

The interweaving of repartnered older adults' lives with their children and siblings

JENNY DE JONG GIERVELD* and ANNEMARIE PEETERS†

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the consequences of repartnering upon the social embeddedness of older adults' lives. The starting hypotheses, that repartnering is a stressful life event and is incompletely institutionalised, are examined using the NESTOR longitudinal survey data from The Netherlands on 4,449 respondents aged 55–89 years, together with in-depth interviews of 46 adults aged 50 or more years who had repartnered in later life. The results indicate that more repartnered older adults choose unmarried cohabitation and to 'live apart together' than remarriage. It was also found that when two partners come together, while not surprisingly their social networks become larger than those of separated older adults who do not enter a new relationship, less positively the quality of the subjects' relationships with their children was negatively affected. The older adults who opted for unmarried cohabitation and 'living apart together' relationships tended to have the weakest bonds with their children, principally for reasons associated with stress and (financial) insecurity.

KEY WORDS – older adults, new partner relationships, remarriage, consensual unions, living apart together, social networks, kin bonds.

Introduction

The transition from marriage to widowhood is commonplace in later life, particularly at the oldest ages, while the likelihood of spouse bereavement is much higher for older women than older men. Moreover, a growing but still small number of people experience divorce after 55 years of age (Cooney 1993), and throughout the western world parents and adult children are less and less willing to co-reside. The combined effect of these phenomena is

* Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Wassenaar, and Department of Sociology and Social Gerontology, Vrije University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

† Department of Sociology and Social Gerontology, Vrije University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

that an increasing number of older adults live in single-person households (de Jong Gierveld 2001). Living alone means that companionship, solidarity, assistance and care have to come from outside the household. Living alone therefore increases the need to create and maintain a supportive network of family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues and others.

Rossi and Rossi (1990) and Kaufman and Uhlenberg (1998) have shown that gender plays a central role in inter-generational relationships, and research findings have consistently shown that older divorcees, particularly men, are more socially isolated than their widowed counterparts who live alone. This difference is related to whether or not the divorced father was (or is) the custodial parent, whether alimony payments were made on time or created problems, and to the amount of care that was invested in the child before the divorce (Aquilino 1994; Cooney and Kurz 1996; Cooney and Uhlenberg 1990; DeGarmo and Kitson 1996; Dykstra 1998; Keith 1986; Strain and Payne 1992; Uhlenberg 1994; White 1994).

Older widows, widowers and divorcees in good health are developing innovative life strategies to cope with the challenges of living alone for an ever-extending later life (Giddens 1991; Baltes and Carstensen 1996). One strategy is to broaden their network of relationships. Johnson and Catalano (1981) showed that unmarried childless older adults used 'anticipatory socialisation' to raise the potential for support, should dependency or illness occur. They widened their social networks of friends, to increase the possible sources of help from non-family sources, while preserving their life-long independence. Other older adults try to achieve the same outcome by starting a new partner relationship (Ganong *et al.* 1998). Living together as a couple is the arrangement that is most likely to alleviate loneliness and to prolong independent living, in the sense of not requiring the care or support of a formal carer. Normally a spouse can and if needed will provide (long-term) emotional as well as instrumental support. Nearly all older husbands rely on their spouses for this support (Kendig *et al.* 1999; Peters and Liefbroer 1997; Stoller and Cutler 1992). Spouses are proximate or 'on hand', have long-term commitment, and have similar interests and values to underpin this type of support (Dykstra 1993).

The attitudes of the latest cohorts of older people towards repartnering have however been influenced by changing values. Individualisation and secularisation are prominent among the factors that are encouraging the replacement of traditional by innovative biographies and living arrangements. The result is that remarriage is declining, and an increasing number of older adults choose either flexible partner relationships, such as unmarried cohabitation (Chevan 1996), or to continue to live alone. Recent evidence from The Netherlands (de Jong Gierveld and Peeters 2002) and Germany (Schlemmer 1995) shows that an increasing number of older

adults who start new partner relationships have opted for 'live apart together' (LAT) arrangements, in which the coupled individuals retain their own separate homes and one-person households, but from time to time live together. Older widows, widowers and divorcees have several motivations and reasons for avoiding both remarriage and the formation of a single household, including: the strong desire to make independent decisions about their day-to-day activities (de Jong Gierveld *in press*), the desire to continue living in their own private homes, concerns about practical problems should they wish to part (Kravdal 1999), and the concern not to lose or reduce a pension (de Jong Gierveld and Peeters 2002). On the other hand, the desire to share time with a partner, to avoid loneliness, and to be comforted through mutual solidarity, is leading more and more to enter a LAT relationship.

People who choose variously remarriage, unmarried cohabitation and LAT relationships do so for different reasons. Those who remarry tend to emphasise the importance of traditional values, while those who enter consensual unions tend to believe that traditional values are no longer important and that people should be free to choose other options. The reasons given by men and women for their LAT relationships include the maintenance of their independence and the accommodation of incompatibilities in their characters and personalities (Borell and Karlsson 2001; Davidson 2001; de Jong Gierveld 2000; Stevens *in press*). When selecting a living arrangement after repartnering, another important consideration for all older adults is that of the financial consequences. Savings in living costs can be realised by remarriage, cohabitation or LAT, but there are also financial risks (Chevan 1996; de Jong Gierveld and Peeters 2002; Schlemmer 1995).

Few people aged 55 or more years who start a new partner relationship enter a step-family household in which a child or children of one or both partners co-reside. There are nonetheless effects on their adult children (although there is very little research into parent-child relationships in these circumstances). Bengtson (2001) urged that the focus of family research be broadened to include the effects of 'co-survivorship between generations' (Goldscheider 1990), and drew attention explicitly to the possibility that an increasing number of grandparents provide support and promote wellbeing, cross-generational solidarity and family continuity. Grandparents are important 'role models' in the socialisation of grandchildren: it is not known, however, whether they still act as 'role models' when they start a new relationship. Do children refrain from contacts with repartnered grandparents, especially those in extra-marital or LAT relationships?

This article focuses on the social embeddedness of adults who have experienced the end of one marriage and late life repartnering. Several

research questions are addressed, beginning with the consequences of repartnering on the size of the social networks and, more specifically, the included number and frequency of weekly contacts with children, children-in-law, siblings and siblings-in-law. The networks of repartnered older adults will be compared with those in first marriages and those who continue to live alone after widowhood or divorce. The second set of research questions are about the factors that influence network size and the frequency of contacts with adult children and siblings among repartnered older people. Those who have divorced have seen their social networks disrupted. Widowhood, too, changes the network size and composition of those involved. Contacts with new friends may have partially or more than fully compensated. The new partnership again changes the social networks of both partners.

Mechanisms affecting social embeddedness after repartnering

Repartnering at older ages creates diverse new marital and extra-marital families and complicated household patterns. Additionally, repartnering may create complex new types of relationships within the extended family, and challenge its members to readjust to the new situation created by the new partner relationship. The readjustment process might be affected by two disturbing or confusing mechanisms. First, the repartnering may be a stressful event for both partners (Henry and Lovelace 1995), because many changes have to be faced, such as moving to a new home and adapting to new household rules. One of the NESTOR survey respondents involved in the in-depth interviewing phase¹ expressed the situation in the following way:

The bond between us has become stronger in recent years because she has come to terms with the fact that I have children and grandchildren. [silence] My oldest daughter ... isn't much younger than my partner is. So that's a bit of a strange situation. (Man, 63 years old, remarried)

Stress is also salient in the following comments of one of the interviewees who recounted the decision to opt for a LAT relationship rather than a full-time shared living arrangement:

After a period of living alone, you have fixed habits. ... It is difficult to adjust. ... If you are very old, you are a whole person, and it is difficult to change your habits (and) since we both have a life behind us ... it's much more difficult than starting a relationship from scratch. ... He is an authoritarian type of person: he is always trying to determine what I should do. (Woman, 71 years, living apart together)

Repartnered older adults require time and energy to ‘invest’ in each other, which might result in their having less time for their children and grandchildren (Spitze and Logan 1992; White 1992). Secondly, as Cherlin’s (1978) *incomplete institutionalisation* hypothesis suggests, there is an absence of an accepted code of behaviour for repartnered couples and their relatives (see also Coleman, Ganong and Fine 2000). People who start a new partner relationship at an older age are confronted with a lack of social norms and guidelines regarding their role and how to deal with common problems in everyday family life. Older partners may be unsure about how to relate to married stepchildren and their families, even though they are part and parcel of the relationship with the new partner. One of the respondents said:

My children always respected him and were always very good to him. My partner, however, couldn’t get along with my children. When they were gone, he would always talk negatively about them. He found the grandchildren too noisy, and told me time and again that they didn’t have good manners. My children never did anything right, in his eyes. They did their best to put him at ease, but he found everything too much. (Woman, 75 years old, remarried)

From the children’s point of view, one has to take into account that the repartnering of a parent may profoundly affect their world. The child might feel distressed when someone takes the special place of the deceased father or mother. This might lead to ambiguous feelings. Two interviewees’ accounts indicated the difficulties:

My children do not accept him and his children do not accept me, because I’m taking the place of their biological mother and he is taking the place of their biological father. It’s not going very well at all between him and my children. The two sets of children are also unable to get on with each other. In the very beginning, they came by now and then, but later on they didn’t come at all. I haven’t seen them for such a long time. I never should have started this relationship. (Woman, 68 years old, unmarried cohabitation)

My children accept him and our relationship: they see him as their own father. But his children do not accept me: they didn’t even come to our wedding. (Woman, 67 years old, remarried)

The last quotation was by a woman who wasn’t happy at all because there was a lot of tension between the two partners: she cried while she told her story. Of course, we should also consider the children’s perspectives, for they might be delighted that their parent – after the period of learning to accept the loss of their partner – has found a new partner and avenue to wellbeing:

And her children are fantastic to me. It’s as if they were my own sons. (Man, 71 years old, unmarried cohabitation)

A neglected aspect of the reaction of adult children towards their parent and a new partner is the resentment associated with the use of the family home by the new partner, and uncertainty about the future situation. Will the family property and the house owned by the father or mother end up in the hands of the new partner? And what about the inheritance? These concerns are manifest in the following exchange:

Interviewer: What was the most important reason for you not to remarry?

Respondent: Who wants to get married at this age? But it's different...

Partner: There is another, different, reason: I am a widow and I've got a house of my own. If I remarry I have to pay the children their share of the inheritance ... so that's the reason for not marrying.

Interviewer: Financial and inheritance matters?

Respondent: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: If you married, the children would inherit?

Respondent: Yes, then I would be obliged to ... when I remarry, I'm obliged to pay the children. (Man, 67 years old, unmarried cohabitation)

Such uncertainties are particularly likely when older couples form a new sharing household. By contrast, when older parents enter a LAT relationship, as the following two quotations show, the arrangement is clearer and more favourable for both partners' adult children, partly because the households, personal belongings and control of personal finances, remain separate.

I want to stay independent ... an important consideration is that I only have one daughter (and a bit of money), and my partner has more children (and no money). A marriage would soon give rise to a lot of problems. I would rather give my money to my own daughter and grandchildren. (Man, 85 years old, living apart together)

No [we are not married] ... well, I don't think it's necessary nowadays. And I have children and he doesn't; and so nothing has to be arranged. (Woman, 79 years old, unmarried cohabitation)

New partner relationships that are not institutionalised but based on companionship, particularly those entered into after a divorce, may compel others in the respective families to decide whether or not they regard the new partner as a relative (Cherlin 1978). The obligations they perceive towards an older *de facto* step-relative may differ from those they perceive towards the equivalent 'authorised' relatives. As Lopata (1996) noted, intimate but legally unrecognised relationships are not acknowledged in funeral preparations or rituals. Repartnered older people in certain types of step-family may have less close-knit social networks than older adults in first

marriages or who live alone after widowhood, particularly when the repartnering was preceded by divorce (White 1994).

Hypotheses about the social network consequences of repartnering

Older adults who start a new partner relationship bring together two sets of social networks and may deeply affect the relationships with their established close relatives, particularly their children. Such effects may be strongest among those who enter non-standard living arrangements. This paper specifically addresses the following hypotheses about the social network consequences:

- H₁: The total network size of repartnered older adults is larger than the networks of their peers who live alone, and similar to that of older adults in first marriages.
- H₂: Repartnered older adults in certain types of step-families have less close-knit partial networks of children and children-in-law, and less frequent contacts with them than older parents in their first marriage or who live alone.
- H₃: Repartnered older adults in certain types of step-families have less close-knit partial networks of siblings and siblings-in-law, and less frequent contacts with them than older adults in their first marriage or who live alone.
- H₄: Repartnered older adults in consensual unions or LAT relationships have weaker partial networks of children and children-in-law, and less frequent contacts with them than older remarried parents.
- H₅: Repartnered older adults in consensual unions or LAT relationships have weaker partial networks of siblings and siblings-in-law, and less frequent contacts with them than older remarried adults.

Design and methodology

The data are from *The Netherlands Living Arrangements and Social Networks Survey* (NESTOR) (Knipscheer *et al.* 1995). In 1992, face-to-face interviews were conducted among 4,494 men and women aged 55–89 years. Names and addresses were sampled from the population registers of 11 municipalities, including the City of Amsterdam, two rural communities in the west of the country, one city and four rural communities in the northeast, and one city and two rural communities in the south. The response rate was 62 per cent, and the mean age of the sample was 72.8 years. The sample is representative

of the elderly population of The Netherlands (Broese van Groenou *et al.* 1995). For the analysis reported in this paper, we selected the 3,737 respondents with complete information on the size and composition of their social networks, and then those who had experienced the dissolution of a marriage and had started a new partner relationship at age 50 or more years. Of the total of 173 eligible respondents, 69 (40 %) had remarried, 48 (28 %) lived in consensual unions, and 56 (32 %) had entered a LAT relationship. Comparison groups were also defined as the respondents who were still in their first marriage ($N = 2,160$), and those living in a one-person household following widowhood or divorce ($N = 1,209$). Altogether, 3,542 respondents were included in the analyses.

Measures

Partner status and partner history. Based on the life history principle, respondents were asked to provide details about the start, continuation, and dissolution of partner relationships, including remarriage, unmarried cohabitation and LAT relationships. A network member was categorised as a partner if the respondent explicitly accepted the designation.

Social network size. This attribute is one of the most important influences on the degree to which people socialise, and is also an indicator of potential instrumental and emotional support. To delineate the social network, respondents were asked to specify the names of the people with whom they were 'in touch regularly' and who were 'important' to them. Network size was measured by the number of names given. Respondents provided information about the presence of children, children-in-law, grandchildren, siblings, siblings-in-law, other relatives, friends, colleagues, neighbours, members of organisations and other acquaintances. For details of the methodology for the delineation of the network, see van Tilburg (1995).

The *partial networks of children* are also examined in the analyses reported here. The number of children in the network is expected to be an indicator of the most intimate relationships outside the partner relationship, and of the availability of instrumental support if the need arises (Seeman and Berkman 1988). Moreover, children and parents belong to the same safety net, the 'latent matrix' of social support. Latent support, in the form of children providing care, may be activated during crises in the lives of their parents (Eggebeen and Davey 1998; Kaufman and Uhlenberg 1998). It is women who tend to act as 'social secretaries', with men stepping in mostly in the absence of daughters and daughters-in-law (Lopata 1996). So, when investigating the frequency of contact between older repartnered parents and their adult children, contacts with both children and children-in-law have been examined. To determine the frequency of contact, respondents

were asked: 'How often are you in touch with him/her?' The question was administered variously by face-to-face interviews, by telephone, or in writing (by post), and the answers ranged from 'never' to 'daily'.

Another partial network that will be examined is the *network of siblings*. The importance of this network is that it connects older people with others that share the same family and social backgrounds. Their common framework of relevant norms and values creates a meaningful context of shared opinions that might be important in crisis situations and in times of need, and frequently provides older adults with valuable emotional support (Seeman and Berkman 1988).

Health was assessed through indicators of ability in the instrumental and personal activities of daily living. Respondents were asked to what extent they could still walk up and down the stairs, walk outdoors for five minutes, stand up from and sit down in a chair, and dress and undress. Answer categories for each item ran from 'not at all' to 'without difficulty'. In this paper we dichotomised the reported replies between 'no difficulties' and 'one or more difficulties'.

The remaining sections of the paper follow the sequence of topics in our analyses. The size and characteristics of the subjects' overall social networks are first described, and then the partial or sub-networks of children (in-law) and siblings (in-law) are examined. Multiple Classification Analyses were conducted to examine whether the frequency of contact with either children or siblings was associated with: (a) the current living arrangement, (b) partner history, and (c) the number of children and siblings alive. Sex, year of birth and the health status of the older adults were included in the analyses.

Results

Total network size

The overall mean size of the repartnered older people's social networks was 13.8 members, and Table 1 shows variations by the living arrangement and other characteristics of interest. When we compare people in different living arrangements, we see that there is a wide variation in the mean size. Older men and women in a first marriage were found to have the largest mean network sizes (15.1). Repartnered older adults have smaller networks sizes, and these vary by the living arrangement: those who remarried or were living apart together had networks with 13.7 members, and cohabitants 11.6. Older adults living in one-person households after widowhood or divorce had the smallest networks, with a mean of 11.4 members. Even allowing for the absence of a partner, the discrepancy is remarkable.

TABLE I. *Social networks of older people in The Netherlands, by marriage and partner status and living arrangement, 1992*

Attribute	Sample size	Size of the social network			Weekly contacts	
		Total	Children and (in-laws)	Siblings and (in-laws)	Children and (in-laws)	Siblings and (in-laws)
<i>Living arrangement</i>						
First marriage	2,160	15.1	4.2	2.9	3.1	0.8
Remarried:						
– Remarriage	69	13.7	4.0	2.6	2.3	0.4
– Unmarried cohab ¹	48	11.6	3.9	2.0	1.8	0.4
– LAT	56	13.7	3.1	1.5	1.8	0.5
Single after wid/dv ²	1,209	11.4	3.8	1.8	2.7	0.6
<i>Sex</i>						
Male	1,720	13.9	4.1	2.5	2.9	0.7
Female	1,812	13.6	4.0	2.5	1.9	0.8
<i>Age group (years)</i>						
75+	1,605	11.9	4.0	1.7	2.6	0.5
65–74	982	14.2	4.2	2.9	3.1	0.9
55–64	955	16.4	4.0	3.4	3.2	1.0
<i>Number of children alive</i>						
0	327	10.8	0.3	2.0	0.2	0.8
1 or 2	1,376	12.8	2.7	2.4	2.1	0.7
3 or 4	1,155	14.7	4.8	2.6	3.5	0.7
5 or more	668	15.6	7.3	2.5	4.7	0.7
<i>Number of siblings alive</i>						
0	543	11.8	3.6	0.9	2.5	0.2
1 or 2	1,408	13.1	3.8	1.9	2.7	0.6
3 or 4	840	14.5	4.3	3.0	3.2	1.0
5 or more	748	15.5	4.5	4.0	3.4	1.1
<i>Divorced</i>						
No	3,326	14.0	4.1	2.5	3.0	0.8
Yes	217	10.3	2.7	1.4	1.6	0.5
<i>Health status</i>						
1 or more problems	1,290	12.0	3.8	1.9	2.7	0.6
No problems	2,238	14.8	4.2	2.8	3.0	0.8
<i>Total sample</i>	3,542	13.8	4.0	2.5	2.9	0.8

Source: The Netherlands 'Living Arrangements and Social Networks of Older Adults' (NESTOR) survey, 1992. See Knipscheer *et al.* 1995, and Broese van Groenou *et al.* 1995.

Notes: 1. Unmarried co-habitation. 2. Living alone after widowhood or a divorce.

Bivariate analyses showed that networks were larger among younger respondents, those who had more children and siblings alive, those who had never been divorced, and those in good health. All these differences were statistically significant (data not presented) and, after controlling for all these factors, it was still found that the living arrangement was significantly related to network size. Remarried older adults and those in a LAT relationship tend to have networks that resemble but are somewhat larger

than the networks of adults in first marriages. Those cohabiting after widowhood or divorce lagged behind, and older adults who were living alone after widowhood or divorce had the smallest network sizes. So, being repartnered at a late age was found to go hand-in-hand with a relatively large network of relationships for two of the three groups of repartnered older adults. The data support Hypothesis 1 for remarried older adults and those in a LAT relationship.

The partial network of children and children-in-law

There were differences in the mean number of children alive by living arrangement. Widowed older adults and those in their first marriage had respectively on average 3.1 and 3.0 living children, as compared to 2.6 among those living alone after divorce, and 3.3 among those who had remarried and were living as couples. Older adults who had started non-traditional types of partner relationships were unlikely to have larger families (the unmarried who were cohabiting or LAT had 2.6 living children). Among older adults with at least one child alive, only a small percentage appeared to be isolated from their children, for just three per cent did not mention children in their network. This percentage was however significantly higher among repartnered adults (9%) and among those living alone after divorce (9%). The low percentage characterised those in first marriages (3%) and those living alone after widowhood (2%).

The average number of children identified in the social network was 2.7, and the mean number of children-in-law was 1.3, giving a total of 4.0. Differences in the size of the partial network of children and children-in-law were associated with the number of children alive and partner history (particularly ever being divorced). The Multiple Classification Analysis reveals that significant differences in the size of the partial network of children and children-in-law associated with number of children alive, being ever divorced, and health status. On the other hand, differences by sex, age group and living arrangements were statistically insignificant (Table 2).

The mean number of children and/or children-in-law with whom respondents had at least weekly contact was 2.9 (Table 1). Of the older adults in first marriages, 74 per cent had two or more children with whom they interacted at least weekly. The equivalent percentages were 64 for divorcees, widows and widowers living alone, and 53 (significantly lower) for the repartnered. Multiple Classification Analysis shows that the number of children and children-in-law contacted at least weekly was lowest among the oldest age group, those who had fewer than two children alive, those who had ever been divorced, and those who had repartnered at a late age

TABLE 2. *Differential social networks with children and siblings of older people by marital status, living arrangement and personal characteristics, The Netherlands, 1992*

	Mean deviation in size of social network				Mean deviation in weekly contacts			
	Children and children-in-law		Siblings and siblings-in-law		Children and children-in-law		Siblings and siblings-in-law	
	Dev'tn ^a	Beta	Dev'tn ^b	Beta	Dev'tn ^c	Beta	Dev'tn ^d	Beta
<i>Living arrangement</i>		0.04		0.06**		0.04'		0.03
First marriage	0.06		0.09		0.04		0.02	
Repartnered:								
– Remarriage	0.06		0.94		–0.31		–0.20	
– Unmarried cohab	0.49		0.25		–0.51		–0.16	
– LAT	–0.26		–0.69		–0.52		–0.17	
Single after wid/div	–0.12		–0.20		–0.02		–0.00	
<i>Sex</i>		0.00		0.02		0.01		0.04*
Male	–0.01		–0.06		–0.03		–0.06	
Female	0.01		0.06		0.03		0.06	
<i>Age groups (years)</i>		0.01		0.13***		0.10***		0.09***
75+	–0.00		–0.45		–0.26		–0.14	
65–74	0.02		0.22		0.11		0.09	
55–64	–0.02		0.53		0.33		0.15	
<i>Number of children alive</i>		0.65***		0.02		0.51***		0.04
0	–3.66		–0.12		–2.58		0.17	
1 or 2	–1.31		0.02		–0.76		0.00	
3 or 4	0.73		0.06		0.58		–0.02	
5 or more	3.21		–0.08		1.82		–0.05	
<i>Number of siblings alive</i>		0.02		0.26***		0.04'		0.18***
0	–0.02		–1.26		–0.07		–0.44	
1 or 2	–0.06		–0.48		–0.10		–0.13	
3 or 4	0.13		0.46		0.12		0.23	
5 or more	–0.02		1.28		0.10		0.31	
<i>Ever-divorced</i>		0.07***		0.09***		0.10***		0.04*
No	0.05		0.07		0.06		0.02	
Yes	–0.81		–1.10		–0.91		–0.24	
<i>Health status</i>		0.04**		0.05**		0.02		0.02
1 or more problems	–0.16		–0.21		–0.06		–0.04	
No problems	0.09		0.12		0.03		0.02	
R ²		0.04		0.13		0.30		0.06

Notes: a, b, c, d: Deviations from the means for the kin group, adjusted for the other independent variables in Multiple Classification Analyses. The respective means are: a (4.0); b (2.5); c (2.9) and d (0.8). Significance levels: ' p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Source: As for Table 1.

(Table 2). The repartnered scored significantly lower in the number of children and children-in-law contacted weekly (2.6 for the remarried, 2.4 for LAT and cohabitants), as compared to those in first marriages (2.9) and those living alone after widowhood or divorce (2.9). Hypothesis 2 is supported in that weekly contacts between repartnered older parents and children were fewer than those of people in first marriages or who lived alone. As expected, and in line with Hypothesis 4, older adults in consensual unions or LAT relationships had fewer weekly contacts with their children and children-in-law than the remarried, and many fewer than those in first marriages or the formerly married who lived alone, although the differences were of weak statistical significance ($p < 0.1$). Another Multiple Classification Analysis investigated the effect of the separation distance from the parent to the nearest child. As expected, travel time was found to be significantly related to the number of children with whom respondents had weekly contact, and contacts were more frequent with children living within 30 minutes travel time (data not presented).

The partial network of siblings and siblings-in-law

The mean number of siblings and siblings-in-law identified in the social network was 2.5, and varied from 2.9 for older adults in a first marriage, to 1.5 for those in a LAT relationship (Table 1). Multiple Classification Analysis shows that after controlling for the effects of number of siblings alive (significant), number of children alive (not significant), partner history (significant), age (significant), sex (not significant) and health (significant), the differences in the size of the partial network of siblings and siblings-in-law by living arrangement are still significant (Table 2). In contrast to the expectations of Hypothesis 3, not all the older adults who repartnered at a later age were characterised by less close-knit partial networks of siblings and siblings-in-law. The pattern among the repartnered is much more intricate, with remarried older adults identifying a relatively large number of siblings and siblings-in-law in their social network, while those in a LAT relationship report relatively few. Hypotheses 3 and 5 are only partially supported by these findings.

The importance of siblings and siblings-in-law becomes clearer when the mean number contacted weekly is examined (Table 1). The highest total by far was for women and men in first marriages (0.8), while those who lived alone after widowhood or divorce reported 0.6, and the repartnered lagged behind whatever their living arrangement (0.4 or 0.5). Table 2 presents the results of a Multivariate Classification Analysis of the number of siblings and siblings-in-law with whom respondents had weekly contact. The significant independent variables were number of living siblings, being ever divorced,

sex and age group. The results additionally show that the effect of the living arrangement on the number of weekly contacts was insignificant, although there was a general tendency for the repartnered to have few weekly contacts (as expected in Hypothesis 3). The differences in the deviations among the three subgroups of repartnered older adults were of little importance. Hypothesis 5 is not supported by these results.

Summary and discussion

The aim of the study was to investigate the interweaving of older adults' lives with their children and siblings after repartnering in later life. Variations in the sizes of the overall social network and of the partial networks of children (-in-law) and of siblings (-in-law) of older people in 11 municipalities in The Netherlands in 1992 have been examined. The numbers of children and siblings in weekly contact, perhaps a better indicator of 'important' relationships, have been analysed in relation to the adopted living arrangement and several personal attributes. Given that the majority (60%) of repartnered older people were in non-traditional living arrangements, it may be concluded that, as Connidis (1989) has proposed, new thinking about partnerships is found not only among a young social elite, but also among older people.

It has been shown that the living arrangement of older people is associated with the size of their partial networks of children(-in-law). The remarried and those in consensual unions have larger such networks than those in first marriages, while those who live alone and, to a greater degree, those in LAT relationships have smaller networks (although the differences were not statistically significant). In other words, the number of children and children-in-law, who conventionally are the most likely after spouses and partners to be potential support givers and receivers, tends to be only weakly dependent on the adopted forms of repartnering and living arrangement. Turning to the partial network of siblings, after controlling for several independent variables, while similarly it is the remarried and those in consensual unions and first marriages who were better embedded than others, and those in LAT relationships were clearly least well connected, these differentials were statistically significant. So, the results suggest that sibling relationships – which are expected to be important in the exchange and affirmation of values, norms and opinions, especially in crisis situations – differ significantly by living arrangement.

The frequency of realised contacts between older adults and their children and siblings provides more information about the quality and embeddedness of the relationships. It has been shown that older adults in first

marriages and, to a lesser extent, formerly married older adults living alone, have relatively frequent weekly contacts with children – they are comparatively well embedded. All the repartnered older adults achieved significantly fewer contacts, and among this group, those with the more flexible living arrangements (either unmarried cohabitation or LAT) were worse off than the remarried. We may therefore conclude that repartnering at a late age involves the risk of upsetting the partners' social networks. In particular, the frequency of contact with children was found to be at risk, although no gender differences were found in weekly contacts with children.

The findings reveal similar effects on the frequency of contacts with siblings and siblings-in-law: all the repartnered older adults were found to achieve smaller partial networks than those in first marriages or who were living alone after widowhood and divorce, albeit that the relationship was not significant and that weekly contacts with siblings were few (overall 0.8 per week, and slightly fewer among men). The sibling embeddedness of older adults living alone shows that they are in a different position from the repartnered. Lopata (1996) argued that sibling relationships in old age are strongest among older adults who live alone after widowhood, based on the (subjective or objective) assumption that these siblings are in need of contact. The present findings provide some support for this assertion, by showing that, among older people, the younger age groups, the women, those with three or more siblings alive, and the never divorced tend to have near-weekly or more-frequent contacts with siblings. Incidentally, patterns of monthly contact with siblings produce similar variations in the patterns of weekly contacts.

Whether repartnering at an older age and opting for non-traditional living arrangements has a negative effect on the social embeddedness of older adults requires a nuanced response. The answer has to be 'no', in the sense that the number of children identified as members of the partial network of children (-in-law) does not vary significantly by living arrangement. If we look at realised relationships, the answer to the question becomes 'yes', for the number of weekly contacts is negatively affected by repartnering. The small number of contacts, or weak embeddedness, is particularly striking among the repartnered in consensual unions and who live apart together. Elements of stress and uncertainty, as mentioned during the in-depth interviews of repartnered older adults, might be the cause. We may conclude that repartnering in later life involves the risk of upsetting the social networks of the older adults involved, particularly the frequency of contacts with children and siblings.

In The Netherlands, neither financial constraints nor separation distances are likely to be very important influences on the frequency of contacts

between older adults and their children or siblings. Distances in general tend to be short, given the size of the country, and it takes no more than three hours to drive between the most remote regions of the country. Costs of travel and telephone conversations are therefore not high and do not form a barrier to contacts. Given that all Dutch residents aged 65 and more years are entitled to a basic state pension that allows them to live in their own home above a poverty level, financial reasons rarely form a barrier to social participation and embeddedness.

Nonetheless, we should not exclude the possibility that the choice of a particular type of living arrangement after repartnering may be related to the ability of the partners to integrate with others in their social networks. Those who remarry and follow the traditional route to repartnering may, for example, be more family-oriented than those who choose a flexible partner and living relationship. Those who opted for a LAT relationship might have been guided by the value they placed on close and supportive relationships outside the circle of the family: in the in-depth interviews several explicitly argued that leaving their current neighbourhood (to join and live with the new partner) would compromise their relationships with friends, acquaintances and other important network members, and that this had influenced their decision not to marry the new partner. Consequently, it could come as no surprise that older adults in LAT relationships identified smaller networks of children and siblings than the remarried.

To explore these influences in more depth, additional information about people's attitudes towards family and social relationships is required (for it is not available in the NESTOR survey). Further research is needed, especially using a symmetrical design that collects data from both sides of relationships, to discover more about the motives behind the less frequent contacts with children and siblings among repartnered older adults, and to enrich our understanding of the emotional, social and instrumental support that is provided when help is needed. In-depth research is required to elicit the patterns of (reciprocal) support within the realm of the family, with special attention to differences among older adults between those in first marriages, those who live alone after divorce or widowhood, and the various living arrangement categories of repartnered older adults.

Acknowledgements

The data for this article were collected as part of the 'Living Arrangements and Social Networks of Older Adults' (NESTOR) collaborative research programme of the Department of Sociology and Social Gerontology and the Department of Social Research Methodology at the Vrije University of Amsterdam and of The Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI) in The Hague.

The programme is funded by NESTOR, the Netherlands Programme for Research on Ageing.

NOTE

- 1 Of the 173 NESTOR respondents involved in late life repartnering, 46 were selected for in-depth interviews. These took place in the respondent's own home, lasted between two and three hours, and were tape-recorded. The principal themes included the decision-making process concerning the new partner relationship, and relationships with children before and after repartnering.

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Accepted 1 October 2002

Address for correspondence:

Jenny de Jong Gierveld, Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, Meijboomlaan 1, 2242 PR Wassenaar, The Netherlands.
e-mail: Gierveld@nias.knaw.nl