



## Dating after late-life spousal loss: Does it compromise relationships with adult children?



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### ABSTRACT

In *Widowhood in an American City* (1973), Helena Lopata observed that widows struggle with new romantic relationships because their children often are resentful toward these new partners. Since the publication of Lopata's classic work, however, few studies have explored empirically the ways that widow(er)'s dating affects their relationships with children. We use prospective data from the Changing Lives of Older Couples study (CLOC) to explore: (1) the impact of bereaved spouses' dating on positive and negative aspects of parent–child relationships six and 18 months postloss; (2) the extent to which these associations are explained by preloss characteristics; and (3) the factors that moderate the association between widow(er) dating and parent–child relations. Multivariate analyses show that widowers who are interested in dating six months postloss report low levels of support and high levels of conflict with their children, yet widows report enhanced relationship quality. This pattern reflects the fact that men who are interested in dating do form new relationships, whereas women's interests are not translated into actual dating. Widowers' dating six months postloss compromises parent–child closeness among those with a history of strained parent–child relations, yet enhances closeness among those with historically good relationships. Dating takes a harsher toll on parent–daughter compared to parent–son relationships. Overall, dating threatens parent–child relationships in specific cases, yet it may also strengthen widow(er)'s parent–child bonds. We discuss the implications for the well-being of older widow(er)s and adult children.

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### Introduction

In her classic study *Widowhood in an American City*, Helena Lopata (1973) provided one of the first detailed portraits of recently bereaved older women, revealing the far-ranging effects of widowhood on older women's social, emotional, and economic well-being. One of her most provocative findings was the complex role of new romantic relationships in widows' lives; the benefits of companionship and physical affection often were counterbalanced by the strains created in parent–child relationships: “widows report that their offspring resent

any man who enters the house as a companion ... of the mother” (p. 100).

Since the publication of Lopata's seminal works, several contemporary qualitative studies found that adult children may disapprove of their recently bereaved fathers (Rushton, 2007; Van den Hoonaard, 2010) and mothers (Bonnar, 2004; Davidson, 2002) dating, at least in the months immediately following the death. However, we know of no systematic empirical analyses that explore the effect of bereaved spouses' dating on positive and negative aspects of parent–child relationships, whether the impact varies based on how soon after the death a widow(er) begins dating, whether these patterns reflect pre-existing familial strains, and which factors may moderate these associations.

Our study investigates three research questions: (1) to what extent are positive and negative aspects of parent–child

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relationships affected by the widowed parent's dating six and 18 months postloss; (2) are these associations accounted for by prior relationship quality, health, and sociodemographic factors; and (3) do the effects of dating vary based on the parent's gender, gender of children, and the quality of parent-child relations prior to loss? Understanding how older widow(er)s' new relationships affect intergenerational relations is an increasingly important concern. More than 40% of women and 14% of men ages 65 and older are currently widowed (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2010), and an estimated 85% to 90% have at least one living child (Koropecj-Cox & Call, 2007). Social norms promoting greater acceptance of later-life sexual behavior, and improvements in older adults' health and longevity today suggest that future cohorts of widowed older adults may increasingly seek out new romantic relationships, and may struggle to integrate these new relationships into their family lives (Fisher, 2010).

## Background

### *Dating among older widows and widowers*

Following the death of a spouse, older widows and widowers must adjust emotionally and practically to the loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Most older bereaved spouses report symptoms of depression, sadness, anxiety, and loneliness within the first six to 12 months postloss, although major depression is rare (e.g., Bonanno et al., 2002). Social engagement, whether time spent with family, friends, or formal social organizations, is considered a critical pathway to readjustment (Ha, Carr, Utz, & Nesse, 2006; Utz, Carr, Nesse, & Wortman, 2002). New romantic partnerships also may facilitate adjustment to loss; the desire for a new romantic relationship may signify that one has come to terms with the finality of a spouse's death, and may establish a new identity to offset the identity of widow or widower (DiGiulio, 1989).

Surprisingly little is known about the romantic lives of older widows and widowers, however. Demographic analyses show that men are significantly more likely than women to date and remarry following the loss of their spouse. One of the few population-based studies to focus specifically on dating estimated that 30% of widowers yet just 7% of widows ages 55 and older had dated in the past month (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991). This gender imbalance partly reflects a highly skewed sex ratio among older adults. Older women have relatively few viable partners, given that women outnumber men 3 to 2 among persons ages 65 and older, and by 3 to 1 among persons 85 and older (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2010). Gender-typed socialization, allocation of social roles in the home, and personal preferences also may account for the gender gap in dating behavior. Given the traditional division of household labor among cohorts born in the early 20th century, men may have a greater need for a helpmate and confidante than women (Cancian & Oliker, 2000). Women have more intimate friendships and closer social ties with their grown children (especially their daughters) because gender role socialization privileges communion and emotional intimacy among women; these strong social ties may lessen the need to find companionship in a romantic partner (Lopata, 1979, 1996).

### *Potential implications of dating for older widows and widowers*

Recent qualitative studies document the psychological, social, and interpersonal benefits of dating for older bereaved adults, yet they also reveal some of the concerns reported by widows, in particular. Open-ended interviews with widowed women reveal that they enjoy the companionship (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986; Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007), emotional and physical intimacy (Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Stevens, 2002), interesting discussions (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986; Stevens, 2002), and the feeling of being appreciated "as a woman" that may accompany dating (Watson & Stelle, 2011). However, several studies suggest that many older women do not see dating as a pathway to marriage, and instead enjoy dating for dating's sake (Watson & Stelle, 2011). As Davidson (2002: 51) observed, older widows want "someone to go out with" rather than "someone to come home to." Concerns about losing one's independence, becoming bored, having to care for an older ailing husband, or placing one's self at risk of exploitation also may dissuade older widows from seeking remarriage (Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Davidson, 2002; Lopata, 1996; Watson & Stelle, 2011). Qualitative studies suggest that widowers also desire emotional and physical intimacy with new romantic partners, yet they also seek out the instrumental support that their wives had provided, such as assistance with meals, homemaking and maintaining health regimens (Van den Hoonaard, 2010). One small-scale study noted that widowers may view dating as a form of "taking time off from grieving," and a step toward resuming a "normal" life (Riches & Dawson, 2000).

Quantitative studies based on larger samples also find evidence for the protective effects of dating on older widow(er)s' well-being. At the same time, they reveal potential sources of strain and distress. For example, one study of midlife adults found that widowed men who have remarried do not differ significantly from other married men with respect to a range of mental health outcomes including depression and alcohol use (Pudrovskaya & Carr, 2008; see also Schneider, Sledge, Shuchter, & Zisook, 1996). Similarly, widows who remarry report fewer concerns and stressors than widows who remain single (Gentry & Shulman, 1988). However, the protective effects of new romantic relationships are not universal and vary based on one's other personal relationships. For example, Carr (2004) found that among widowers with high levels of social and emotional support from friends and family, dating did not have an additional protective effect on their well-being. Emotional support from friends and children effectively replaced widowers' need for a new romantic relationship. Stressful familial relationships also may undermine the psychosocial benefits provided by new partnerships. For example, Gentry and Shulman (1988) found that remarriage created stress for widows who worried that their children and other family members disapproved of the union.

Although new romantic relationships following spousal death are generally a source of psychological well-being and social integration for older adults (especially men), mounting evidence suggests that widowed older adults who date – especially those who date "too soon" after the loss – may find their relationships with children to be strained (Moore & Stratton, 2001; Van den Hoonaard, 2010). Some evidence suggests that daughters may be particularly critical of their fathers' dating. In a study of relatively young widowers,

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