



Article

# The initiation and progression of late-life romantic relationships

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## Abstract

This research explores the initiation and progression of new late-life romantic relationships among older Australians (60 years plus). Our research found that older adult romantic relationships were meaningful, important and sexually intimate. However, few led to cohabitation or marriage, with these older adults preferring to date or to maintain separate households (living-apart-together, LAT). In line with Giddens' ideal of 'pure' relationships, our research indicates that older adults are looking for egalitarian relationships based on emotional and sexual equality, albeit not necessarily based on cohabitation or monogamy.

## Keywords

late-life romantic relationships, living-apart-together (LAT), older adults, online dating, pure relationships

Few studies exist which describe the initiation and progression of late-life romantic relationships. This is surprising, as it is likely that the dynamics of romance in later life differ from romance among younger adults (Bulcroft and Bulcroft, 1991: 246; Dickson et al., 2005). Previous research which has looked specifically at heterosexual older adults has largely described their sexual functioning rather than the meaning they give to their loving relationships (see Gott and Hinchliff, 2003: 1618). Much of the research has been

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quantitative and has largely centred on medical issues, such as decline in sexual activity over time (for example Lindau et al., 2007), although there have been some recent exceptions (see for instance Malta, 2008; Waite et al., 2009). Such research is usually conducted within the context of long-term marriage, rather than among single, dating older adults (Bulcroft and Bulcroft, 1991), who may, arguably, have different sexual profiles.

Although research into older adult romance has tended not to focus on new relationships, a large number of older adults are single. Australian statistics (ABS, 2006) indicate that more than one-third of those over 65 are not married. It is therefore reasonable to expect that older adults are initiating new relationships in later life. Our study aims to contribute to the literature on older adult romance by investigating new late-life relationships among a group of Australian older adults. We looked at what types of relationship these older adults were participating in and how the relationships progressed. We found that very few of the relationships led to cohabitation or marriage, with most older adults in our study preferring to date or live separately, even when their relationship was long-term and committed (Levin and Trost, 1999). Our research indicates that these older adults were looking for and finding relationships based on emotional and sexual equality but not necessarily based on cohabitation or monogamy. In the following sections we outline previous research on love and romance, and on the progression of older adult romantic relationships. We then discuss our research approach and report our findings.

## **Love and romance among older adults**

Social changes of the modern and post-modern periods 'have contributed to detaching people from traditional roles and obligations' (Lindsay and Dempsey, 2009: 62). Because society is no longer clearly structured by social institutions such as religion, gender and class, decisions about appropriate ways to live are now made at the individual level (see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995 for discussion) and, what is more, they have become a point of negotiation. This is undoubtedly the case for romantic love.

The introduction of oral contraception in the middle of the 20th century brought major changes to society. People were now free to express their sexuality without fear of conception. This subsequently led to a rise in personal autonomy (especially for women) and resulted in what Giddens has described as the democratization of sexuality (Giddens 1992: 182). With these changes, love and sexuality were no longer tied to marriage, which Giddens argues brought about a complete restructuring of intimate relationships (1992: 58). In the past, marriages were 'never ... based upon intimacy [or] emotional communication', and it is this intimate communication which Giddens argues provides the 'foundation' for the new 'couple' relationships (1999: [4]). Giddens termed these relationships as 'pure' relationships, based as they are on what he calls 'confluent' love (1992: 61).

For Giddens, today's pure relationship is based on a love that is contingent. Self-reflexivity is also important, as individuals think about what they want in a relationship and also what they bring to a relationship (Giddens, 1992). Such contingency and self-reflection suggests ongoing revision and renegotiation of what the relationship is and what it stands for. This notion of change, of adjustment, in contemporary relationships, is reflected in Giddens' premise that confluent love is 'not necessarily monogamous' and

therefore sexuality becomes yet another factor to be negotiated in the relationship (1992: 63). In such relationships, love is 'liquid' (Bauman, 2003) and sexuality itself becomes 'plastic' (Giddens, 1992: 2), meaning it is both changeable and also subject to negotiation (Jamieson, 1999).

This renegotiation involves personal growth, communication and change for the individuals involved and therefore, according to Giddens, the relationship is inherently unstable: unstable to such an extent that if it 'doesn't suit' or if it doesn't provide satisfaction, it can be terminated (1992: 58). Giddens cites the high rates of divorce and the corresponding increasing level of cohabitation as evidence for this view (1999: [3–4]). A US study adds empirical support to Giddens' arguments. It indicates that while less secure than so-called 'romantic love relationships', pure relationships are, nevertheless, happier, more autonomous and egalitarian (Gross and Simmons, 2002: 547–8). Older adults provide an interesting case to use to explore Giddens' ideas. Are older adults looking to participate in pure-type relationships? Do they find new relationships easy to initiate and/or leave when they no longer suit?

Giddens' view of contemporary relationships has been criticized as being unrealistic (Jamieson, 1999). What is missing from his account is an awareness of the reality of how little relationships have effectively changed – partly because of the ongoing prevalence of what is seen as 'gendered responsibilities' between couples (Jamieson, 1998: 140). Indeed, time-use and qualitative studies of domestic household labour indicate that gender inequality in relationships is remarkably persistent (see Carter, 2007 for an in-depth discussion). Furthermore, the work by Ghazanfaraon Karlsson and Borell (2002) indicates that in older adult, non-cohabiting relationships, the traditional labour division is still the norm, despite the maintenance of separate households. These studies serve to highlight that the democratization of intimate relationships which Giddens champions exists in theory but not necessarily in fact. As Jamieson contends, Giddens' narrative fails to make a distinction between how lives are *actually* lived and his view of 'how they *should* be lived' (1999: 480, emphasis added). That said, Giddens does acknowledge that the principles he espouses are, essentially, ideals and that 'most ordinary relationships don't come even close' (1999: [5]). Very few studies have tested Giddens' theory empirically (see Hughes, 2005 for further discussion).

Like Giddens, Bauman (2003), argues that romantic love has changed. In contrast to Giddens, however, Bauman's view of contemporary romantic relationships is far more pessimistic. He argues that, 'liquid modern life' (Bauman, 2005: 2) encourages a similar form of togetherness: that of virtual relationships which are 'loose and eminently revocable' (Bauman, 2003: 90). According to Bauman, today's society values being connected by belonging to networks rather than to individuals. This connection by, and as, networks encourages people to create ties and links that are very easily formed but just as easily broken. Consequently, we are no longer developing the skills that are necessary to foster and sustain long-term bonds. We are caught up in what Jacobs (2004: 127) describes as a 'commitment to transience', which has 'replaced the value of durability'. In Bauman's (2003: 49) view, individuals still want romantic relationships but do not want the responsibilities that being in them demands – they want relationships that can be easily disposed of when something better and brighter comes along. This argument is

very similar to the 'until further notice' aspect of Giddens' pure relationships (1992: 63), in which relationships last only as long as they provide benefit for those involved.

Under Bauman's consumerist scenario, love and sex become, in effect, just other objects that lend themselves to quick usage and equally quick disposal: *viz.* 'liquid love' (Bauman, 2003). Or, as put so succinctly by Blum in her critique of Bauman's treatise, 'in consumer culture, fucking and shopping are pretty much the same thing' (Blum, 2005: 339–40). Likewise Illouz (2007: 110) argues that emotions are now tied to and shaped by market forces. And internet dating, in particular, provides a prime example of the market at work and how people shape themselves to produce (and look for) an ideal product based on 'categories and cognitions' not 'senses' (Illouz, 2007: 104). While the internet effectively provides unparalleled access to others, she claims it removes the 'emotional and bodily resources' essential to conducting personal love relationships (Illouz, 2007: 111).

Subsequently, while Giddens finds much to be optimistic about with regard to pure relationships, for Bauman, like Illouz, the shift towards commodified love as facilitated by the internet is inherently bad for society (see Barraket and Henry-Waring, 2008, for discussion). Like Giddens, Bauman has also been critiqued, in particular for not offering empirical support for his theory (Smart, 2007). Bauman does raise questions for late-life relationships, however, which are of particular relevance to this study: were the older adults experiencing their new romances as disposable, with low entry and exit costs? Or were they looking for something more durable?

Neither of the portrayals of modern relationships by Giddens or Bauman accounts specifically for older adults. This is a significant omission given that there are many older adults potentially looking for and engaging in new late-life romantic relationships. Further, the numbers of older adults who are doing so are likely to increase given the anticipated growth in the older population (United Nations Population Division, 2003: 15). Current research in this area has thus far been extremely limited.

## The progression of older adult relationships

There is some evidence that older adults partner with a view to companionship and sexual activity (Bulcroft and Bulcroft, 1991; Dickson et al., 2005), but older adult relationships appear less likely to progress to cohabitation or marriage (Bulcroft and Bulcroft, 1991; Bulcroft and O'Connor-Roden, 1986a; Dickson et al., 2005), due to a desire to remain independent and – especially for the women – a desire to avoid the care-giving role (Borell and Ghazanfareon Karlsson, 2003; Bulcroft and O'Connor-Roden, 1986a; Dickson et al., 2005). For example, when asked why they had not married their partners, 46 per cent of unmarried women and 44 per cent of unmarried men in one study reported that they 'preferred things the way they are' and 43 per cent of women and 16 per cent of men said they could not marry because their partner was married to someone else (Brecher, 1983: 207). Other reasons for not marrying sexual partners included economic factors (not wishing to be responsible for each other's medical bills or not wishing to lose government benefits) and the desire to remain separate (Brecher, 1983: 207). An additional study found that very few couples provided ongoing instrumental support to each other in the way of housekeeping, health care and finances (Bulcroft and O'Connor,

1986b: 400). Although dated, these findings suggest that older adult romance is not necessarily organized around cohabitation and, further, that extramarital relationships are not uncommon, particularly for unmarried older women.

Overall, the research into dating and courtship in late life suggests there is a strong desire among older adults – especially women – to retain their independence and maintain separate lives from their romantic partners. The studies discussed above suggest that late-life couples want to maintain close, romantic and intimate relationships while living separately – a phenomenon which has since become known as living-apart-together (LAT) (Levin and Trost, 1999).

What distinguishes dating in late life from LAT relationships? Dating involves short-term, non-committed interactions, sexual or otherwise (see for instance Aleman, 2003), whereas LAT relationships involve longer-term, committed and, for the most part, sexually intimate relationships. Investigations into LAT relationships indicate that they are popular among older adults (de Jong Gierveld, 2002), particularly women (Borell and Ghazanfaraeon Karlsson, 2003), and suggest that senior couples may choose such partnerships for a variety of reasons, including an unwillingness to move away from one's home and belongings and to help maintain relationships with one's family (Levin, 2004).

There is limited data on older adult relationships or LAT relationships in Australia in any age group. One study suggested that nearly 16 per cent of adults over the age of 45 were involved in LAT relationships (Reimondos et al., 2009). The study found that older people were more likely to choose to live-apart-together than younger people, and were also more likely to have no intention to cohabit in the future, although the authors were not able to determine why that may be the case. The analysis suggested that fewer than 10 per cent of older adults (over 60) were in LAT relationships (Reimondos et al., 2009), and even fewer were cohabiting.

## Research questions

Together these findings from the literature provided the impetus for our research project investigating older adults' romantic relationships. In particular we asked: How do these new late-life relationships progress? Are they casual and short-term or long-term relationships leading to something more committed (marriage, cohabitation, LAT)? And what types of relationships are these Australian older adults engaged in? Do they reflect 'pure relationships' (Giddens, 1992)? Do older adults experience their relationships as having low entry and exit costs (Bauman, 2003)?

## Method

The exploratory nature of our research necessitated a qualitative approach, and we used semi-structured in-depth interviews to answer our research questions.<sup>1</sup> Such an approach produces data that are both rich and descriptive (Neuman, 2003). In-depth interviews allow people to convey their perspectives on their own particular situations – in other words, how *they* interpret what is happening (Kvale, 1996).

Forty-five Australian participants 60 years of age or older and either currently or recently involved in a romantic relationship that began in late life were interviewed.

Participants were recruited by a variety of means including through posts to RSVP.com.au<sup>®</sup>, articles written about the study in local newspapers and seniors' magazines, radio interviews and by word of mouth. The in-depth interviews were conducted by various means: online by instant messaging ( $n = 26$ ) or email ( $n = 4$ ), by phone ( $n = 5$ ) and face to face ( $n = 10$ ), with participants selecting their preferred interview mode (see Kazmer and Xie 2008). Interview schedules were adjusted to reflect the mode of interview. All interviews lasted between one and two hours, with the exception of the four email interviews. The phone and face-to-face interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. Instant messaging and email interviews generated their own transcripts. Transcripts were analysed thematically by means of 'analytic grids' (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 127–32).

To elaborate further, data analysis involved identifying themes based on the research questions. Further themes were identified as the process of analysing the transcripts continued. Once completed, each theme was transferred to its own grid and a further process of identifying sub-themes was undertaken. The analytic grids were printed out and re-checked for anomalies, exceptional examples and so on. Summaries were made of each theme and these were compared and contrasted against each other, in an effort to make sense of the data and as an aid to find the best way to disseminate the information gathered.

Because the study uses a convenience sample we cannot generalize the findings to a broader population of older adults. Advertising for participants online at dating websites might have skewed the sample in favour of participants who were actively 'still looking' for relationships, as opposed to those who had 'found' partners. This was not always the case however, as many online participants who were involved in ongoing relationships still maintained regular contact with dating websites and so still received notices from them. Furthermore, the individuals who participated in the study were those who were currently in or had recently been involved in a late-life romance and *wanted* to talk about their experiences. This means that the views of older adults engaged in long-term relationships or not involved in or uninterested in the subject of late-life romance, or sex, are unrepresented. Neuman has argued, nonetheless, that purposive, non-random sampling is an acceptable method for exploratory research, as it allows researchers to 'identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation' (2003: 213), based on their relevance to the topic being researched rather than their 'representativeness' per se (Neuman, 2003: 211). Consequently this type of research is useful as it can provide insight into older adults' experiences of their relationships.

All participants are referred to by a pseudonym followed by their age (for example: Mary 76). The age and gender characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1. Ages ranged from 60 to 92 years and the mean age was 67 years.

**Table 1.** Sample age by gender

	Men	Women	Total
N	21	24	45
Age (mean)	67.6	66.9	67.2
Age (median)	69.0	65.5	66.0
Age range	60–81	60–92	60–92

In terms of previous relationships, 30 participants were divorced or separated (three divorced twice; one divorced, remarried and then separated), 14 were widowed and one had never married or cohabited out of choice.

## Results

### *What types of romantic relationships were these older adults engaged in?*

While all participants desired long-term relationships, 20 reported only making short-term or casual connections; the other 25 developed long-term connections. Interestingly, those who were in long-term relationships were very unlikely to want to live with their partners, preferring instead to maintain separate households. In the following section we discuss the types of relationships these older adults entered into and how they were organized. We note here that two participants, both men, were involved in more than one relationship at the time of their interview. Despite being non-monogamous, both of them sought and engaged in long-term commitments.

*Casual and/or short-term.* In this study relationships that lasted less than 12 months were termed short-term or transitory. Many of our participants who went looking for new partners experienced such short-term and casual connections rather than the long-term connections they desired. In all cases, these relationships were sexually intimate.

The participants attributed the short-term nature of their connections to three main factors: First, the large numbers of people available through online dating sites made it possible to try out relationships before committing to them. Second, because all were seeking long-term relationships, if the people they met were not looking for long-term involvement, these connections were ended. Finally, some attributed the short-term nature of their relationships to a lack of flexibility on the part of their partners. Online dating emerges as an important part of the picture here as it facilitated new relationships, but also made them easy to exit. We discuss each factor in turn.

The first explanation for the transitory, short-term nature of the relationships was the large number of possible partners available through online dating. Participants reported that there were far more potential partners available online via dating websites than in their offline or real world social environments:

I was just moving through a divorce after 35+ years of marriage and determined I was not cut out to be single. I registered on RSVP after researching various sites. I was inundated with a dozen or so emails from a range of ladies before I could get my own emails out. (Nicholas 63)

This plethora of possible partners gave the participants chances to try out relationships before committing to them, meaning that they could leave partnerships that were not ideal as there were many other potential partners to pursue. For these participants the low entry and exit costs to online dating were an attraction. Such factors meant that the older adults could easily end relationships that did not suit them and just as easily look for ones that might.

Several of our participants commented that their relationships had been short-term because the people they had met were not interested in commitment. For example, Veronica was divorced and had been involved with a number of men through RSVP.com.au®. None of her relationships had lasted longer than two months, and she held the view that most of the men she met were not after ongoing, committed relationships, although she herself was looking for one:

[most are after] casual sex. if you say no, you never hear from them again, and if you have sex you don't see them again. one guy a week later tried to contact me again, he hadn't remembered that he'd already met me. he states in profile not after casual sex! [sic] (Veronica 60)

This quote shows that Veronica felt somewhat duped by the men she had met who were interested in sex but not commitment. She did not desire casual relationships but nevertheless found herself participating in them. As there are so many people available online, she continued to date, still hoping for a long-term connection. Other participants echoed Veronica's experiences.

The final reason our participants gave for the short-term nature of their relationships was a lack of flexibility on the part of their lovers. Neil had been involved in a number of romantic relationships, none of which had lasted longer than four to eight months. He described older women as lacking flexibility and used this as a reason for why his relationships had been short-lived:

Senior women are more fixed in their ways. They also carry a lot of baggage about power and control issues. Some have been badly abused in childhood and in their previous relationships/marriages – several women started out being loving and friendly but after a few months started getting bossy or angry – that's when I walk quietly away. (Neil 71)

For Neil, senior women were 'fixed in their ways' and, implicitly, so was he, making it difficult to come to a compatible situation. Kristen also attributed the demise of one of her short-term relationships to a lack of flexibility, which she described as selfishness:

The relationship carried on for a few months off and on.... I felt that he was very selfish and wanted me to fit in with the life he was planning; he wanted me to move and leave my family. (Kristen 66)

Although several found themselves in short-term relationships, none of our participants were seeking them. The three reasons given for failed relationships essentially all involved a lack of compatibility with a potential partner. Also, the large pool of potential partners available through dating websites meant that our participants were less likely to compromise in their search for a long-term partner.

*Long-term: marriage/cohabitation/LAT.* Of our 45 participants, 25 had initiated long-term romantic relationships as older adults (range 12 months–10 years; mean = 3.4 years). Interestingly, only six of these 25 relationships involved cohabitation or marriage (and two of these relationships had ended upon the death of the partner). None of the 19 remaining participants who were currently in long-term relationships were interested in



living with or marrying their partners. Moreover, none of the long-term relationships that had ended had taken such a form, indicating that cohabiting was very much the exception for our participants, the majority of whom elected to live-apart-together.

Evie was one of the few who did live with her partner, although they did not marry. She was introduced to her partner Len by a mutual friend at the local dance. Their relationship developed slowly over a 12 month period after which Len moved in to Evie's house. They eventually bought a unit where they lived as co-owners: "he paid half and I paid half... equal share". When asked if they had married, she said:

He wanted to marry me eventually ... and I said, no, I wouldn't be bothered now, you know. No that's a bit silly now, bothering at my age, bothering at his age. So I just said, no Len, we'll stay the way we are. (Evie 92)

Evie clearly indicated that she was not interested in marriage, even though Len may have been. Among our participants, the women in particular were reluctant to marry. This supports the earlier work by Borell and Ghazanfaraeon Karlsson (2003) who argue that women in particular, favour LAT-arrangements in their late-life partnerships. One who did marry was Ursula, but only because her partner insisted:

but I said ... 'Buy some house close to my house and we can see each other every day'. He said, 'no I don't want a friend, I want a wife' and we marry in 75 days. (Ursula 69)

Ursula's experience was very much the exception. Most of our participants did not wish to cohabit. When asked why they did not live with their partner, three themes emerged: (1) a desire to appease the concerns of children regarding inheritance issues, (2) a strong need for independence, and (3) a desire to maintain separate households and finances. Some of these themes overlapped.

The presence of adult children was important for many participants in the decisions about living together. Edwin had this to say about the attitude of some of his children to his partner of two years:

[The children] are hostile ... they won't talk. They won't have anything to do with her. They think she's just out to get what I've got ... what's left. So, no, we've decided we just go on with our separate lives ... (Edwin 81)

For Edwin, it was tremendously important that he and his partner appeased his children's concerns and also preserved their separateness by retaining separate households and separate financial arrangements. Despite this they spoke on the phone every day, stayed over at each other's houses at least three nights during the week and every weekend. In this manner they felt they were allaying any fears the children might have about losing any legacy that might come to them upon Edwin's death. For Edwin, being involved in an LAT arrangement rather than a marriage or cohabitation, helped him to preserve his family relationships (see Levin, 2004).

Others, like Abbie, had no such considerations about children or their inheritance. Abbie had, however, always strongly guarded her independence from her much older lover and continued to live in her own home, despite the relationship lasting for nine

years. She and her lover had never lived together and never intended to. She said they had never classed themselves as a 'couple' even though they were heavily involved in each other's lives. Although Abbie felt connected to her partner, the relationship was not the kind that involved instrumental support. These anecdotes provide support for previous research which showed that older women in particular resisted partnerships where they would have to provide care-giving (Borell and Ghazanfaraeeon Karlsson, 2003; Bulcroft and O'Connor-Roden, 1986a; Dickson et al., 2005).

Stewart was in the situation of having two partners at the one time – one for 18 years and the other for 22 months. For him, the possibility of marriage or cohabitation with either of them was not an option that he would ever have considered, even as a young man:

I had a feeling, a gut feeling, when I was very young you know ... that this marriage bit wasn't for me; and this living together bit wasn't for me at all.... [And] it suits Meg to have that level of independence and you know she loves her own house ... And Una ... is similar ... she's very independent, very career orientated. (Stewart 63)

Stewart's point about his partners valuing their separateness, their 'independence', was repeated throughout this research, particularly by female participants, who said they valued the freedom of not having to care for and look after a male partner, sometimes for the first time in their lives. As in previous research which showed that older female widows were reluctant to remarry because of a fear of being 'locked into traditional marriage roles' (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1991: 246; see also Brecher 1983; Bulcroft and O'Connor-Roden 1986a), these participants were careful not to put themselves in a position where they might have to relinquish their independence. One key strategy was to live separately.

The following quote from Neville illustrates all three themes: the desire to appease children, be independent and maintain separate households:

Well, there's separate families, separate dependencies ... oh not dependencies, the kids are independent. But [pause] I'm not keen to relinquish my house. I'm hard to live with because I'm not tidy [laughs] and that's a difficulty I think for most women. And so I can minimise those sorts of difficulties. But apart from that my grandchildren ... now live [nearby] and attend schools locally and come to me after school and my partner's grandchildren come to her. And so it doesn't disrupt any of their lives. It means that my own financial things remain confidential and [pause] I'm comfortable with this arrangement. (Neville 76)

Although our participants did not call their partnerships living-apart-together, the type of relationships they described certainly fit that term. These participants wanted commitment, companionship and sex, but they did not want to cohabit.

### *Late-life romances: pure relationships or something else?*

According to Giddens (1992), intimate communication forms the basis for today's pure relationships. Our findings indicate that this was the case for our participants who, for the most part, desired egalitarian relationships based on intimate communication and shared ideals.

Joyce expresses this in her discussion of what she was looking for in a partner:

The sort of man I want is an educated, well adjusted man who is capable of sharing an equal relationship where we can enjoy our like interests. (Joyce 66)

Here Joyce clearly expresses a desire for an egalitarian relationship based on shared ideals and values. This desire was also discussed by Dennis, providing some support for the idea that contemporary relationships among older adults are based on mutual satisfaction rather than on obligation or social institutions:

we appear to have similar values, politically, socially, emotionally and, importantly she was financially independent. (Dennis 60)

In seeking, and being attracted to, particular types of partners, our participants reported aiming for sexual and emotional equality in their relationships. Furthermore, that Dennis knows and is able to articulate his desire for someone with similar 'values' and so on, indicates a process of self-reflection which is highlighted as a key aspect of pure relationships (Giddens, 1992).

Veronica (60) had begun a number of short-term, casual relationships through RSVP.com.au<sup>®</sup>, although she was ultimately looking for a committed, long-term arrangement. She was looking for 'strength, security, companionship' and a 'best friend' who would then become a 'lover'. Veronica's desire for a 'best friend' who would then become a 'lover' underscores Giddens' (1992) idea of intimate communication as the foundation for the pure relationships.

Likewise, Amy's quote about the type of person she was looking for perhaps ideally illustrates the notion of democratic, emotionally and sexually equal relationships:

I think that I am looking more for companionship, shared values and a person with an equal intelligence to my own.... I definitely want recognition as a person, not as a stereotyped female ... (Amy 64)

For Betty, who met her romantic partner at a social venue where she was a regular, the relationship ended because it did not develop into a long-term commitment:

The problem was that we never really became a couple. That was why I ended it. It was a wild courtship on his part for two weeks and once we had been to bed together, he became more casual. What I said to him when I broke it off was that where I wanted a relationship, he only wanted an affair! (Betty 69)

This type of relationship epitomizes the pure relationship: it was based on intimate communication and egalitarianism, and it ended when it was no longer satisfying. Betty's desire for a relationship, not just an affair, indicates her expectation that a relationship should be ongoing and committed – not just casual sex. She was willing to try a new relationship out, providing some support for the idea that contemporary relationships have low entry and exit costs (Bauman, 2003), but what she really wanted was a long-term relationship, which, once achieved, would not be something she would want to leave.

Even though the participants in this study were looking for ongoing, long-term connections, not all of them were seeking monogamy, reflecting the notion of 'plastic sexuality' (Giddens, 1992). For example, Nigel (79) had been married twice before and was already involved in four concurrent relationships at the time he met his new partner. He said that although they were both looking for a 'steady' relationship, his partner had wanted an 'exclusive' one, and he had a problem with that. He said:

Today [people] have their relationships and sow their wild oats, and have all sorts of experiences before they're married. Most people in my vintage ... that didn't happen. Once I was free, I decided it was time that I started to catch up [laugh] and I certainly did [laugh]. (Nigel 79)

Although Nigel was very happy in his committed relationship, he relished his freedom and maintained contact with his other relationships. He said he was 'still attracted to other women' and that he and his partner would 'make a joke of it' but that at times it could be painful for her. Nevertheless, Nigel considered his relationship a 'partnership', albeit one that did not involve cohabiting or even exclusiveness, in effect, a non-monogamous LAT relationship. Like Stewart, despite having multiple partners, Nigel was interested in maintaining ongoing, stable connections; he was not interested in disposable relationships.

The above indicates that our participants were looking for companionship and intimacy on egalitarian terms. Unlike Bauman's (2003) description of liquid love as akin to brief episodes of affection which are then disposed of, our participants were looking for meaningful and lasting love. For those whose relationships were over, there was no indication that they had experienced the relationship as trivial. Nevertheless, relationships appeared to be easy to enter and also easy to exit, and this was especially so for those that were initiated online compared to those that were initiated face to face.

## Discussion and conclusion

It is clear from our findings that these older adults were looking for meaningful ongoing relationships which were egalitarian and based on shared intimacy, in other words, they desired the idea of the pure relationship. Like Stewart and Nigel and their non-monogamous arrangements, the relationships were negotiated but they did not appear disposable. In fact, all the older adults desired long-term, committed relationships; however, they were not willing to settle for something that was less than ideal. Dating services, in particular online dating, gave these older adults the means to be able to pursue this ideal by allowing them access to many more potential partners than would otherwise be available. In this manner, it appears that while Giddens' (1992) theory describes the type of relationship that these older adults were seeking, their relationships were not experienced as being disposable, as Bauman's (2003) theory would suggest. Giddens' argument that today's pure relationships are 'contingent' and not reliant on idealized, romantic love describes the relationships in our study, as our participants were interested in developing democratic, intellectually and sexually fulfilling partnerships, and were willing to move on when these relationships no longer suited their needs. Also in line with Giddens, the participants were reflexive in their approach to their new relationships, engaging in critical self-reflection about what they wanted and what they brought to the relationships.

Neither of these theories was able to account for the fact that the older adults in this study, despite their openness to ending relationships that were not working, were hoping for long-term, committed relationships, although not ones that were necessarily monogamous nor involved cohabitation. Our finding that the older adults in long-term relationships were likely to live-apart-together (LAT) supports the literature which indicates that older adult romance is not necessarily organized around cohabitation (Borell and Ghazanfareon Karlsson, 2003; Brecher, 1983; Bulcroft and Bulcroft, 1991; Bulcroft and O'Connor, 1986b; de Jong Gierveld, 2002; Dickson et al., 2005), and that older adult women in particular resist marriage (Borell and Ghazanfareon Karlsson, 2003; Dickson et al., 2005; Ghazanfareon Karlsson and Borell, 2002). Unlike Reimondos et al. (2009), who were unable to determine why older people were more likely to choose to LAT than younger people, we found that the specific contexts of older adulthood – particularly the need to maintain cordial relations with their children and to protect their inheritance, as well as the desire for independence and an unwillingness to undertake daily care activities for their partners – were key reasons why these older adults did not elect to either marry or cohabit. This finding suggests that it is very important to consider an individual's stage of life when trying to understand LAT relationships, as older adults have different considerations than those at earlier life stages.

This research provides a starting point for further research in the area of older adult love and sexuality in Australia and, particularly, the role and impact of the internet and online dating on late-life romantic relationships. Our research raises a number of questions that should be investigated: how do older adults negotiate new romantic relationships within the context of their families and friends? Are there qualitative differences between long-term relationships which begin as a consequence of one's daily interactions and those which are deliberately sought and if there are, what are they? We would also invite comparisons with other age groups.

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## Note

1. For a more detailed description of the interview methods used see Malta's chapter, 'Qualitative Interviewing of Older Adults using Online Methods', in *Researching Later Life and Ageing – Expanding Qualitative Research Agendas and Methods* (to be published by Palgrave, UK, in 2012).

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