over the life span (Padilla, McHale, Rovine, Updegraff, Umaña-Taylor, 2016;

Pinquart, Silbereisen, 2004a; Roberts, Bengston, 1999; Cemalcilar, Secinti, Sumer, 2018). Furthermore, the role of family in socializing values appears to diminish over time but does not disappear completely. Considerably more studies have examined parent-child value similarity to the exclusion of grandparent generation value transmission, but one might extrapolate from the findings, nonetheless. A German panel study of parents and their adolescent children (Boehnke, Hadjar, Baier, 2007), found the influence of the *zeitgeist* (the modal value climate of a society) was stronger in families closely associated with the *zeitgeist*. In those families that were more distant from the societal value climate, parents had more influence on adolescents' value formation. In a hypothetical example as per the United States, families that do not adhere to the dominant social norms of autonomy and individualism and who hold values of collective good and subjugation of the self, would have greater influence on the formation of their children's values. These and other studies of value transmission attest to the important role the family plays in shaping values, but it may be more of a bidirectional process than was originally theorized (Pinquart, Silbereisen, 2004b). Thus, it may be that grandchildren play some role in socializing grandparents into values and attitudes about sexuality and intimacy. Coupled with the changing social milieu, older adults may well modify or even radically alter their value orientation about sexuality and living arrangements outside marriage as influenced by younger grandchildren and the social context of the times.

We know very little about the transmission of values from the youngest to the oldest generations in an extended family with some exceptions (Werner, Buchbinder, Lowenstein, Livni, 2007), nor has the role the middle generation plays in gatekeeping family values been approached as a research topic for consideration. One might speculate, however, that conflicts may arise between adult children and their older parents over behaviors and values that differ. In a study of older cohabiters in the United States, it was found that family members were more likely to support the relationship when it conformed to their own values and expectations. Concomitantly, family members put pressure on the older couple to separate when their values conflicted (Vespa, 2013). Data show that values are fluid and malleable over the life course. Family plays an important role in the socialization of the younger generation, but less so as the family matures. Other factors influence value formation and transformation, such as the cultural milieu, the media, and the peer group. Values modify in response to opportunity structures and societal/family pressure. Family transmission of values is bidirectional and not strictly linear, top-down. Given these findings, the following hypotheses regarding family reaction to later life dating and courtship can be derived.

- When an older parent's values about sexuality and cohabitation or LAT differ from their adult children's values in these domains, greater pressure to terminate the relationship will be applied by the adult children.
- Grandchildren's values about sexuality and living arrangements outside marriage may influence and moderate the middle generation's response to their elderly parent's dating relationship.
- Older daters more closely aligned with the modal societal values of sexuality and living arrangements outside of marriage will be less influenced by family members whose values are in conflict.
- The stronger the peer group's alignment with the values of the older dating couple, the greater their influence and the less the influence of the extended family.
- Variables such as social class, level of education, health, gender, and religiosity

will mitigate or strengthen the influence of family pressure to conform to values on sexuality and cohabitation or LAT.

In summary, two areas of research are fruitful foundations for considering intergenerational relationships and later life dating. The first, stereotyping of the elderly, may explain some, but not all, of adult children and grandchildren's reaction to the oldest generation's dating and courtship. The role of family values and value transmission is another dimension that may impact the ways in which family members respond. Lastly, a third area that warrants consideration is social exchange and its contribution to the distribution of family power over the life span of the family.

SOCIAL EXCHANGE AND FAMILY POWER ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

The roots of social exchange theory span several disciplines but it was in the 1960's that this framework came into the sociological arena (Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964). The focus has been on exchanges between a dyad and, to a lesser extent, exchanges between a triad or more. The crux of social exchange theory posits that individuals tend to maximize rewards and minimize costs (Rank, Le Croy, 1983). Since the 1960's many scholars have pointed out the problems of operationalizing the concepts of reward and cost, as well as considering how altruistic behaviors factor into the exchange process. Nonetheless, social exchange continues to be a dominant theoretical perspective and continues to have merit in studies of family dynamics.

Studies of family power often emphasize gender differences in dyadic interactions regarding the ability to win contested decisions. Today many family scholars believe that power is a multidimensional, situation-centric, and difficult to measure through the predominant method employed, self-reporting. Furthermore, the research has focused on husband-wife interactions and failed to consider generational changes in family dynamics that would give rise to dynamic shifts in power over the life course. The power dynamics within intergenerational families are not static and shifts in power and authority ebb and flow over the family life span. If we consider social exchange theory as a plausible explanation in determining relative levels of power and authority in family decision-making, it stands to reason that individuals or generations holding the greatest amount of instrumental or affective assets would demonstrate greater influence in decision-making in the family (Beckman-Brindley, Tavormina, 1978).

Over the family life course, levels of instrumental and affective assets across members have wide variation. Ad hoc conclusions about family reactions to later life dating, cohabitation and LAT cite resistance from adult children due to fears of losing inheritance and economic assets of the older parent. In the context of social exchange theory, the older relative has an asset, inheritance, that might mediate the negative response on the part of an adult child rather than exacerbate it. But what other resources, instrumental or affective, might come into play between the middle generation and the older generation that would facilitate hostile and negative responses to later life dating and courtship?

One consideration is the emotional investment between adult children and their parents. The developmental stake hypothesis states that parents are more emotionally invested in the relationship than are adult children. Research suggests that this generational difference remains consistent across the lifespan (Rossi, Rossi, 1990;

Shapiro, 2004). If older daters have higher levels of affective connection to their adult children, fear of diminishing the emotional bond might be a factor in predicting the power of adult children's response to dating and living arrangements. Women have long served as 'kin keepers' in families, taking responsibility for creating and maintaining bonds across generations (Danielsbacka, Tanskanen, Rotkirch, 2015; Dubas, 2001; Fischer, 1982). This suggests that women, both in the middle and older generations, have higher levels of affective resources in social exchange processes within families.

Similarly, concern about future needs for caregiving might factor into an older individual's decision to date. Fear of alienating or weakening ties with adult children as a result of forming an intimate relationship in later life may reduce the likelihood of assistance from adult children in the future. Such perceptions would factor into decisions about relationship formation on the part of both parent and older children.

Intergenerational solidarity, which has its roots in social exchange theory, warrants consideration as well. Solidarity refers to the sense of cohesion among family members. In America, solidarity is high in families (Lawton, Silverstein, Bengtson, 1994). Concomitantly, in the United States parents report feeling close to their children (Swartz, 2009). Contact between parents and children is common, with frequent exchanges of instrumental and emotional support. The closest intergenerational relationships are between mothers and daughters (Silverstein, Bengtson, 1997). The counterpart to solidarity is ambivalence. Intergenerational ambivalence refers to the combination of positive and negative feelings that characterize family relationships. People may feel close to their families and have frequent contact, but tensions and conflicts nonetheless exist.

A study conducted in six developed nations (Silverstein, Gans, Lowenstein, Giarrusso, Bengtson, 2010) found patterns of support and ambivalence across generations in four domains – amicable, detached, disharmonious, and ambivalent. The findings suggest the styles of interaction are robust and widely practiced approaches in all six countries. While the nations in the study all demonstrated these interaction styles between adult children and older parents, the level of each domain varied across countries. For example, amicable relations were more common in England; detached relations were more typical in Germany. In Israel higher levels of ambivalent interaction between adult children and older parents was found. In the United States, disharmonious relations were the most common form of interaction, keeping in mind that studies such as those of Leona Lawton, Merrill Silverstein and Vern L. Bengtson (1994) and Teresa Schwartz (2009) measured feelings of closeness as a unidimensional concept rather than breaking it into component parts and might explain why the work of Merrill Silverstein, Daphna Gans, Ariela Lowenstein, Roseann Giarrusso and Vern L. Bengtson (2010) features these cross national differences. These findings are central to understanding the varied and complex nature of intergenerational relationships in the context of the culture of the family.

As my early work on dating in later life suggested, older couples were not likely to marry as a result of their relationship. Cohabitation was not a dominant form of living relationships as well, but many reported 'living apart together' as the primary form of their relationship. Since my study other researchers have verified this trend in LAT in the United States (Benson, Colman, 2016). Even the term, 'living apart together' has no ontological meaning in most countries, the exception being Norway, Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands (Borell, Karlsson, 2003). In Belgium and the Netherlands, LAT has become generally accepted as referring to intimate relationships that do not



There is always something to talk about. Photo: Zora Pauliniová, 2018

include a shared home. In nations in which the language accommodates this type of living arrangement, it is not surprising that most of the current research about LAT is from Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands and Sweden. Studies in Canada, Australia and the United States have built on the European work of scholars in this area of inquiry (Connidis, Borell, Karlsson, 2017).

Data that give good, reliable estimates of the number of older adults in LAT relationships at any given cross section of time is difficult to obtain. However, due to increasing numbers of older, single individuals in most Western countries, it is assumed that LAT is a viable and growing trend in couple formation in most Western countries. What is currently known about LAT in the later stages of the life course regarding intergenerational relationships is largely speculative. Some evidence from survey and qualitative follow-up in the Netherlands shows, however, that adult children can be influential in decisions to live apart together rather than to cohabit (de Jong Gierveld, Merz, 2013). The majority of the study respondents reported that their children encouraged LAT rather than cohabitation and they adjusted their behaviors in accordance with the children's wishes. Adult children in this study employed several forms of family boundary maintenance in dealing with older parents in LAT relationships. These boundary maintenance strategies included sabotage, pure boundary preservation, and refusal to accept the partner. Adult children's objection to their older parents' intimate relationships stemmed from fears of replacement of the biological parent, fear of weakening family bonds, and concerns about loss of inheritance rights. The decision to couple as LAT rather than cohabit may be an attempt to assuage adult children's fears about their parent's financial security or inheritance rights.

Older dating couples demonstrate greater levels of ambivalence about maintaining closeness with extended family members. Perhaps, due to this ambivalence, older dating

partners are choosing to LAT rather than cohabit (Schenk, Dykstra, 2012). Social networks, including adult children, have influence on how older individuals establish themselves in the recoupled relationship. Work by Chaya Koren and Zvi Eiskovits (2011) in Israel finds that older LAT couples either keep their relationship secretive from their social network or they 'account' the relationship attempting to bridge the gap between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

In summarizing the literature on LAT in later life, while family clearly has influence in the decision-making and couple identity formation, it is important to note that there are benefits to LAT over cohabitation and marriage. LAT couples are likely to have a greater degree of individual autonomy. Research conducted in Sweden by Sofie G. Karlsson and Klas Borell (2002) show that older women play a far more important role than men in establishing and maintaining LAT relationships. For women, maintaining her own home is likely to result in greater autonomy as well as avoiding the pitfalls of asymmetrical gender roles in household labor and caregiving.

In summary, current research on living arrangements of later life daters attests to the power of social networks, particularly adult children, in shaping the decision about dating and living arrangements. The ambivalence experienced by older LAT and cohabiting couples about maintaining ties with children and grandchildren warrants further theorizing and investigation.

Obviously, variation across families in terms of economic resources and inheritance, health status of the older person, and levels of emotional connection will make generalizability of patterns of reaction to dating difficult. Yet, future research should consider social exchange theory as an underlying mechanism that will enhance or curb levels of conflict between the middle and older generations regarding later life partnering.

A few hypotheses that can be derived from social exchange theory as it relates to later life dating and intergenerational conflict are as follows.

- Middle generation children with greater instrumental resources will demonstrate less control attempts over their parent's choices about dating and living arrangements than middle generation children with fewer resources.
- Middle generation daughters will demonstrate greater control attempts over their parent's choices due to higher levels of affective resources.
- Older parents with higher levels of instrumental and affective resources will have greater autonomy from adult children's control attempts.

The theoretical underpinnings of stereotyping of the elderly hold promise for understanding macro-level, societal responses to later life dating and courtship, but only provide a partial understanding of intergenerational relationships in this context. Research on the transmission of values may prove fruitful, but age-period-cohort effects are difficult to isolate and access to large, longitudinal studies of family dynamics over time are scarce. The author concludes that while social exchange across the generations is not widely used to explore family reactions to older generational dating and courtship, it holds the greatest potential for illuminating the intergenerational dynamics at play. The response to an older parent or grandparent dating or cohabiting appears to be a complex set of actualized and future social exchange dynamics that elicits ambivalence across the generations.

In conclusion, looking back on my original study of older daters and considering the reasons for intergenerational disapproval and conflict that arose as a result of recoupling in later life, has opened some possible avenues for further exploration into this little understood and seldom researched topic of intergenerational relationships in the family.

REFERENCES

- Alwin, D. (1990). Cohort Replacement and Changes in Parental Socialization Values. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52(2), 347–360.
- Beckman-Brindley, S., Tavormina, J. (1978). Power Relationships in Families: A Social Exchange Perspective. *Family Processes*, 17(4), 423–436.
- Bennett, K., Arnott, L., Soulsby, L. (2013). You're Not Getting Married for the Moon and Stars: The Uncertainties of Older British Widowers about the Idea of New Romantic Relationships. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 27(4), 499–506.
- Benson, J., Colman, M. (2016). Older Adults Developing a Preference for Living Apart Together. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 78(3), P 797–812.
- Bente, I., Carvalheira, A., Hald, G., Theis, L., Kvalen, I. (2019). Attitudes toward Sexuality in Older Men and Women Across Europe: Similarities, Differences, and Associations with Their Sex Lives. *Sexuality and Culture*, 23(1), 1–25.
- Blau, P. (1964). *Exchange and Power in Social Life*, New York, NY: Wiley.
- Boehnke, K., Hadjar, A., Baier, D. (2007). Parent-Child Value Similarity: The Role of Zeitgeist. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69(3), 778–792.
- Borell, K., Karlsson, S. (2003). Reconceptualizing Intimacy and Ageing: Living Apart Together. In: S. Arber, K. Davidson, J. Ginns (Eds.), *Gender and Ageing: Changing Roles and Relationships*, Buckingham: Open University Press (pp. 47–62).
- Brown, S., Bulanda, J., Lee, G. (2012). Transitions Into and Out of Cohabitation in Later Life. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 74(4), 774–793.
- Brown S., Lee G., Bulanda J. (2006). Cohabitation Among Older Adults: A National Portrait. *Journal of Gerontology: Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 61(2), S71–S79.
- Brown, S. L., Lin, I. F. (2013). *Age Variation in the Remarriage Rate, 1990–2011*. (FP-13–17). National Center for Family & Marriage Research.
- Brown, S., Shinohara, S. (2013). Dating Relationships in Older Adulthood: A National Portrait. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75(5), 1194–1202.
- Bulcroft, K., O'Connor, M. (1986). The Importance of Dating Relationships on Quality of Life for Older Person. *Family Relations*, 35(3), 397–401.
- Burch, T., Matthews, B. (1987). Household Formation in Developed Countries. *Population and Development Review*, 13(3), 495–511.
- Campbell, D. (1967). Stereotypes and the Perception of Group Differences. *American Psychologist*, 22(10), 817–829.
- Calasanti, T., Kiecolt, K. J. (2007). Diversity Among Late-Life Couples. *Generations*, Blieszner (Ed.), 31(3), 12–17.
- Carr, D. (2004). The Desire to Date and Remarry Among Older Widows and Widowers. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66(4), 1051–1068.
- Carstensen, L. (1992). Social and Emotional Patterns in Adulthood: Support for Socio-emotional Selectivity Theory. *Psychology and Aging*, 7(3), 331–338.
- Cemalcilar, Z., Secinti, E., Sumer, N. (2018). Intergenerational Transmission of Work Values: A Meta-Analytic Review. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 47(8), 1559–1579.
- Connidis, I. A., Borell, K., Karlsson, S. (2017). Ambivalence and Living Apart Together in Later Life: A Critical Research Proposal. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 79(5), 1404–1418.
- Cruz, J. (2012). *Remarriage Rate in the U.S., 2010* (FP-12-14). Bowling Green, Ohio: National Center for Family & Marriage Research. Retrieved from http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/family_profiles/file114853.pdf.
- Danielsbacka, M., Tanskanen, A., Rotkirch, A. (2015). Impact of Genetic Relatedness of Emotional Closeness on Intergenerational Relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(4), 889–907.
- Davidson, K. (2002). Gender Differences in new Partnership Choices and Constraints for Older Widows and Widowers. *Ageing International*, 27(4), 43–60.
- de Jong, J. (2004). The Dilemma of Repartnering: Considerations for Older Men and Women Entering New Intimate Relationships in Later Life. *Ageing International*, 27(4), 61–78.

- de Jong Gierveld, J., Merz, E. (2013). Parents' partnership decision making after divorce or widowhood: The role of stepchildren. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75, 1098–1113.
- Dubas, J. (2001). How Gender Moderates the Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 22(4), 478–492.
- Elder, G. (1980). *Family Structure and Socialization*. New York: Arno Press.
- Fischer, C. S. (1982). *To Dwell among Friends: Personal Networks in Town and City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gerwirtz-Meydan, A., Ayalon, L. (2018). Why Do Older Adults have Sex? Approach and Avoidance Sexual Motives Among Older Women and Men. *Journal of Sex Research*, Sage Publications, Online First, <https://doi.org.exproxy.haifa.ac.il/10.1080/002244992018.1543644>.
- Gierveld, J., Merz, E. (2013). Parents' Partnership Decision Making after Divorce or Widowhood: the Role of (Step) Children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75(5), 1098–1113.
- Gott, M. (2005). *Sexuality, Sexual Health and Ageing*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, Maidenhead, UK.
- Graaf, P., Kalmijn, M. (2003). Alternative Routes in the Remarriage Market. *Social Forces*, 81(4), 1459–1498.
- Hagestad, G., Uhlenberg, P. (2005). The Social Separation of Old and Young: A Root of Ageism. *The Journal of Social Issues*, 61(2), 343–360.
- Homans, G. (1961). *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich.
- Karlsson, S. G., Borell, K. (2002). Intimacy and Autonomy, Gender and Ageing. *Ageing International*, 27(4), 11–26.
- Kessel, B. (2001). Sexuality and the Older Person. *Age and Ageing*, 30(2), 121–124.
- Koren, C. (2015). The Intertwining of Second Couplehood and Old Age. *Ageing and Society*, 35(9), 1864–1888.
- Koren, C., Ayalon, L. (2019). "Not Living Together Yet all the Time Together:" The Construction of Living Apart Together in Continuing Care Retirement Communities from Perspectives of Residents and CCRC Staff. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, Sage Journals, Online First, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407519840711>.
- Koren, C., Eisikovits, Z. (2011). Life Beyond the Planned Script: Accounts and Secrecy of Older Persons Living in Second Couplehood in Old Age in a Society in Transition. *Journal of Society and Personal Relationships*, 28(1), 44–63.
- Koren, C., Lipman-Schiby, S. (2014). "Not a Replacement:" Emotional Experiences and Practical Consequences of Israeli Second Couplehood Stepfamilies Constructed in Old Age. *Journal of Ageing Studies*, 31, 70–82.
- Koren, C., Simhi, S. (2016). As Long as It's Good: An Intergenerational Family Perspective of Bridging Gaps between Reality and Ideality of Second Couplehood as a Problem and as a Solution. *Ageing and Society*, 36(4), 716–740.
- Koren, C., Simhi, S., Fogel, S. (2016). The Partner in Late-life Repartnering: Caregiving Expectations from an Intergenerational Perspective. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 28(9), 1555–1565.
- Lawton, L., Silverstein, M., Bengtson, V. (1994). Affection, Social Contact, and Geographic Distance between Adult Children and Their Parents. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 56(1), 57–68.
- Levy, J. (1994). Sex and Sexuality in Later Life Stages. In: A. Rossi (Ed.), *Sexuality across the Life Course*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (pp. 287–309).
- Liao, J., McMunn, A., Mejaa, S., Brunner, E. (2018). Gendered Trajectories of Support from Close Relationships from Middle to Late Life. *Ageing and Society*, 38(4), 746–765.
- Lowenstein, A. (2007). Solidarity-Conflict and Ambivalence: Testing Two Conceptual Frameworks and Their Impact on Quality of Life for Older Family Members. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 62B(2), S100–S107.
- Madon, S., Jussim, L., Keiper, S., Eccles, J., Smith, A., Palumbo, P. (1998). The Accuracy and Power of Sex, Social Class and Ethnic Stereotypes: A Naturalistic Study in Person Perception. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 24(12), 1304–1318.
- Nock, S. (1981). Family Life-Cycle Transitions: Longitudinal Effects on Family Members. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 43(3), 703–714.
- Padilla, J., McHale, S., Rovine, M., Updegraff,

- K., Umaña-Taylor, A. J. (2016). Parent-Youth Differences in Familism Values from Adolescence into Young Adulthood: Developmental Course and Links with Parent-Youth Conflict. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 45(12), 2417–2430.
- Pinquart, M., Silbereisen, R. (2004a). Human Development in Times of Social Change: Theoretical Considerations and Research Needs. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 28(4), 289–298.
- Pinquart, M., Silbereisen, R. (2004b). Transmission of Values from Adolescents to Their Parents: the Role of Value Content and Authoritative Parenting. *Adolescence*, 39(153), 83–100.
- Putnam, R. D. (1996). The Strange Disappearance of Civic America. *A Journal of Public Policy and Ideas*, 12(1), Autumn, 3–15.
- Rank, M., Le Croy, C. (1983). Toward a Multiple Perspective in Family Theory and Practice: The Case of Social Exchange Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, and Conflict Theory. *Family Relations*, 32(3), 441–448.
- Roberts, R., Bengtson, V. (1999). The Social Psychology of Values: Effects of Individual Development, Social Change, and Family Transmission over the Life Span. In: *The Self and Society in Aging Processes*, New York: Springer (pp. 453–482).
- Ron, P., Lowenstein, A. (1999). Loneliness and Unmet Needs of Intimacy and Sexuality: Their Effect on the Phenomenon of Spousal Abuse in Second Marriages of the Widowed Elderly. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 31(3/4), 69–89.
- Rossi, A., Rossi, P. (1990). *Of Human Bonding: Parent–Child Relations across the Life Course*, New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Schenk, N., Dykstra, P. (2012). Continuity and Change in Intergenerational Family Relationships: An Examination of Shifts in Relationship Type over a Three-Year Period. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 17(3), 121–132.
- Shapiro, A. (2004). Revisiting the Generation Gap: Exploring the Relationships of Parent/Adult-Child Dyads, *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 58(2), 127–146.
- Silverstein, M., Bengtson, V. (1997). Intergenerational solidarity and the structure of adult child–parent relationships in American families, *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(2), 429–460.
- Silverstein, M., Gans, D., Lowenstein, A., Giarrusso, R., Bengtson, V. (2010). Older Parent-Child Relationships in Six Developed Nations: Comparisons at the Intersection of Affection and Conflict. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(4), 1006–1021.
- Smith, S., Hamon, R., Ingoldsby, B., Miller, J. (2009). *Exploring Family Theories*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Spalter, T. (2010). Social Capital and Intimate Partnership in Later Life: A Gendered Perspective on 60 Year Old Israelis. *Social Networks*, 32(4), 330–338.
- Suitor, J., Pillemer, K. (2006). Choosing Daughters: Exploring Why Mothers Favor Adult Daughters over Sons. *Sociological Perspectives*, 49(2), 139–161.
- Swartz, T. (2009). Intergenerational family relations in adulthood: Patterns, variations, and implications in the contemporary United States. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 35(1), 191–212.
- Taylor, A. Gosney, M. (2011). Sexuality in Older Age. *Age and Ageing*, 40(5), 538–543.
- Tetley, J., Lee, D., Nazroo, J., Hinchliff, S. (2018). Let's talk about sex – what do older men and women say about their sexual relations and sexual activities? A qualitative analysis of ELSA Wave, *Ageing and Society*, 38(3), 497–521.
- Thompson, A., O'Sullivan, L., Byers, E., Shaughnessy, A. (2014). Young Adults' Implicit and Explicit Attitudes Toward the Sexuality of Older Adults. *Canadian Journal of Aging*, 33(3), 259–277.
- Vespa, J. (2013). Relationship Transitions Among Older Cohabitors: The Role of Health, Wealth, and Family Ties. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75(5), 1194–1202.
- Vinick, B. (1978). Remarriage in Old Age. *The Family Coordinator*, 27, 359–363.
- Werner, P., Buchbinder, E., Lowenstein, A., Livni, T. (2007). Grandmothers', Mothers' and Granddaughters' Perceptions of Grandparenthood: A Qualitative Analysis of Congruence Across Generations. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 5(3), 7–25.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KRIS A. BULCROFT – is a sociologist who specialized in aging and family research throughout her academic career. After completing her Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota in 1980, she taught and conducted research in the United States, Canada, Switzerland and the Slovak Republic. She has received three Fulbright Scholarships that brought her to the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada where she conducted research on a cross national comparison of inheritance laws and family dynamics resulting from inheritance. She also had Fulbright support at the University of Economics in Bratislava where she consulted with the administrators and faculty on accreditation processes and procedures. She also worked at Comenius University in Bratislava where she taught a course on later life family relationships and supervised graduate theses. Her areas of research focused on later life intimacy and dating, filial responsibility laws, remarriage in later life, and family dynamics in inheritance. In addition to numerous research publications in scholarly journals, she is the co-author with L. Smeins and R. Bulcroft on a book about the social history of the North American honeymoon, *Romancing the Honeymoon: Consummating Marriage in Modern Society* (1999). The later part of her academic career brought her into higher education administration in an international context, serving as Provost at Franklin University in Lugano, Switzerland and later as President and Vice Chancellor at Capilano University in North Vancouver, British Columbia. After a nearly forty-year distinguished career in higher education, she retired in 2016 and now resides in Slovakia and the United States where she continues to write, garden, and sew as well as lecture at local universities and consult with the Office of the Fulbright Commission.