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## Dating for Older Women: Experiences and Meanings of Dating in Later Life

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### Abstract

Research over the last 20 years has provided an increased understanding of intimate relationships in later life; however, dating in later life remains largely unexplored. The purpose of this study was to examine the meanings of dating for women in later life. In this study, dating was examined through semistructured, in-depth interviews with 14 women ages 64 to 77 who had all dated in later life. Themes that emerged from an interpretative phenomenological analysis included multiple meanings of dating in later life, how dating in later life compared to earlier points in life, and dating in the future.

### Keywords

dating; older women; reasons for dating; companionship; intimacy

## INTRODUCTION

It is nearing two decades since Bulcroft and Bulcroft (1991) pointed out the dearth of information available on dating in later life. Although some research has been conducted in this area since the early 1990s (e.g., see Dickson, Hughes, & Walker, 2005), these studies tend to examine factors that influence the likelihood of dating, such as health, enjoyment of independence, and lack of available partner. What is lacking in the area of later-life relationship research is an understanding of the meaning of dating. The purpose of this qualitative study is to enhance our understanding of how older women view and experience dating, including the meanings of dating, how dating compares to earlier points in their lives, and their desire to date in the future.

## BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

As recently as 2005, Dickson and others pointed out the lack of information on older adults and dating, and in *Family Ties and Aging* (Connidis, 2010), the author laments how little is known about the dating experiences of adults in later life. The available research on dating tends to focus on the experiences of adolescents and young adults (Dickson et al., 2005; McElhany, 1992). Research regarding dating in later life explores factors associated with the

likelihood to date (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991), the desire to date (Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Davidson, 2002; Dickson et al., 2005; Stevens, 2002), the reasons to date (Bulcroft & O'Conner, 1986; Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Cooney & Dunne, 2001; Dickson et al., 2005), and the impact of dating relationships on health and well-being (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991; Bulcroft & O'Conner, 1986; Carr, 2004).

### **Correlates of Dating**

In their groundbreaking examination of correlates of dating in later life, Bulcroft and Bulcroft (1991) found that the most significant factors related to the likelihood of dating were gender and age—women were less likely to date than were men, and people were less likely to date as age increased. Factors that increased the likelihood of older adults dating were driving ability, single-family residence, comparative health, and organizational participation. Specifically for women, health and mobility were the most significant predictors of dating.

### **Desire to Date**

One of the challenges when examining literature on dating in later life is that dating is often assumed to be a precursor to marriage and not a goal in and of itself. In Davidson's 2002 study, "new partnerships" largely meant remarriage. However, "twelve of the widows said they would like to have a male friend, especially if he had a car, for shopping and outings" (p. 57). It is important to note, that none of these women was pursuing this type of relationship because "they did not want to put themselves in a position where they might eventually be required to 'look after' a man" (p. 57). This friendship, or potential dating relationship, might put them in position of having "cross-gender 'obligations,'" which they did not want (p. 57).

Studies that have specifically investigated dating in later life have found that previously married women largely enjoyed the company of men but did not desire remarriage (Dickson et al., 2005). Previously married women wanted to remain independent and often viewed dating as a step toward losing this independence because men wanted marriage (Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Dickson et al., 2005). This potential, or fear, of being put in a position of being taken advantage of (Dickson et al., 2005), having to choose between a relationship and one's personal or financial independence (Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Dickson et al., 2005), or being put in the role of caregiver for an older man (Dickson et al., 2005) often made dating undesirable at this point in life.

### **Reasons for Dating**

Despite concerns and reservations about dating, some women view dating in later life as very enjoyable and beneficial. Even with the potential negatives and fears that accompany dating, some women in later life choose to date. Companionship is by far the most cited reason for dating in later life (Bulcroft & O'Conner, 1986; Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Cooney & Dunne, 2001; Dickson et al., 2005; Fisher & Montenegro, 2003; Stevens, 2002). Another reason for dating is the pursuit of physical affection. Physical affection is sometimes defined as sex, but is also ambiguously defined as affection or intimacy (Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Dickson et al., 2005; Stevens, 2002). Additional rationales for

dating include for mate selection (Bulcroft & O'Conner, 1986), for prestige or an enhanced sense of identity or esteem from peers (Bulcroft & O'Conner, 1986; Stevens, 2002), for social connection to reduce loneliness (Dickson et al., 2005), and as a sounding board or for advice (Bulcroft & O'Conner, 1986; Stevens, 2002).

### **Impact of Dating on Health and Well-Being**

One final area of investigation in regard to dating in later life is the connection with health and well-being. A “dating partner often assumes the roles of friend, confidant, lover, and caregiver” and has been found to serve “as a buffer against loneliness” (Bulcroft & O'Conner, 1986, p. 400). Given this previous finding, Bulcroft and Bulcroft (1991) hypothesized in a later study that dating would have positive implications for well-being, but the hypothesis was not supported in their research. In fact, they found that when other variables were controlled, dating had a negative effect on happiness and no effect on depression. Similarly, Carr (2004) found that individuals who desired a new relationship and were dating reported fewer symptoms of depression, but the differences were erased when socioeconomic resources were controlled.

## **RATIONALE AND PURPOSE**

Many researchers point out the need to explore dating in later life from the perspective of older individuals as opposed to making assumptions about their experiences based on what is known from other populations (e.g., Carr, 2004). It is also important to understand dating for individuals in later adulthood as demographic shifts in rates of marriage and divorce make dating in later life more likely (Cooney & Dunne, 2001). Understanding the formation of romantic relationships at this stage in life is valuable, but it is particularly vital to keep in mind the older individual's history of intimate relationships. While it is important to know what factors correlate with the likelihood to date and why people in later life date, a focus on the meanings of dating is critical in understanding the experiences of women who date in later life. The goals of this study are to increase our understanding of how women experience dating in later life, how their previous relationships provide context for their current goals and expectations, and how their desires for relationships may encourage dating in the future. These goals also include an understanding of what dating means to these women and if the meaning has changed over time due to changing life experiences and expectations for the future and for themselves.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

Study participants were recruited through word of mouth and flyers distributed by friends, family, and colleagues and posted at a retirement community in central Texas. Selection criteria included women between the ages of 65 and 80 who had dated in later life. Following a phone call or e-mail from a potential participant, the first author contacted the woman and explained the project and asked her if she would be willing to discuss her relationships and sexual experiences. Participants were informed that the interviews would last between 1 and a half to 2 hours, would be recorded, and that only the first author would

have access to those recordings and participants' identities. A follow-up letter, which provided preliminary interview questions, was sent to each participant prior to the interview so that each woman could give some thought to the topics prior to the face-to-face interview.

Participants in this study were 14 White, middle-class, heterosexual women who ranged in age from 64 to 77. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned. The sample consisted of 8 remarried women and 6 currently single women, all of whom had dated in later life. Of the 8 remarried women, 2 had experienced divorce (Martha and Karen), and 1 of these 2 women (Karen), as well as the other 6, were widows (2 were widowed twice). Three were in their third marriages (Sara, Sally, and Karen), and 5 were married for the second time (Virginia, Anne, Martha, Carol, and Mary). Time spent single prior to current remarriage ranged from 6 months to 17 years. At the time of the interview, the length of current marriage ranged from 6 weeks to 5 years.

Six of the women interviewed were currently single. Two were widowed (Anita and Fran), one was divorced (Peggy), one was twice divorced (Pam), one was widowed from her first marriage and divorced from her second marriage (Sue), and one woman's first marriage ended in divorce while her second ended in widowhood (Betty). At the time of the interview, the length of time they had been single ranged from 4 years to 21 years. Prior to the interview, Betty, Anita, and Peggy had been involved in long-term, exclusive dating relationships. Betty had recently broken up with her partner at the time of the interview, Anita's partner had died 3 years prior to her interview, and the man Peggy had dated for 8 years had died from cancer 4 and half years previously.

## Procedures

Semistructured interviews were conducted by the first author in a conversational, flexible manner, allowing respondents the opportunity to introduce their own topics of interest and to provide their insider's perspective. The open-ended interview addressed intimate relationships in later life, including dating experiences. Interviews were conducted in either the participant's home or a place of her choosing. Consent forms were completed prior to the beginning of the interviews. Respondents' participation was voluntary, and they were not compensated for their time.

## Analyses

Transcribed interviews were analyzed according to the methods of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Osborn, 1997; Smith & Osborn, 2003). This approach was chosen because of the attention it gives to individual meanings while also drawing tentative conclusions across interviews, thus tapping more broadly into the phenomena of study. The procedures of IPA entail many successive steps in abstracting themes from specific content, first for each individual, and then across individuals. For a more in-depth description of the analysis process, see Watson, Bell, and Stelle (2010).

## RESULTS

Understanding the meaning of dating in later life involves examining the experience of each woman as she navigates her personal process of dating. Dating is discussed in relation to the

women's (a) multiple meanings of dating in later life, (b) how dating in later life compared to earlier points in the life course—both in the type of partner they were seeking as well as how they view themselves, and (c) dating in the future.

### Multiple Meanings of Dating

Dating had many meanings for these women. For some women, dating meant a pathway to remarriage, while for others, dating meant companionship and having fun without that level of commitment. Dating was seen as an opportunity for physical intimacy with varying meanings for intimacy. It also meant having to confront fears, whether those fears stemmed from not having dated in a long time or from having heard negative stories from other women who had dated. Lastly, dating was viewed as a potential enhancement to already full and content lives.

**Remarriage**—For four of the women, dating meant a precursor to remarriage. Two remarried women (Mary and Karen) said they had been interested in dating for the purpose of remarriage, and in fact, were not particularly interested in dating if marriage was not a probable outcome. Two of the single women—Sue and Betty—dated with the goal of remarriage, or if remarriage was not the result, a committed companion. Sue was not uncomfortable being single, and she had not dated much in the past 5 years. However, she missed having physical contact with a partner, having someone with whom she could do things, and the support that a partner would bring. Betty also missed having a partner and talked about her loneliness and desire for a companion. She wanted to find another partner like her second husband, but believed that the chances of this happening were doubtful. Therefore, marriage was unlikely, but she struggled with being alone and wanted a companion with whom to share her life. These four were not particularly interested in dating to date; dating to them meant finding a long-term, committed partner, and preferably marriage.

**Companionship and fun**—For the other women, dating did not mean a pathway to remarriage. In large part, dating entailed companionship and having fun. An acknowledgement that this is a couple-oriented world brought with it a desire to have a male partner with whom to have dinner out, go to movies, and to talk. As illustrated by Peggy, it was nice having a male companion with whom to do things. Peggy: “I’ve dated a lot of nice guys. . . . It’s fun. . . . It’s nice to have somebody to go out with. It really is.”

Included in the desire for companionship and having fun was the belief that dating meant something different than participating in activities with other women. This was, in part, motivated by wanting to be appreciated as a woman. For Carol, it was an opportunity to spend time with a man and to be appreciated as her own person again. “I found it very exciting. I found it very exciting to be a person again rather than a wife, a widow, a mother. . . . To be singled out as a person I found to be exhilarating” (Carol).

Another aspect of this meaning centered on the enjoyment of the company and conversation of men. As expressed by Martha, men’s conversational topics were different than the topics pursued by women, and some of these women desired the type of conversation that they experienced only with men. Martha: “I enjoy the connection with a man. So, I don’t go out

chasing men, but I really don't like to sit around and talk recipes and babies and that kind of thing with women. . . . The things that I enjoy, the computers and the investments and those kinds of things, are things that I enjoy talking with men (about)." There was often recognition, not that they did not enjoy spending time with other women, but that spending time with men was different, and that dating allowed for different types of activities and conversation.

**Physical intimacy**—Dating also meant physical intimacy. The definition of physical intimacy, however, spanned the continuum from holding hands to sexual intercourse. Because they were single when dating and were all brought up with the belief that sex belongs within marriage, they struggled with thinking about sex outside of marriage. In later life, eight of the women—six who are remarried and two currently single—still espoused the belief that sex outside marriage was wrong. However, Anita, one of the women who strongly held this belief, had sex with her most recent boyfriend, and she regretted this decision. Because these women believed that sexual intercourse belonged only within marriage, dating was not for sex. However, dating did mean physical connection in the form of holding hands, hugging, and kissing.

The other six women—four single and two remarried—have changed in their beliefs regarding premarital intercourse over time as a result of their own life experiences. Dating did not necessarily mean sexual intercourse for these six women, but they were/are open to the possibility. Pam was not interested in sex at this point in her life, although she did say that she might consider it within the context of a committed relationship. For Fran, the idea of sexual intimacy with a man again did not seem realistic. She occasionally missed sex and thought that if she met a man she liked, it might be possible for her to enjoy sex again. She did not, however, think it would happen for her, and she was not worried or concerned if it did not. For Sue and Betty, the two single women who spoke of considering remarriage, both said they would consider sex outside marriage if there was "chemistry." For Betty, her most recent dating relationship included an unsatisfying sexual component, but she still had sexual desires and might consider sex again with the right partner. Sue admitted that her ideas concerning sexual intimacy have changed with age. Within a long-term, loving relationship, Sue would enjoy an affectionate, sexual relationship. Sue would not have allowed herself to engage in this behavior when she was younger.

Martha and Karen, both remarried, also talked of having changed their attitudes about sex as they aged. Both of these women lived with their current husbands prior to remarriage, something neither would have considered when younger. Both are also surprised at how much they are enjoying the sexual component of their relationships, something that is different from previous relationships they have had as well.

**Facing fears**—Dating also meant facing fears. The fears often centered on being taken advantage of—emotionally, financially, and/or sexually. Because it had been quite a while since some had dated during adolescence or early adulthood, they spoke of feeling naïve about entering this strange, new world. They had heard horror stories from their friends about negative dating experiences. Almost every woman interviewed had heard a story either from a friend about herself or about someone they knew who had been exploited by a



dating partner. Exploitation involved having money stolen, being pressured for sex, and being left feeling foolish after a relationship thought to be long-term turned out to be temporary. These women felt wary about putting themselves in a position of being vulnerable to this type of hurt. As Virginia expressed: “I just had heard nightmare stories about people dating . . . as widows or single women . . . you know . . . I just had heard nightmare stories, I guess. Just, I don’t know, I just didn’t want to date. . . . I just didn’t want to go through the dating game.” To be willing to date meant facing these fears and exposing oneself to potential hurt.

**Openness to possibilities**—Lastly, dating meant being open to possibilities, the notion of being content with life *as is*, but being open to the possibility that dating might also bring enjoyment to life—dating might enhance a good life. These were women who had constructed lives with which they were content. They had friends and family and were busy with activities. However, this attitude led to two different sets of conclusions.

For one group of women, there was a strongly expressed outlook that life was good, but that did not mean that they would not also enjoy dating. Fran, for example said, “If I met somebody that I liked that we could date, then I might date him, but I’m certainly not going out looking, and they’re not around, so I’m not meeting them and that’s okay. That’s all right. I’m satisfied with the way my life is.” Both women who had remarried (Martha, Carol, Karen, Mary) as well as women who remained single (Peggy, Fran, Pam, Sue, Anita) expressed a contentment with their lives, but were open to the possibility of dating. For them, dating could be thought of as an enhancement to life. These women did not want to spend time with a man just to spend time with a man. Even when they were interested in dating, they were not interested in dating just anyone. “I am not that desperate” was a chorus repeated time and again. Sally: “I thought if a good one came along, then I would be open to it, but not just anything with anybody.” There were concerns of being bored on a date or being forced to talk about things in which they had no interest. They were not willing to do those things just for the sake of having a date.

There were, on the other hand, women who expressed a satisfaction with their lives and were not open to dating or its possibilities. For them, there was a sense of “been there, done that” for both dating and marriage. They had structured lives that were content, and they had no desire to change that either by dating or marriage. This lack of a desire for remarriage was a barrier to dating for some of the women because dating was assumed to be a step toward marriage. For these women, no desire for marriage meant a lack of a desire to date, and contentment with life served as a barrier to both.

### Compared to Earlier Points in Life

Dating in later life is in some ways different from when they were younger. They feel older and wiser now. Even if they have apprehensions about dating, they now know what they want in a dating partner and are not willing to compromise. They have very full lives and are not desperate for a companion. These women know the type of person with whom they enjoy spending time, and they know how they want to be treated. This is different from when they were adolescents and young adults in part because they feel that they know

themselves better now. Very few of them have dated in later life to find a marriage partner. Therefore, dating someone who will be a good provider or a good father to their children, or someone with whom they can build a life are goals they had as young women. These are not their goals now. Finding a man who is interesting with whom they can go out and have fun and from whom they can be treated with kindness and respect are the goals voiced in these interviews. When describing the type of man she would be interested in dating, Peggy said, "I would like somebody clean cut and nice looking . . . and likes to have fun . . . and is congenial . . . who likes to just go ride around and look at flowers . . . go look at bluebonnets, go to a ballgame, go to a movie, just an all-around person, just an all-around good guy." Having fun with a companion is often the goal as expressed by Anita: ". . . to go to a movie, go to a dance and or out to eat and then say good night at the door." Different goals in life now and different identities for themselves as older women lead to different meanings for dating than at earlier points in their lives.

### Dating in the Future

The six single women, even those who enjoy dating, are now accepting if they do not date in the future. Peggy summarizes this idea when she speaks of enjoying dating (although she prefers the terms "companion" or "friend" to "date"). She enjoys having someone with whom she can do things. However, she is not lonely, she "doesn't need a man to be happy," and she "can entertain (her)self." Except for Betty who continues to struggle with being alone, a sense of contentment with life provides a background that allows these women to enjoy dating, desire dating if the right man comes along, but to be content and satisfied with themselves and with their lives if they do not date in the future.

Along with contentment with the lives they had established was a satisfaction with or enjoyment of their independence. Whether divorced or widowed, some of the women had worked hard to establish their identities as independent women and had learned to do tasks on their own since becoming single again. They did not want to give up their independence through remarriage or even dating. Pam expressed it in this way, "I think of it (dating) fondly, but it's not something I want to do again. I think in my, as I've aged, um, I'm too independent now. It's almost like thinking of that in that it would be very intrusive into my life, you know, it would take up too much of my time. I'm too selfish now. I'm talking about dating with different men and all that. That would be big. That would be stressful."

For Peggy, Pam, Anita, and Fran, the goal of dating was to have fun. Peggy and Anita both said they would consider a long-term relationship with a man, but not marriage. These four single women had enjoyed dating in the past and would be interested in dating again, but they emphasized being satisfied with their lives, enjoyed living alone, and they did not need to date because of loneliness.

## DISCUSSION

Dating had a multitude of meanings for women in later life. For a few of the women in this study, dating meant a pathway to remarriage, but most dated for companionship, which was widely supported in previous research (Bulcroft & O'Conner, 1986; Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Cooney & Dunne, 2001; Dickson et al., 2005; Fisher & Montenegro, 2003; Stevens,



2002). These women acknowledged that they live in a couple-oriented world and by dating, they could participate in couple activities like dancing, which many of them enjoyed. Dating, for most of these women, was to have fun—to have someone with whom to go out to dinner, to go to the movies, to dress up for, and to talk to. Dating was viewed as a different experience than doing things with other women (Dickson, et al., 2005). Dating meant being seen as a woman—not a widow or a grandmother, but to be appreciated as feminine and attractive. Dating also had the potential for different types of conversation, talking about things that typically other women might not talk about, such as computers. Even if engaged in similar activities, dating meant a different type of experience when participating in an activity with a man as opposed to another woman.

Dating provided the opportunity for physical connection (Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Dickson et al., 2005; Stevens, 2002). Intimacy was a complicated term. For some of the women, intimacy implied hugging and kissing. For some, intimacy was sexual intercourse. The women in this study were positioned at all points along the physical intimacy continuum of what they were looking for in a dating partner. No one said that she dated explicitly for the purpose of sex. However, a number of women said they were open to the possibility of a sexual relationship with the right man. For some women, this differed from earlier points in their lives when they would not have considered sex outside of marriage as an appropriate option. The role of physical intimacy within the dating relationship underscores the considerable heterogeneity of these women's experiences.

Another dating issue that was different in later life than at earlier stages in life was what one considered important in a dating partner. When they were younger, these women looked at the potential of a man as a long-term partner, as a father for their children, and as someone with whom they could build a life. In keeping with their current goals, only a few of the women were dating with the purpose of finding a marriage partner (Dickson et al., 2005). Because of their current goals, they were interested in finding men whose company they enjoyed, men who treated them with respect, and men who enjoyed doing the things they enjoyed.

In order to date, many of the women had to confront their fears. Dating had the potential for fun and for physical intimacy, but there was also the fear of being taken advantage of, which can be found in prior research (Dickson et al., 2005). An additional fear that these women spoke of was the fear of being bored. After divorce or widowhood, they had developed identities as women who were content with their lives. They had structured lives that were full of hobbies, family, and friends, and they did not want to go out with a man just to have something to do. They were not desperate, depressed, or lonely, and in large part, were not dating to fill a void (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991; Carr, 2004). Dating, for most, provided opportunities to enjoy the company of men, to be treated as special, and to engage in activities as part of a couple.

As reported in other research (Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Davidson, 2002; Dickson et al., 2005), one of the striking barriers to dating was that, for the most part, these women did not want to give up their independence, which they often feared intimate involvement with a male partner would include. Interestingly, the women in the study who had remarried spoke

of finding a resolution of *interdependence* where independence had not been sacrificed (Watson et al., 2010). However, single women continued to guard their independence and were concerned that too much involvement with a man might threaten their independence. In some ways, dating was seen as a step towards marriage, not as a separate activity. For those women who did not want to remarry, often because of their strong independence or their contentment with their lives, this lack of a desire to remarry was a barrier to dating.

However, in looking toward dating in the future, the currently single women were still open to the possibilities that dating might bring. It might be nice to have a male companion with whom to have dinner, for example, but these women had female friends and family with whom to have dinner and do other activities. The experience would be a different one if done with a male partner, and it was fun when that opportunity arose, but these women saw themselves as content and independent and not lonely or desperate. Dating was seen as an enhancement to life—if it happens, that would be nice; if it does not, life is nice as it already is.

### Limitations

One of the major limitations of this study is the small, homogeneous sample. To understand women's experiences of dating in later life, women representing diverse backgrounds are needed as participants. Because some of the women were divorced, some were widowed, and some were both, the sample was very diverse in this respect. However, in an article that included all statuses, some of the individual nuances may have been overshadowed as similarities between all of the women were stressed, perhaps to the exclusion of some of the unique differences of one or more of the groups.

### Future Research

Future research would benefit from purposefully interviewing single women who are divorced and dating in later life, as very little information is known about their experiences. A larger sample of single women would allow a richer investigation of the range of options that "single" may encompass. For example, one individual may be single but casually dating multiple partners, whereas another individual may be single but involved in a LAT relationship or Living Apart Together (e.g., Karlsson & Borell, 2002). Both of these individuals would be defined as single and dating, but their experiences of dating could potentially be very different. Lastly, future research might examine online dating, as it has become more of a popular tool for meeting potential dating partners for individuals of all ages. Exploring this approach for women in later life could provide interesting information in not only what women are looking for in a dating partner at this stage in life, but also how they are presenting themselves in exploring issues of identity for women. While this study has aimed to provide us with information on the meanings of dating for older women, there remain a number of issues to explore in order to fully understand the changing nature and meaning of women's experiences of dating in later life.

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