



This article reviews the relationship statuses that are common for older adults today. It addresses the prevalence of various statuses among the older adult population as well as their consequences for economic, social, psychological, and physical well-being and adjustment. In addition, consideration is given to how the prevalence and experience of various relationship statuses may change in the next few decades given such demographic changes as reduced mortality, increased education and employment for women, and reduced standardization of the life course. Throughout the article, differences for older men and women are highlighted.

## **Intimate Relationships in Later Life**

### **Current Realities, Future Prospects**

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The life course is heavily influenced by sociohistorical context. Therefore, the role options individuals have, the norms that guide their life choices and behaviors, and the institutional supports available as they attempt to carry out their roles vary for persons of different birth cohorts. As a result, life experiences of persons from different cohorts are likely to vary widely, as is their adjustment to various roles at different points in the life cycle. In this article, we consider late life, with a focus on individuals' marital and intimate relationship experiences. We review the typical relationship statuses and experiences that older adults encounter and how these experiences affect well-being. We then consider how sociohistorical changes in recent decades may shape the lives of future older adults in terms of the experiences they have with the marital and relationship statuses we discuss.

Although space prohibits a review of the major social changes of the 20th century, the key demographic shifts that likely influenced marital and intimate relationships the most are well-known. One dramatic change was the reduction in mortality and the increase in life expectancy. Since 1900, life expectancy at birth rose by almost 50%, from 47.3 to 75.5 years (Treas, 1995). Another shift was the increase in educational attainment for both men and women. Although about one in three persons age 75 and older in 1990 had less than a high school education, that is true of less than

5% of the population age 20 to 44 today. Fewer than 10% of older persons had college degrees in 1990, whereas now about one in four persons aged 25 to 44 has finished college (Spain & Bianchi, 1996). Women's labor force involvement also has changed; women born between 1946 and 1955 were twice as likely, and women born between 1956 and 1965 were 3 times as likely as women of their mothers' cohorts to be working from ages 25 to 34.

In addition to demographic transformations, life course theorists argue that American society has changed in other ways that influence life course development. Examples include heightened emphasis on individualism and the creation of more public supports to assist families in responding to financial hardships. Consequently, individuals today, compared to those living 50 to 100 years ago, are more likely to make life choices and pursue individual goals at their own discretion, with less need to coordinate their actions with the larger family collective. It is argued that the life course has become less standardized and regimented; greater flexibility in the timing and ordering of education, work, and family roles has provided adults today increasingly diverse relationship experiences and options for shaping their lives (Buchmann, 1989).

### **INCREASING HETEROGENEITY IN MARITAL STATUSES**

Whether a person's later years are shared with a spouse or spent alone is largely determined by sex, and this will not change in the 21st century. Census data reveal that among adults age 65 and older today, three of four men are married compared to just more than half of women (Census Bureau, 1999). Wade (1989) projected that the proportion of married older men will drop to 69% by 2040; the figure for women will continue to be about 42%. The decline in marriage for men will result primarily from a doubling of the percentage of older never-married men. For older women, the shift will primarily involve a reduction in the proportion widowed and an increase in the proportion divorced. Therefore, the 21st century will be characterized by greater heterogeneity in marital statuses for the older population. Smaller percentages of older adults will be married than is true today, more elders—especially men—will never have been legally married, and among the formerly married, marital disruption will almost be as likely to have resulted from divorce as from death of a spouse, especially for women.

The potential for being married in later life increased substantially over the 20th century due to reductions in mortality. Of couples marrying around age 25 in 1900, only 19% could expect to stay continuously married to age 70 (Uhlenberg, 1990). By 1990, reduced mortality meant that 54% of those marrying at the same ages could anticipate such a lengthy union. Yet, because of concomitant increases in age at marriage and divorce rates, the proportion of the life span devoted to marriage has actually declined. Marriage occupies about 45% of men's life span and 41% of women's, down from more than 50% for both in 1970 (Schoen & Weinick, 1993). If these trends continue, living in a long-term marriage in old age will be less common in the future.

### LONG-TERM MARRIAGE

Long-term marriages are characterized by both continuity and discontinuity. There is continuity over time regarding the relative happiness or unhappiness of the marriage (Alford-Cooper, 1998; Brubaker, 1985). That is, the same things that make a given couple happy or unhappy early in marriage tend to make them happy or unhappy later in marriage, and couples having happier early marital experiences tend to have happier experiences later. Continuity also is evident in the division of household duties. The division of labor after retirement is similar to the way it was before retirement (Lee & Shehan, 1989). Wives perform more of the traditional feminine chores, even when both spouses are retired. This arrangement relates negatively to marital satisfaction for wives who work after husbands retire (Lee & Shehan, 1989). After retirement, wives' marital satisfaction increases, although the division of labor remains the same.

Discontinuities also occur. For example, marital satisfaction in long-term marriages decreases from the early to the middle years, during childrearing, and then increases in later life when children usually have left home and couples have more time together (Goodman, 1999). Thus, most people in long-term marriages report being happy with their marriages (Alford-Cooper, 1998).

Another possible discontinuity in long-term marriage is found in how individuals characterize their relationships. Couples married many years report less conflict and negativity; more pleasure, affection, and intimacy; and fewer marital problems than do couples who have been married for shorter durations (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995). These differences may exist because spouses in long-term marriages tend to have more time for each other and less stress due to retirement and the absence

of children, and those in long-term marriages may be grateful to be married because many their age are already widowed (Goodman, 1999).

How other life transitions affect marriage is important to consider. Retirement often results in long-term married spouses being home together for the first time. This requires a "reconsideration of how time is spent, of priority given to activities, and of territorial issues" between spouses (Scott, 1997, p. 371). In a study of couples married at least 50 years, those who were happier and more satisfied with marriage were less likely to report that partners got in each other's way after retirement; overall, 43% claimed that their marriage improved, 53% reported it was about the same, and 4% claimed that their relationship declined (Alford-Cooper, 1998).

A more complete picture of the effects of retirement on long-term marriage experiences is gained by distinguishing among patterns of retirement. Brubaker (1985) proposed the following four types: (a) traditional (only the husband worked and retired), (b) dissynchronized husband initially (both spouses worked, husband retired first), (c) dissynchronized wife initially (both spouses worked, wife retired first), and (d) synchronized or dual (both spouses worked and retired at the same time). Although few researchers make such distinctions, those that have report that the effects of retirement on long-term marriage differ across these retirement styles. Ten percent of wives in the traditional retirement style complained about loss of autonomy and indicated that their marital happiness decreased after their husbands retired, whereas 33% in dual-earning families reported increased happiness after they retired (Tryban, 1985). The difference might be due to the fact that dual-earner wives have more control over the timing of retirement in their lives than do traditional wives. Another study found that husbands' retirement had a negative effect on their marital satisfaction and on the marital satisfaction of working wives until the wives retired (Lee & Shehan, 1989). Further research that attends to the designated types of retirement situations for couples is needed to resolve this issue.

Both positive and negative changes for the future of long-term marriage can be speculated. Although we can expect a smaller proportion of older adults to be in long-term marriages, due to later ages at marriage and higher divorce rates, couples who are married after several decades may be more satisfied with their marriages than older couples today. Long-term marriage partners in the future are more likely to have remained married out of choice, which might not be the case for older couples today whose marital lives were largely spent in a period that was less accepting of divorce. The greater economic dependence of wives on husbands in the

past may have trapped some unhappily married women in today's older cohorts in dissatisfying marriages out of economic necessity.

Long-term married couples in the future also will probably be faced with tougher decisions regarding the coordination of the husband's and wife's retirement as more older couples will consist of two continuously employed partners. Moreover, many more of the wives will have established careers rather than sporadically assuming different short-term jobs. How greater commitment and investment to career might affect the retirement decisions of married women relative to their husbands' decisions is unknown, but they may be less willing to follow the retirement timing choices of their husbands. When their older and possibly less healthy husbands are ready to retire, these women may resist because of their own career interests and attachments.

Finally, qualitative aspects of retirement in long-term marriages may change. Given lower mortality rates and the relatively young retirement ages that have been common recently, couples will have an opportunity for increasingly long periods of postretirement time together. For happily married couples, the expansion of years when they are free of work and childrearing responsibilities means they can devote more time to each other. For those less happily married, longer retirements may be less bearable once other life roles and demands no longer exist.

## **REMARRIAGE**

Little is known about remarriages in later life, either those occurring in old age or those entered into earlier and continuing over long durations. The few studies conducted examine postbereavement remarriage. Remarried widows age 40 and older reported fewer concerns than widows who had not remarried, although those who had only considered remarriage reported more worries than other nonremarried women (Gentry & Shulman, 1988). These worries were age related as it was the oldest women who had not considered remarriage. For some widows, feelings of disloyalty and other unpleasant reactions are experienced when they consider remarrying, especially if children and others object. Adult children's concerns are often about inheritance (K. Bulcroft & O'Conner, 1986). Other longitudinal research from persons age 50 and older indicates that remarriage leads to positive outcomes for bereaved persons. Although remarried adults did not differ initially from the continually widowed, after 5 years, they reported higher self-esteem, more life and friendship satisfaction, and less stress (Burks, Lund, Gregg, & Bluhm, 1988). Older persons may benefit from remarriage because of the relatively high-quality

remarriages they establish. One of the few studies to consider the quality of remarriages for older adults found high marital satisfaction, especially for men, when compared to remarried, middle-aged persons (Bograd & Spilka, 1996). They also may feel more secure about their remarriages—most had long-term first marriages that ended by spousal death, whereas middle-aged remarrieds had mostly experienced divorce.

Remarriage in later life appears to be a positive experience for older adults today and likely will be more common for older adults in the future, although how remarriage quality will change is unclear. There may be less resistance to remarriage among older adults and their families in the 21st century if people adjust to marital patterns that involve more remarriages, especially after divorce. Offspring with divorced parents may be less concerned about inheritance and parental loyalties and thus more supportive of parental remarriage. Steprelationships formed from these remarriages will be important to study, especially regarding issues such as caregiving and support.

## NONMARITAL LIVING SITUATIONS

A larger proportion of older adults in the future are expected to be single or formerly married than today. Currently, widowed men outnumber the divorced by more than 2 to 1 in old age, and they surpass the never married 2 to 1. By 2040, an estimated 12.9% of older men will be widowed, 10.4% never married, and 7.4% divorced. For older women, the proportion of both never married (7.3%) and divorced (13.2%) is expected to climb in the next 40 years, along with a drop (37%) in widowhood (Wade, 1989). Such changes underscore the need for greater attention to the differences in life situations and well-being for unmarried persons.

Studies of older adults often combine all unmarried persons into one group and compare them to married individuals. Whether scholars assume the common role-loss approach (Hatch, 2000) or frame widowhood and divorce as support-disrupting events (Rowe & Kahn, 1987), they typically focus on problems of older adults as a result of these transitions. Little consideration is given to potentially positive adaptations to or benefits of marital disruption.

Gender has been a central focus in the study of adjustment to widowhood and divorce. Gender socialization theory, with its focus on differential training for and experience in males' and females' social roles, has been used to explain differences in marital disruption for men and women (Hatch, 2000). For example, women primarily lose financial security

when their husbands die, whereas men's socioemotional adjustment is affected when their wives die. Gender socialization theory has been used to argue that women are more distressed than men after marital disruptions because spousal roles are more salient for women's than men's identities (Carey, 1979) and their social status is based more heavily on marriage (Kimmel, 1990).

*Widowhood.* Fewer older persons will be widowed in the future, and the mean length of widowhood will decline because of later entry into marriage (Schoen & Weinick, 1993). However, widowhood will still be a common experience of later life.

Economic changes and strain for widows have been widely studied. Both sexes deal with economic loss when a spouse dies. Widows often lose the contributions of the main provider, and widowers face financial setbacks due to inadequate planning for their wives' deaths (Smith & Zick, 1986). Many older couples have more life insurance for the man than for the wife. Thus, if the wife dies first, her husband may face reduced monthly income plus burial and funeral costs. However, the magnitude of financial loss after spousal death is greater for women than men, as is the risk of poverty (Burkhauser, Butler, & Holden, 1991). Greater economic risk for women is partly due to the longer time they are widowed, a result of sex differences in mortality and remarriage.

Social and emotional support also is threatened by spousal death. Gender socialization theory posits that social disruption will be greater for men than women because wives are men's main confidants, so wives' deaths result in fewer emotional outlets for men (Babchuck, 1978). Widows have the most friends, formerly married men have the fewest, and men's contacts with friends dissipate more than do women's after spousal death (Hatch & Bulcroft, 1992).

Early research portrayed widowers as seriously disadvantaged compared to widows in their relationships with grown children (Berardo, 1970). However, more recent data indicate that children may only slightly favor mothers over fathers (Lee, Willetts, & Seccombe, 1998). Widows receive more aid after a spouse's death than they give (Heinemann, 1983). Contact with children increases after widowhood (Gibbs, 1985), with offspring serving as primary sources of instrumental support to widows. This support is critical for widowed persons; widowed elders that maintain more ties to adult offspring survive longer (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1991).

Gender differences in social and family connections after widowhood may be explained by gender socialization theory. Females are raised to at-

tend to emotions and relationships, so they often become the managers of social and kin relationships (Di Leonardo, 1987) and childrearing. These experiences pay relational dividends for women by fostering connections that may provide assistance back to them when needs arise. Men's reliance on women for tasks may contribute to their reduced social interaction and isolation following widowhood.

The social context of widowhood shapes different experiences for men and women. Because there are more widows than widowers, integration into the social world may be more difficult for widowers. Living near peers of similar status has social benefits; widows participate in community activities and interact with friends at higher rates when residing in places with a greater ratio of widows to married couples (Hong & Duff, 1994). Compared to nonbereaved peers, widowed persons report greater distress and depression, with widowers appearing most depressed (Lee et al., 1998; Umberson, Wortman, & Kessler, 1992). In most samples, widowhood tends to be more recent for men than for women, which could account for this difference, plus men exhibit less psychological recovery than women do (Lee et al., 1998). More health problems (Lee et al., 1998), lack of extensive social involvement, and resistance to help seeking (McMullen & Gross, 1983) are more typical of widowers than widows.

Perhaps the ultimate concern centering on widowhood, especially for men, is an increased risk of health problems and mortality compared to married individuals (Hu & Goldman, 1990). The buffering effects of marriage on health for men are attributed to their wives' roles as "health brokers" (O'Bryant & Hansson, 1995, p. 445) and to the suppression effect that marriage has on men's risk-taking behavior (e.g., excessive drinking). Financial stress mediates depression for women, but this is less predictive of depression for men than are domestic demands (Umberson et al., 1992).

Some research suggests that widowhood can foster positive life changes and adaptive behavior. The health of some widows, for example, has improved with this transition (Murrell, Himmelfarb, & Phifer, 1995), perhaps because they are not involved in spousal caregiving, which so many women face when their husbands' health fails. Some women also report enhanced efficacy (Arbuckle & deVries, 1995) and self-confidence (Umberson et al., 1992) after spousal death, maybe due to more autonomy and to learning new skills (Lund, Caserta, Dimond, & Shaffer, 1989).

*Divorce and aging.* For adults entering late adulthood in the first decades of the 21st century, divorce will have a more salient role in their lives than it has for current elderly. Many will have divorced relatively early in marriage and remarried prior to late life. A growing number, especially



women, will divorce and stay single into late life (Bumpass, Sweet, & Martin, 1990). Finally, it is projected that among more recent cohorts, a greater share of persons will divorce during and after midlife (Uhlenberg, Cooney, & Boyd, 1990).

Economic setbacks associated with divorce are immediately apparent and continue over the long term. Among adults age 50 to 73 who were married at least 15 years, men had a 61% decline in income and women reported a 66% loss (Gander, 1991). More attention has been paid to the economic plight of divorced women than men. In a comparison of divorced and widowed women age 40 and older, the most serious financial problems were found for women who had been divorced at least 5 years (Uhlenberg et al., 1990). Divorced women were economically disadvantaged despite higher employment rates than widowed and married peers. Economic recovery from divorce is unlikely for women unless they remarry (Hoffman & Duncan, 1988).

In late life, financial security rests on assets and savings as well as current earnings. Divorce is likely to disrupt saving and asset accumulation that couples often do in preparation for old age (Fethke, 1989). There may be a disincentive for couples to save if they anticipate divorce and the likelihood of dividing assets. Older couples who save and invest still may lose wealth by dividing assets such as home equity and in losing benefits from insurance policies and pensions. Finally, costs imposed by divorce (e.g., legal fees and costs of living apart) may slow the reaccumulation of wealth. Thus, high rates of divorce led Fethke (1989) to predict, "In future years, then, there may be a new class of elderly poor, those who have experienced the breakup of their marriage" (p. S127). Fethke's arguments have not been empirically studied.

Divorce also has negative psychological and emotional effects in later life, especially for men. Divorced women report less satisfaction with family life and life in general than married women, although they do not differ from widows (Hyman, 1983). Divorced men report less friendship satisfaction than married and widowed men and less family and life satisfaction than married men (Hyman, 1983). Similarly, among persons divorcing prior to and after age 50, divorced women were more satisfied with their recent life changes than were men, regardless of age (Hammond & Muller, 1992). Such gender contrasts are echoed in recent evaluations of personality changes over nearly a decade for a large, middle-aged sample (Costa, Herbst, McCrae, & Siegler, 2000). Compared to persons who remained married, divorced women felt greater self-empowerment, and divorced men had increased depression and reduced achievement mo-

tivation. These findings suggest different costs and rewards to marriage for men and women.

Postdivorce emotional adjustment appears to be mediated by social support. Having a confidant reduces depression (Miller, Smerglia, Gaudet, & Kitson, 1998). Network support is critical too, as greater well-being and a positive self-concept are more characteristic of persons who have stable social networks from pre- to postdivorce (Daniels-Mohring & Berger, 1984). Differences in the availability and use of social support by men and women probably explain some of the gendered outcomes above. Indeed, regardless of age at divorce, women are more likely than men to depend on others for emotional support during the divorce process (Hammond & Muller, 1992). Older divorced men are especially vulnerable as help seeking and age are negatively related.

Family support to older adults is seriously affected by divorce. Whether couples dissolved a long-term marriage or ended a shorter marriage years ago when children were young, divorce influences their potential support from offspring. Adult offspring whose parents divorce later in life report less contact with both parents, especially fathers, than do offspring with married parents (Cooney, 1994). Older fathers with a history of divorce are less likely to get support from their adult offspring than are married fathers (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990). Women divorcing from long-term ( $M = 28$  years) marriages are more likely than men to consider their children as supports (Wright & Maxwell, 1991). Compared to fathers, older mothers receive more advice, services, and financial and emotional support from children. Support from offspring after divorce is especially valuable for middle-aged and older persons because their parents are unlikely to help due to age. Divorces that occurred in the distant past are related to less intergenerational contact in later life (K. A. Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990). Affective relations also are affected. Adult children of divorced parents feel less loved and listened to by their fathers than do adults with married parents (Webster & Herzog, 1995).

Support issues become increasingly salient when older parents are in poor health, and poorer health status is associated with divorce. Using data from 1950 on for 16 developed nations, Hu and Goldman (1990) documented an association between nonmarital status in general and heightened mortality rates for adults. Controlling for age, being unmarried is a greater mortality threat for men than women. Divorced men have the highest mortality rates relative to married men (2.5 greater in the United States).

Few studies of divorce attend to the positive life changes it may present for individuals. Some positive personality changes may accompany divorce (Costa et al., 2000); limited data suggest that experiencing divorce in adulthood may contribute to developing coping skills important to adjustment in late life. O'Bryant and Straw (1991) found in studying recent widows that previously divorced women demonstrated more self-sufficiency than continuously married women and exhibited better adjustment to widowhood after age 60 than did never-divorced widows. Experiencing marital transitions across the early life course may therefore benefit future cohorts in their adaptation to late life.

The social and economic contexts of older adults who are widowed or divorced in the future may be quite different than those documented over the past 20 years. The continuous involvement of women in paid labor through adulthood, a pattern more characteristic of baby boomers than of cohorts before them, may affect both the economic and social well-being of the divorced. Specifically, the economic status of future divorced women may improve markedly relative to both widowers and their same-sex counterparts today due to their employment patterns. Indeed, Smith and Zick (1986) reported that work history is a stronger predictor than gender of economic stability in widowhood. In studying economic changes over a 5-year period spanning pre- to postwidowhood for both sexes, they found that a persistent work history reduced chances of poverty. Compared to persons with 16 to 34 years in the labor force, those working less than 4 years had a tenfold greater risk of poverty. Women's labor force participation across adulthood has reduced their economic dependency within marriage over the past several decades (Sorensen & McLanahan, 1987). As a result, the loss of income by older women when they lose a spouse will be less severe than it is today. As more women establish continuous work histories and move into higher-level jobs, their access to benefits and pensions will increase. Between 1990 and 2030, the percentage of older unmarried women with pension income is expected to triple from about 26% to 73% (Zedlewski, Barnes, Burt, McBride, & Meyer, 1990). Reduced adherence to gender-segregated work-family roles among women in young and middle age today suggests that widows and divorcees in the 21st century will be better situated financially than those today.

Women's greater involvement in paid work may affect men's aging as well as it has somewhat altered men's roles in the home in the past 30 years. Men contribute more to domestic chores than they did a few decades ago (Schor, 1992). Such role changes may better equip them to deal with domestic chores when they become widowed or divorced. Increased

domestic proficiency may reduce stress for older divorced men, just as improved economics will benefit older women's emotional health (Umberson et al., 1992). Being able to better manage domestic tasks may contribute to reduced health problems for older, formerly married men.

Changing social situations also may facilitate the adjustment of divorced persons. Given projections in the growth of never-married and formerly married populations, especially for men, and increasing social acceptance of singlehood and divorce, how older adults feel about being unmarried and their range of social options may change. Growing numbers of nonmarried peers may provide older men a more comfortable social environment with more extensive male support systems and more formal services.

Finally, in the future, reductions may occur in the health risks associated with being unmarried for men. Hu and Goldman (1990) reported that as countries experience growth in particular nonmarital statuses over time, the relative mortality ratio associated with that particular status declines. The relatively poor health of formerly married and single men may therefore be less of a problem in the future as their numbers increase in the older population.

#### **NEVER-MARRIED OLDER ADULTS**

Research has neglected never-married older adults, who make up about 7% or 8% of the older population. However, in the next 40 years, the proportion of never-married men older than 65 is expected to more than double (Wade, 1989).

Never-married elders are heterogeneous in their motivations for remaining single, living situations over time, relationships, and adjustment in later life (Allen, 1989; Rubinstein, 1987). This heterogeneity presents challenges for researchers.

Most empirical evidence suggests that never-married persons are not socially isolated and report high life satisfaction compared to ever-married peers (Fengler, Danigelis, & Grams, 1982; Stull & Scarisbrick-Hauser, 1989). Although they may report more frequent bouts of loneliness (Rubinstein, 1987) and somewhat lower levels of happiness than married persons (Stull & Scarisbrick-Hauser, 1989), the never married are better adjusted than widowed and divorced persons (Fengler et al., 1982; Rubinstein, 1987; Stull & Scarisbrick-Hauser, 1989).

While never-married persons may have relatively low levels of family contacts and support in later life because most have no children (Choi, 1996; Fengler et al., 1982), they typically report extensive friendship ties

that compare favorably to those of ever-married persons (Babchuck, 1978; Choi, 1996; Stull & Scarisbrick-Hauser, 1989). Their social lives include more salient relationships with siblings; in late life, they are more likely than divorced persons to reside with relatives—siblings in most cases (Choi, 1996; Stull & Scarisbrick-Hauser, 1989). Such arrangements shelter older never-married persons from some drawbacks of living alone, such as a greater risk of institutionalization (Stull & Scarisbrick-Hauser, 1989). Although coresident siblings or friends may provide older never-married persons support and companionship, their age similarity places them at risk for experiencing functional limitations at about the same time. Thus, the substitution value of friends and siblings for offspring may weaken over time.

Gender differences in the life experiences of single older adults have not been widely studied but are important to address given the projected rates of singlehood for men. Singlehood may be easier to adjust to for men than for women because society places fewer social prohibitions on single men. For example, it is more acceptable for men than women to participate in public nightlife alone, and men have a larger field of eligible partners for dating than do women. However, the larger number of older single women may provide a wider support system for never-married women than it does for men. Hong and Duff's (1994) research on widows pointed to the importance of this factor for socialization purposes.

Issues likely to influence the social and psychological adjustment of older never-married persons that bear further investigation are their relational careers and transitions across adulthood. Although they are not at risk for losing a spouse, they still will encounter important relationship losses and transitions if they have significant attachments to others, such as parents, siblings, and special friends (Rubinstein, 1987). In the future, some may have had long-term cohabiting relationships. Whether these ties assume a unique character when one is unmarried and how the loss of these relationships is handled by older never-married persons are unknown.

Questions about the positive adaptation and developmental strengths gained from never marrying require attention as well. Regardless of whether lifetime singlehood was chosen or was the result of factors beyond control (e.g., limited marriage market, family demands, and poor health), individuals who do not marry likely adapt to the situation and establish strengths as single persons (e.g., self-sufficiency and reliable networks). Their lives may therefore be characterized by greater continuity (e.g., in terms of relationships and work histories) than those of married persons (Choi, 1996; Stull & Scarisbrick-Hauser, 1989), which could con-

tribute to fewer adaptation problems in late life. The higher educational attainment, more continuous work history, and greater access to pensions of single women illustrate this. Such assets give single women a financial advantage over formerly married women in late life (Choi, 1996), with possible effects on housing and lifestyle choices, health and use of health care, and life satisfaction.

How singlehood is experienced and the meaning of singlehood in later life may be different in the 21st century. Although single women are generally better off financially than formerly married persons (Choi, 1996), women's increasingly higher education and better jobs should mean greater financial security in later life for future cohorts of single women compared to single women today. Nonfamilial support networks are likely to be larger as more women will be either never married or formerly married in the future. Family support systems may be more extensive as well, as baby boomers entering old age in the 21st century will have more siblings and more singles will have children than earlier cohorts as a result of increases in nonmarital childbearing in the past 50 years. Rates of nonmarital childbearing for women ages 25 to 34 today are 3 times greater than they were at comparable ages for women who are now ages 75 to 84 (Spain & Bianchi, 1996). These possible variations in support systems could affect emotional and material well-being for never-married elders in the future.

Finally, it is important to consider that the meaning of being never married may change in the future. Studies suggest that many never-married elders today did so by default, in response to family demands and missed opportunities (Allen, 1989). Younger single persons today are likely to say that they chose this status, and acceptance of this choice is probably greater today as well. Thus, the experience of being single may be even more positive for older adults in the future than today because they will face less social stigma and may feel a greater sense of control over how their lives have taken shape.

#### **GAY MEN AND LESBIANS IN THE AGING POPULATION**

The few systematic, representative studies regarding issues of aging among older gay and lesbian adults (Boxer, 1997) focus mostly on social support and adjustment. Studies on social support challenge the stereotype of older gay males and lesbians as lonely, depressed, and devoid of close contacts (Friend, 1990). The support received by older homosexuals appears comparable to that of heterosexuals, but the composition of support groups differ (Berger & Kelly, 1986) in that older gay males and lesbi-

ans receive support from their families of choice (Dorfman et al., 1995), composed of selected relatives, close friends, and current and/or former lovers who provide support, including caregiving (Boxer, 1997; Kimmel, 1992).

Older gay males and lesbians report levels of adjustment and morale similar to those reported by older heterosexual individuals (Cohler, Galatzer-Levy, & Hostetler, 2000). Homosexuals cite similar concerns regarding growing older, such as potential health problems, financial problems, and loneliness (Quam & Whitford, 1992). The adjustment of elderly gay males and lesbians probably has been shaped by the sociohistorical context in which they came of age. The heterosexism and homophobia that existed during most of their adulthoods and the lack of role models probably have affected them. Many older gays and lesbians concealed their sexual orientation to conform, fearing losses of job, family, and friends (Berger & Kelly, 1986; Friend, 1990), and some may even have married to hide their homosexuality.

Although generally aging gay men and lesbians today appear well adjusted, adjustment of gays and lesbians in the 21st century raises several possibilities. Because cohorts are moving through adulthood in a societal context that is more accepting of homosexuality and that presents fewer obstacles to maintaining a gay or lesbian identity, adjustment may be better for future cohorts of older gays and lesbians. Fewer persons may feel forced to conceal their sexual orientation and live their adult lives closeted from family, friends, and coworkers. Participation in public commitment ceremonies and recognized unions and for some, access to same-sex partner benefits are experiences unavailable to earlier cohorts that may ultimately affect late life well-being (Hostetler & Cohler, 1997). Along with new opportunities, however, current cohorts of gay and lesbian adults are faced with new challenges that older counterparts may have largely avoided, such as AIDS. The spread of AIDS may have led to different lifestyle choices, approaches to partnering, and may even have affected social support. Middle-age gay males have had fewer sexual partners than older gay males (Deenen, Gijis, & van Naerssen, 1994), and members of younger cohorts may have lost more friends and partners to AIDS compared to today's elders, so they may experience less social support as they grow older (Boxer, 1997).

#### **DATING AND NONMARITAL COHABITATION**

Although generally ignored by researchers, many unattached older adults are involved in intimate nonmarital relationships. This may be es-

pecially true for men, who date more in midlife and continue to date longer than women (K. A. Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991).

Companionship is the main incentive for older men and women who date. Yet, when asked about the rewards they derive from dating, men are more likely than women to note payoffs in intimacy and emotional support, and women identify status rewards (K. Bulcroft & O'Conner, 1986). Such differences may reflect the unique gender socialization of today's older cohorts, with men placing greater stock in women to fulfill their emotional needs (Babchuck, 1978) and women turning to men for instrumental support and social standing. In the future, what older men and women value about dating may be less distinct as their societal roles become less segregated. In addition, older adults might date more in the future because fewer of them will have experienced a single, long-term marriage for most of their lives. The greater diversity of relationship and marital experiences across adulthood may leave older persons feeling more comfortable with dating. Similarly, future elderly may be less likely than older persons today to have had only one sexual partner in their lifetime as a result of higher incidences of premarital sex, cohabitation, and divorce. Thus, older adults in the future may be more open to and comfortable with forming intimate sexual relationships. Increased recognition within society that older adults have sexual interests and can be sexually active also may contribute to such changes.

Nonmarital cohabitation also may be an increasingly common option for achieving intimacy among older adults in the future given that its prevalence in the general population has skyrocketed in the past 30 years. Unfortunately, empirical evidence on cohabitation among older adults is limited. Using data from the 1960 and 1990 censuses, Chevan (1996) estimated that in 1990 there were 407,000 cohabiters age 60 or older (about 2.4% of unmarried elders) in the United States compared to just 9,600 in 1960. However, estimates of cohabitation in later life require much more validation. The figures cited here are offered mostly to demonstrate growth in the phenomenon of later life cohabitation rather than to serve as valid estimates.

We have no research base on cohabiting unions in later life. Quite possibly, cohabiting in later life may be preferable to marriage for some older adults (and their families), especially if the elders have been married before and if offspring believe their own inheritance is safer if an elderly parent cohabits rather than remarries.

Despite relatively low rates of cohabitation for older adults today, chances are great that these numbers will climb in the future. Not only does the baby boom cohort have a history of cohabiting across adulthood,



rates also are notably high (11% currently cohabiting) for persons born 1931 to 1950, who were ages 40 to 59 in 1990 (Chevan, 1996). Cohabitation rates also are significantly higher among persons who have been previously married (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991).

### **FUTURE RESEARCH ON LATER LIFE RELATIONSHIPS**

We contend that relationship experiences and options for older adults will be increasingly diverse in the future. The aged population in the United States also will become considerably more diverse in terms of racial and ethnic make-up in the 21st century. These changes demand that research on later life intimacy and relationships move beyond examination of primarily White samples to attend more carefully to between-group variations. This altered focus should address how the quality of various later life relationship experiences may differ based on socio-demographic characteristics, developmental history, and life events. The life course perspective, emphasizing development across the life span and the cumulative effects of earlier life events on later experiences and well-being, can provide a particularly useful perspective for family scholars and gerontologists.

In studying older adults in partnered relationships, a few conceptual and methodological shifts will be necessary. One development that has characterized research on younger couples is increased use of methods other than or in addition to self-reports. Relationships scholars, for example, are increasingly employing observational methods to extend their understanding of couple dynamics. Yet, this approach is absent in work on older couples. More attention also should be directed to the study of dyads in later life, attending to the coordination of linked lives as life course scholars suggest. This need is evident in studying retirement decision making for partners who both are employed and coordinating physical care needs in older couples and families.

Regardless of whether older adults are partnered or alone, greater understanding of their well-being will come from considering their relationship careers across adulthood rather than focusing on their current status, as in most research. Length of marriage or cohabiting relationship is a potentially important variable in the study of remarriage and long-term marriages, yet research varies in applying the label *long-term* to marriages spanning from 20 years to 50 years and more (Alford-Cooper, 1998). The pattern of relationships—whether divorce or spousal death preceded re-

marriage or whether older adults are dealing with a first or higher order divorce—may shed insight into variations in adjustment. Although many critical variables can be assessed with retrospective methods (Scott, 1997), more longitudinal studies are needed (Huyck, 1995). Such designs lend themselves to assessing continuity and discontinuity over time (e.g., interaction patterns in long-term marriages and adjustment to divorce) as well as providing data to evaluate selection effects. This is important as researchers study the direction of effects between economic disadvantage and divorce and make policy and intervention suggestions.

In sum, the 21st century will present a wider variety of relationship situations for older adults as a result of sociohistorical changes in the past several decades. As gerontologists and family researchers attempt to conduct meaningful and relevant work, we must expand our thinking to include the new issues that are emerging as a result of these changes. Similarly, our methods will have to change to be more representative of the increasingly heterogeneous population of older adults and sensitive to their varied life course experiences that will likely contribute to their outcomes in late life.

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