



# “Not a replacement”: Emotional experiences and practical consequences of Israeli second couplehood stepfamilies constructed in old age

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## ABSTRACT

The increase in life expectancy enhances phenomena such as second couplehood in old age following widowhood or divorce as an alternative way of coping with changes that occur with aging. Research on the phenomenon has focused mainly on individual and dyadic perspectives of the repartnered. The aim of this article was to explore repartnering from the stepfamily's perspective, which has scarcely been studied. Nineteen Israeli stepfamilies (38 multigenerational families) were recruited using criterion sampling, of men who repartnered at age 65+ and women at 60+, with children and grandchildren from a lifelong marriage that ended in widowhood or divorce. We audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim 107 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with older partners, their adult children, and grandchildren. Analysis was based on grounded theory and dyadic analysis principles adapted to families. It showed how repartnering in old age changed the family structure, constructing complex stepfamilies, which require further study. Emotional experiences refer to repartnering being a replacement for couplehood but not for parenthood/grandparenthood. Practical consequences refer to “knowing their place” within the stepfamily and included the following subthemes: showing affection; participating in memorials for the deceased spouse; sharing, listening, and assisting. Findings are discussed regarding life course and family life cycle perspectives.

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## Introduction

Second couplehood in old age is a relatively new phenomenon expected to broaden with the ongoing increase in life expectancy, social change, and expected acceptability of the phenomenon as part of active engagement and fulfillment in old age (Cruz, 2012; de Jong Gierveld, 2004).

The phenomenon described in this article refers to older Israeli partners, who enter such a relationship after termination of lifelong marital relationships due to widowhood or divorce, after their adult children have launched and have families of

their own, and after both partners have retired. Hence, second couplehood does not involve commitment to raising a family together, and occurs at the retirement stage of life that leads to a change in social status (Biggs, Phillipson, Money, & Leach, 2006). One result of retirement is having more time to spend with each other, and hence the second couplehood relationship is a means of dealing with possible loneliness (de Jong Gierveld, 2002).

Three forms of repartnering were identified in the literature; remarriage, cohabitation (Brown, Bulanda, & Lee, 2012), and living apart together (LAT) (Levin & Trost, 1999). LAT refers to couples who live in separate homes while perceived by themselves and by their social network as being in a couplehood relationship (Levin & Trost, 1999). It differs from the dating phenomenon in terms of commitment to the relationship and to each other.

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Cultural differences could be identified by the forms of repartnering emphasized in research in different countries. In the USA, the phenomenon relates mainly to remarriage and cohabitation. In 2010, only about 0.6% of all adults remarried when they were 65 or above (Cruz, 2012). In addition, approximately 4% of the unmarried population over 50 were cohabiting (Brown et al., 2012) and 14% of older unmarried individuals were in a dating romantic relationship (Brown & Shinohara, 2013). In Western Europe (de Jong Gierveld, 2004), Scandinavia (Levin & Trost, 1999), Britain (Davidson, 2002), and Israel (Koren, 2011), the phenomenon also includes and emphasizes living apart together (LAT) (Levin & Trost, 1999). The Survey on Living Arrangements and Social Networks in the Netherlands of adults aged 55 to 89 (N = 4494) showed that 21% had repartnered (de Jong Gierveld, 2004). In Israel, the percentage of older widowed persons is higher in comparison to older persons who are divorced. Although within the last 15 years, the percentage of divorced older persons has increased, the percentage of widowed has remained higher (see Table 1). The Central Bureau of Statistics (2012) data on married persons do not provide information on age at entering marriage or on whether the person is remarried or married for the first time. Neither is there any official information regarding repartnering in old age, whether married or not. However, from the present study and from previous studies conducted in Israel, the majority of persons who repartnered in old age did not remarry and those who remarried did so for religious reasons (Koren, 2014).

#### *Second couplehood in old age constructing stepfamilies*

As the phenomenon of second couplehood in old age is likely to influence the older partners' offspring, it can be considered to be constructing a type of stepfamily. The literature differentiates between stepfamilies and complex stepfamilies. Stepfamilies are defined as families in which one partner has a child from a previous relationship, who lives with the new couple (Coleman, Ganong, & Russell, 2013). Complex stepfamilies are defined as families in which both partners have children from previous relationships living with them (Visher, Visher, & Pasley, 2003). When complex stepfamilies are constructed in late adulthood (age 50 and above), the children do not necessarily live at home and might not even be in contact with the stepparent (Suanet, van der Pas, & van Tilburg, 2013). This is similar to when repartnering occurs in old age (65 and above). Therefore, the phenomenon of second couplehood in old age could also come under the category of complex stepfamilies. Although not necessarily residing with the new partner, offspring have to cope with a new non-biological family member. Therefore, issues relevant to complex stepfamilies might be significant for second couplehood stepfamilies constructed in old age.

Research has focused mainly on stepfamilies with young children (e.g. Sweeney, 2010). Research into late life stepfam-

ilies referred to stepfamilies that were constructed at earlier stages of the life course (Coleman et al., 2013), whereas research on stepfamilies constructed in old age is very scarce. Research on stepfamilies with young children explored common stressful situations such as families' acceptance of the partner, preparing children for the new family, creating a stepfamily without dealing with loss, and the new partner's place within the family (Coleman et al., 2013). Although potential differences could evolve due to constructing a stepfamily at different stages of the family life cycle, some of the issues mentioned regarding stepfamilies with young children might be relevant for stepfamilies constructed in old age.

#### *Relationships between stepparents and adult stepchildren*

Among adults who had entered a stepfamily when they were young children through the repartnering of one of their parents, a range of emotional reactions were found, such as happiness, excitement, and hope, but also a lack of love, anger, hostility, hate, stress, anxiety, confusion, and fear. Some of these adult children mentioned feelings of betrayal, abandonment, and pain. Others described events that helped them to feel like a family, such as family outings. Other issues, such as the new partner's presence at family funerals or graduation ceremonies, caused conflicts among family members (Metts et al., 2013).

The parent's remarriage ceremony was also found as a possible cause of negative emotions among children, defined as an "empty ritual" (Baxter et al., 2009). Some had not been invited to take part in the ceremony, and others perceived the remarriage as illegitimate and diminishing their parent's previous marriage. Rituals are an important component of family life and family identity, especially for older persons with a lifelong family history of intergenerational relationships. As such, stepfamilies need time to adjust (Connidis, 2001).

Adult children's perceptions of their stepparents are located on a continuum. Most do not perceive their stepparents as family or as parents, whereas others do (Schmeeckle, Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengtson, 2006). Stepparents are even less considered as parents or as part of the family when the stepparent's relationship with the biological parent is terminated (Noël-Miller, 2013). In addition, LAT parents were less likely to include their stepchildren as part of their family system in comparison to stepparents who had resided with their stepchildren in the past (Suanet et al., 2013).

#### *Relationships between adult stepgrandchildren and stepgrandparents*

Stepgrandparents were found to be a source of emotional and instrumental support and assistance, for example as babysitters, and as mediators in stepparent–stepchildren conflicts (Coleman et al., 2013). Shared family identity was related to relationship satisfaction between grandchildren and grandparents in both biological families and stepfamilies and also to parental encouragement and supportive communication (Soliz, 2007). Although research on grandparent–grandchild relationships in stepfamilies is scarce, such relationships are significant and should be further explored.

**Table 1**  
Marital status of the 65+ in 1996 and 2010 (Brodsky et al., 2012).

Year	Widowed	Divorced	Married	Never married	Sum
1996	37.1%	3.7%	56.5%	2.7%	100%
2010	30.3%	8.9%	57.5%	3.3%	100%

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