

## **Symposium: Cohabitation at both sides of the Atlantic**

The Role of Children and Stepchildren in Divorced or Widowed Parents' Decision-Making about  
Cohabitation After Repartnering: A Qualitative Study

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Longevity and higher divorce rates trends have led to a growing number of older adults who repartner after a breakup or the death of a spouse. Divorced or widowed adults have lost an important source of social support and daily companionship but can and often do remedy this absence of a significant other by establishing a new romantic bond (Carr, 2004). Divorced and widowed men in particular report an interest in getting remarried or living together (Moorman, Booth, & Fingerman, 2006). Many older adults are successful in finding a new partner; some remarry, others cohabit, and some start Living-Apart-Together (LAT) relationships. Repartnering at an older age and living arrangements such as remarriage and cohabitation or LAT have already been the topic of ample research (e.g. De Jong Gierveld, 2002, 2004; Karlsson & Borell, 2002; Régnier-Loilier, Beaujouan, & Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2009). Studies have also been conducted on the role children and stepchildren might play in influencing their parents' decision whether to move in together (e.g., Graefe & Lichter, 1999; Goldscheider & Sassler, 2006), but

are still rather scarce, especially regarding middle-aged and older parents. This is unfortunate because parents remain parents for a lifetime and it seems more than likely that regardless of whether they still live at home, children play an important role in the decision-making about the new family constellation. Parents' lives are linked to those of their children and parents remain concerned about children's well-being. A parent's new relationship may threaten the children's well-being or decrease the contact with adult children or grandchildren, particularly if repartnering means merging households.

The current study intends to shed light on the decision-making process of repartnered parents to remarry and/or share a household with the new partner. In particular, the role of children and aspects of the intergenerational bond with children are taken into account. To examine the mechanisms behind certain choices, we use qualitative data collected in an in-depth study on repartnering that devotes special attention to changes in relationships with children and other kin. In this qualitative approach, interviews have been conducted with 52 divorced or widowed respondents involved in a new romantic partnership and either living together or living apart together.

## Method

### *Participants in the Qualitative Analysis*

The current study addresses the quality of family bonds of divorced or widowed adults above the age of 50 who are in new relationships. Inclusion criteria were as follows: divorced or widowed respondents above the age of 50 in Wave 2 of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS; Dykstra et al., 2012), who are either remarried, cohabiting or in a LAT relationship, and had two or more children at the start of their new relationship. A university-educated interviewer and the first author conducted the interviews in 2008/9 at the respondents' homes throughout the

Netherlands. The mean duration of the interviews was 60 to 90 minutes. About half the interviews were with adults who were cohabiting, and the other half with adults in LAT relationships. To shed more light on decision-making processes with regard to cohabitation, we decided to solely concentrate on data from those 19 respondents in cohabiting relationships.

### *Measures and Procedure Qualitative Analyses*

The open starting question was, “How did your children react when they learned about your new (current) partner?” The respondents had plenty of time to answer this question. If necessary, additional questions were formulated for clarification. The information was tape-recorded and transcribed to prepare the data for entry into the qualitative data system. The analysis procedure started with open coding of the interviews. This resulted in more than 30 different coding categories which were examined and compared for similarities and differences. The coding categories were combined into clusters of related categories, including one ordering all the coding categories from very positive to very negative. As expected, parent-child bonds over time are not stable, they are created and re-created, they get better and they deteriorate. Introducing life course elements – such as children’s marriages and associated needs and possibilities for broadening support for children and grandchildren – provided an opportunity to reassemble meaningful pieces of information (Elder, 1995). Coding schemes were revised and expanded as our interpretations and explanations progressed. The analysis was completed by formulating theoretical propositions around the interactional processes elicited, while data saturation was discussed between researchers.

### Results

The 19 respondents were asked to describe the bonds with their children at the moment when they were informed about the new partner. None of the respondents had difficulties in

answering this question. All of them were able and willing to speak extensively about the bonds with their children. Similar to the analysis of interviews with 25 LAT respondents (De Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013) we could distinguish among several patterns in the relationship of parents with their children: (a) positive comments by children; (b) neutral or indifferent comments about the current relationship; (c) predominantly negative comments and serious problems with own or the partner's children; (d) anticipation of problems and trying to prevent them.

### *Positive Comments by Children*

One of the remarried respondents, a divorced man now aged 72 years (34173) with two children at home, waited until both children had grown-up and had left the parental home before remarrying:

Then I pushed off. Yes, we married, we had planned to marry, and in marrying before my 65<sup>th</sup> birthday we could guarantee a widow pension for her. ....in case of ...

The children's reaction? Er.. I think they judged it positive, yes. But of course, ...er..it was also...oh well...One of them now does not show up, but my oldest son, he comes to visit us at least once a week. ..but both of them were glad to hear about the marriage, I think so yes.

For our wedding-day we said, we will pay for everything and you do the organizing of the day. And so my kids and her kids, they did it together, that was...er...they have tried hard enough.

This respondent explicitly mentioned the positive reactions of his children but later on was confronted with problems with one of the kids:

I don't know what happened between my [second, DJG] wife and my daughter, but nowadays, yes, they drifted apart to a certain extent...something happened...but I will wait and see,..er ..that will not be endlessly...

This statement shows the frailty of intergenerational relationships; many older adults are confronted with periods of warm relationships with children and periods characterized by problems.

### *Indifferent, Neutral or No Comments by Children*

Two of the remarried respondents fall in this category, although their experiences and interactions with the children are very diverse. One respondent, a man aged 72 years (1115) divorced his wife and lived alone for many years. During this period he was in ongoing contact with his children, helped them after their separation and divorce, offered them ski-holidays and so on. Later on he restarted contact with his divorced wife, and they started a LAT relationship for about seven years. Now they share the same household again. The children's reaction?

Yes, er... the views of our children: there is no point in going on, ... because if you allow the children to comment... (...) we always say, we are not yet senile. We do what we want...that has been made clear.. we as parents have our own responsibility, we keep tabs, no we are not yet demented... [he laughs], but you have to keep your freedom and they have to allow us our freedom...may be some people are afraid that children don't want to visit them... that's not the case here, definitely not...

The position of this respondent can be classified as an example of parents and children leading their own lives in a more or less harmonious way. Caring for one another if needed, being there in case of need, but offering freedom to follow and live their lives and not to comment.

The other respondent who belongs in this category, is a man, who divorced before the age of forty (52545). After divorce he returned to the house of his mother:

That did not work, my mother did not like the situation and I was convinced that the situation got worse and worse; but I did not think much of living alone either. I wanted to leave the parental home as soon as possible. After that I met a new wife. We shacked up together for about one and a half year and then we married. But since that I had not much contact with my kids, a weekend so now and then...and after the marriage with my second wife, it became less and less....the relationship disintegrated. Also because of the large distance...

In remarrying, this respondent experienced no problems with the children because the intergenerational bonds were already weak and later on became virtually nonexistent. As a consequence there was no discussion about the new partner relationship.

#### *Predominantly Negative Comments by Children*

With eight respondents directly and explicitly talking about the difficulties with their children in the period before and after remarriage, we have to speak of a non-negligible part of the remarried adults who faces serious troubles with the children and/or stepchildren. In an

earlier publication we differentiated the negative comments into three types (de Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013). Our current analysis showed that each of the three types is also recognizable in the narratives of the eight remarried respondents. In this section we present examples of each of the following types: (1) the pure boundary work type, most frequently observed in biological children who still live at home; (2) the *refusal* type, observed in (young) adult children who had left home; and (3) the *sabotage* type, most frequently observed in the children of the new partner, whose rejecting comments and behavior represent an effort to prevent intrusion of a new person into their family household.

*The pure boundary work type.* Four of the 19 respondents fall in this category, being confronted with behavior of their biological children trying to establish boundaries around the current family home. Children want to continue as much as possible the situation as it used to be before the death or departure of one of the parents. Being confronted with a stepparent is a very emotional experience for these children. The following statement is by a 64 year old widow (54310):

I became a widow at the end of my thirties. I lived alone with three teenage children: the oldest 18 years of age and the youngest 8 years. I have been down in the dumps and felt awfully lonely. However, I raised the children nicely, but continued to be very lonely. When the two oldest had left home, and only my daughter of then 18 years was at home, I was advised by my GP to use a dating agency to find a new partner. That worked out very well. I found a new partner, same religious background....I became very happy. But my daughter of 18 years. We talked with her, and talked and talked, but...er..she said it was ok, but....Look she was only 8 years when her father died. It was so difficult for her, difficult: another man... When my new partner came to drink a cup of coffee in my house, the atmosphere was always ruined, mordant.. that was tough to him while he tried to be nice and to ignore the bad behavior of my daughter. We, my daughter and I, we talked and talked, and she tried to convince me it is not because of J. (the new partner), he is a nice fellow, but...but... (...)...We waited and waited before remarrying. Recently, when J. and I started to co reside, my daughter accepted the situation and now, the relationship is fine again.

*The refusal type.* Children who already left the parental home continue to be involved in the lives of their parents; they sometimes show either verbally or via ostentatious behavior their disapproval of the parent's intentions to remarry. We present the example of a 66 year old,

divorced women (17838), who remarried when her daughter was about 16 years old. This daughter rebels against her, and firstly tried to push her mother to refrain from remarriage. Now, after the remarriage of her mother, the daughter and her husband have ended all contact:

And during all these years I have not seen my grandchildren. We have no grandchildren, so to say. We are grandparents without grandchildren... That is really bad, awful, and I don't see any light at the end of the dark tunnel.

This situation continues for more than 10 years now and this woman suffers from it.

My life lost its lustre. I was so upset, especially during the first years after the break-up with my daughter. But, later on it waned eventually.....

*The sabotage type.* The comments and behavior in this type are characteristic of a situation in which the children of the new partner are obstructive. This type of children's comments and behavior is mentioned by three out of the 19 respondents. A 69 year old remarried man (29611), with a son and daughter who already left the parental home, told us about the period directly after meeting his new partner and after remarriage:

The daughter of my second wife, she...she got totally crazy. This daughter is a kind of perfectionist and she could not make it...in the end it did not click between the three of us: my wife, her daughter and me. That makes me sad.

A man, who became a widower at a young age and remarried a young women living with her daughter of three (21647), illustrates in his narrative that not only teenage or young adult children, but also very young children might negatively affect the lives of a reconstituted couple.

The beginning of our relationship was painful and with difficulty. The small child lived with her mother and consequently lived together with her mother and me. Yes, she lived here. There was an arrangement concerning parental access: once in the fourteen days she was a weekend with him [JG: the daughter's biological father]. And then... yes...then her behaviour towards me during the first two days after that weekend ... you won't get anywhere with her. This was the result of...the grandparents... especially the ex-mother in law rubbed her nose in it.... But now it is over. When she was about ten, eleven. Yes...er...then she was old enough to see the reality, to see the situation as she experienced that every weekday her in our house, still different from what the other family pushed to let her belief.

Although (step)parent-child relationships were difficult, most repartnered parents wanted to continue the co-residence situation.

*Anticipating problems with (step)children.* Eight of the 19 remarried respondents mentioned spontaneously that they worked hard to counteract foreseen problems with (step)children. Below, we show some examples for strategies mentioned in this context, and pay attention to the details of successful and not successful strategies.

A male schoolteacher (4984), now aged 64 years, was confronted with the terminal illness of his wife and her death at the age of 31 years. They had two small children of two and four years old. The youngest child was temporarily in the house of a brother and the oldest one lived with neighbors. After a short period of time he met his new wife (also a schoolteacher) and not long after that they decided to marry. He urgently needed someone to care for the children and she raised the young children as their own kids.

Yes, the oldest one, four years of age,... We talked a lot how to tell and prepare her and especially grandma, so the mother of my first wife, she was a great many of times in our house , yes, we... she paid much attention and...er ...this daughter, she accepted the new situation rather quickly, oh yes. There was hardly any problem. And the youngest daughter of two, she lived with my brother and yes, .. she was of course very happy that... that the matter was united again. No, everything went rather smoothly actually. It was difficult for my family-in-law. It went so quickly, but my [second] wife she did a good job and she took good care of the family and the young children. We did not avoid contacts...but not .... And gradually everything changed for the better. I do understand that grandma had difficulties in accepting, but... er... that's life.

The strategy chosen to counteract problems with the children worked out well in this example with young children involved. The following example presents a divorced women, now aged 56 years (9522), who had met a new partner several years ago, when her son was thirteen years of age.

I: What was the reaction of your son?

R: Fine...er...as long as he [the new partner] should not act as father with him, and ...er...not to tell him what to do and not to do. I was his mother, and I had to tell..., it was me to say the word...and so M. should have nothing to say, should have no authority...But M. proved to be no father figure at all...they both behaved as friends, ....companionable...and they went for a holiday to London. Later on, at our marriage, M. asked my son to be his best man, as a kind of thank you...



A divorced man (18529), now 58 years of age, started a new partner relationship eight years ago. In the preparations for the remarriage, he and his wife were clear about the importance of their children's well-being

We, as a couple, we said very clearly to ourselves: If there is one, who does not like the idea of our being together, our remarrying .... anyone who did not think much of this undertaking, then we won't persist, we should not continue. It would be a pity for us, ...too bad, but.....listen, it could work as a tight corner, no.. you don't want your children to be in bad mess. But, my oldest son, 25 years of age at that moment, he was positive, very positive. Yes, very good, really fantastic [...]. My youngest son is mongoloid. He lived in my house until his 24<sup>th</sup> age. Now he comes home one Sunday every fourteen days. He can't talk, so, ...but I am convinced that he is happy...

In these examples of careful preparations for the new parental living arrangements, the outcomes are described as successful, and overall the relationships with children can be considered as positive and warm. This is not always the case. Careful preparations sometimes do not work out as hoped for. In the following examples, parent-child relationships deteriorated sooner or later, and in some cases even are broken down. It will not come as a surprise that parents confronted with such difficulties in the relationships with children are describing their situation as sad, as illustrated in the examples that follow. Firstly, the complex situation of a widow, now aged 59 years (57453), who intended to marry five years ago her new partner – a widower who she knew from the same church. At the moment of repartnering, her children were 17, 32 and 35 years of age.

In my perception my youngest daughter belongs to a different kind of 'generation', a generation I don't understand. Very difficult...a source of concern and worries. She turned me grey. And half a year after the death of my first husband she became pregnant of an unwanted child...and she was only 17, a nightmare for me. And in that period of time W. [R's new partner] started to visit me, and to talk to me...but I was not in for a new partner... We started too early, I should not have done that... given the circumstances. Given all this, we postponed marriage. Only three years later we married, although I did prefer a LAT relationship, but you see ... we are Christians.

My two oldest children, they wanted me to become happy again... they granted it me. Although my second daughter...er... she once said to me 'Mom, why are you doing this? Now, you have your freedom to decide, to do what you like, and why, why a new bond?' But she did understand and appreciated that there was someone new in my life who was thinking of me.

Before remarriage, I contacted all the children and grandchildren of my new partner....Visited them and congratulated them with the birth of their children and so on.... I try hard to continue to do so, but I have to

admit that the relationship with his children and grandchildren is far from optimal. These children are not interested at all in their father and also not in their father's second wife. And maybe he is less interested in his kids... All children of him ignored our wedding...

A divorced woman, aged 61, met a new partner 13 years ago (1972). Although they waited a long time before starting co-residence and marrying, the attitude of one of his sons is still negative and neither of his sons participated in the marriage ceremony:

From the beginning I said: I prefer to wait... to wait until my children leave home. So, we were just friends for many years. And the children did appreciate this and said: we have had a wonderful good time, everything was excellent, so, you know...and he showed my children his good attitude and behavior. So, for my children this new bond felt all right. They did appreciate that. After waiting so many years, and just before the planned day of our marriage, he had a stroke. So, since then he needs my help and support, but I can manage, and we can afford him to be at home and not in a nursing home.

But my husband had no contacts with his sons at that time. And it was me who have started writing letters to his children.... I don't know exactly what was behind this, I still don't know, but of course, at the moment of his divorce his sons were adolescents... In the meantime, one contact is repaired. With one of his sons, ... that is totally ok, he likes his father and they sit closely together... very good ... but the other son, he is at a distance, and so now and then he negatively comments on what his father is doing....

Apparently, he has never really come to terms with the divorce of his parents; he was in his teens at that time, when the father left his mother, so you don't know what happened exactly...

Postponement of marriage and other types of problem anticipating behavior from the parents' side are not always helpful. Sometimes, the negative comments and behavior of the children continue for years and years, making life of their parents sad and filled with sorrow.

### Discussion

The current study expands prior knowledge on the role of children and stepchildren in their divorced or widowed parent's decision-making about living arrangements after repartnering, especially if the parents are middle-aged or older adults. When parents get divorced or pass away, it can be a major negative life event in a child's life course. Their parents' divorce can be particularly disturbing for children since it means a partial loss of the affective tie with one parent and is often accompanied by changes at home, such as a decrease in the quality of the relationship with the other parent (Crowell, Treboux, & Brockmeyer, 2009) and other short and long-term negative effects (Riggio, 2004). (Adult) children might see a parent's new partner as a

threat to the fragile ties they have with their parents. Children and parents can differ significantly about seeing a newly constructed household as a family (Brown & Manning, 2009). Apparently, children sometimes engage in strong boundary work in an effort to prevent their parents from establishing a new composite household with a new partner and secure their own position in the household. Insecurity about the relationship with the custodial parent may be one reason for engaging in boundary work so as not to have to share the parent with a new partner on a daily basis. Parents, however, might want to share a home with a new partner to provide their children with a complete family and guarantee greater resources. At the same time, as is clear from the qualitative data, parents are aware of – or even anticipate – their children’s boundary work and sometimes refrain from sharing a home with a new partner to protect their children.

We hope we have made an interesting contribution to the understanding of aspects of the repartnering of divorced or widowed middle-aged and older adults by explicitly addressing the role of children and stepchildren. The use of qualitative interviews has been explorative but clearly demonstrates the central role children play in their parent’s decision-making.