

# Late life widowhood, selfishness and new partnership choices: a gendered perspective

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## **ABSTRACT**

Little sociological attention has been paid to the repartnering of older people after widowhood, and how age, gender and the meanings of marriage influence choices about new cross-gender relationships. This paper reports on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 25 widows and 26 widowers over the age of 65, widowed for at least two years and who had not remarried. Respondents were asked about their current lifestyle and relationships and whether they had ever considered remarriage. The words ‘selfish’ and ‘freedom’ were often used by the widows when describing their present existence, which was associated with not having to look after someone all the time. Few of the widowers mentioned selfishness and this was more likely to be associated with feelings of anger at the loss of their spouse; none of the men associated widowhood with a sense of freedom. The paper argues that the desire for repartnering after widowhood is gender-specific: widows are more likely to choose to remain without a partner for intrinsic factors: the reluctance to relinquish a new-found freedom; while for widowers, extrinsic factors of older age and poor health are more salient issues in new partnership formation choices and constraints.

**KEY WORDS** – widowhood, repartnering, selfishness, freedom, guilt.

## **Introduction**

Widowhood has been described as one of the most traumatic experiences in life, regardless of the quality of the marriage (Parkes 1994; Stroebe 1994; Hyrkas *et al.* 1997). Loneliness is one of the most frequently expressed causes of distress after bereavement for both men and women (Shuchter and Zisook 1993), and it would seem that one way of ameliorating loneliness would be to take on another partner. In contemporary Western society, at all ages, men are more likely to take this option after widowhood or divorce, whether through remarriage,

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co-habitation or non co-residential partnerships, than women (Liefbroer and de Jong Gierveld 1995). This would seem to give credence to the old adage that following widowhood, 'women grieve, men replace' (Campbell and Silverman 1987). Queen Victoria was a classic example of a widow whose grief was so profound that she continued to have Prince Albert's pyjamas put out nightly and his shaving water made ready every morning, for the 40 years of her widowhood (Parkes 1994). However, Lopata (1996) and van den Hoonard (2001) found that widows reported positive aspects in their status, among which were freedom and relief from caring. Mason (1987) found that marriage appeared to be more beneficial for men than women, especially in later life. These findings were supported by Greene (1990) whose longitudinal study of widowers revealed that new partnership formation had positive effects on the men's wellbeing.

### **Widowhood and repartnering**

Marriage statistics reveal that in the UK, at all ages, remarriage rates for widowed men are higher than for widowed women, and the gender difference increases substantially with age (OPCS 1999). Although the rates decline steeply with age for both widowers and widows, a widower is more likely than a widow to remarry at all ages, and the greatest difference is in the over 75 age group where widowers are nine times more likely to marry than widows. Explanations usually advanced for this are demographic and cultural: women live longer than men and the comparatively large number of older widows have relatively few eligible men from whom 'to choose'. Patriarchal gender relations mean that the cultural norm is for a man at all ages, and regardless of previous marital status, to marry a woman younger than himself (Walby 1995). Unfortunately, little is known about other types of exclusive cross-gender romantic relationships of older people who are no longer married, either cohabitation or non co-residential relationships, and to what extent these relationships reflect similar gendered patterns to remarriage rates. Analysis of the General Household Survey shows that in 1995, only one per cent of all people over the age of 65 were cohabiting (OPCS 1997).

As a man grows older, he has an increasing pool of women, including younger single, widowed and divorced women, available for a new union (Vinick 1978; Burch 1990; Greene 1990). Therefore, for women, the pool of 'eligible' men shrinks as they age, and this is viewed as an obstacle to their forming new partnerships (Johnson and Troll 1996).

This paper argues that gender differences in desire to form new partnerships are less influenced by the strength (or otherwise) of the old marital tie as characterised by Moss and Moss (1980), or by the sanctification of a dead spouse (Lopata 1973), than by the gendered experience of the institution of marriage solemnised during the middle years of the 20th century and what it means to this cohort of older people once this marriage is dissolved.

### **Marriage and caring**

In order to gain insight into what might dictate choices regarding the establishment of a new cross-gender relationship after widowhood, it is important to understand the meaning of marriage to older people. For the majority of people born before 1930, marriage was the central plank around which the family operated, and roles within marriage were seen as 'given' (Elliot 1996). The gender division of caring and domestic labour was viewed as the normal outcome of being born either male or female. Conformity to the ideal of a conjugal unit, consisting of a husband/father, wife/mother and children (preferably), was widespread (Oakley 1975). Less sociological attention has been paid to the married lives of older people, although there has been more interest in recent years (Askham 1995), particularly in the field of co-residential care (Arber and Gilbert 1989; Arber and Ginn 1990; Thompson 1993; Rose and Bruce 1995; Mason 1996; Twigg 1998). A very important aspect of the nature of marriage, and particularly in a long-term marriage, is the perception of the caring role as differently carried out by men and women within the relationship (Davidson *et al.* 2000a).

There is a considerable literature on the diverse nature of caring, including 'caring about' and 'caring for' (Finch and Groves 1983; Finch and Mason 1993), 'instrumental caring' and 'emotional labour' (Graham 1983; Dalley 1993; Pyke and Bengtson 1996; Lewis 1998), but Mason (1996) takes the argument further by identifying a fine distinction between 'active sensibility' and 'sentient activity'. Active sensibility, she argues, operates largely on a conscious plane in terms of physical looking after and decision making on a task-orientated level. Sentient activities, on the other hand, operate on a less conscious plane; with greater involvement of 'consideration' for another, sensitivity to likes and dislikes learned over time, acquiescence to another's wishes, not as a 'martyr', but as a desire to please. So much of these invisible, sentient activities are carried out on 'auto pilot' that they are underestimated and often undervalued by both the giver and the

recipient (Mason 1996). Therefore, it is often only when there is no longer the requirement to look after someone, or the availability of someone who has been looked after, that the importance of these sentient activities is acknowledged.

Recognition of the contribution made by older people in looking after all generations has been somewhat lost in the feminist discourse which highlights caring as primarily work done by middle-aged daughters for ageing parents (Arber and Ginn 1993; Finch and Mason 1993). Although the majority of non-resident caring is carried out by women, co-resident spousal care in old age is carried out equally by men and women (Arber and Gilbert 1989). Thompson (1993) says that when the situation demands care, both women and men are capable of providing it. She defines care as the 'activity of attending and responding to another. Marital partners strive to meet each other's needs, prevent harm, and take positive action to protect and promote each other's welfare' (1993: 559). She considers the conditions under which men cross the stereotypical gender care boundaries:

I suggest that men are more likely to display care when there is a clear need to care, no one else is around to provide care, and the recipient is dependent. (Thompson 1993: 564)

Caring is what a wife does for her husband (and children), throughout the marriage 'in sickness and in health' whereas, in general, caregiving is what a husband does when he has no other option in the case of his wife's 'sickness'. This is not to say that the care given by an older husband to his sick wife is not good and offered with love and affection (Lewis 1998; Twigg 1998). However, as Rose and Bruce (1995) point out, in a society which considers elderly male spouse carers to be 'Mr Wonderful', the assistance they receive from professional health and welfare workers and the esteem in which they are held, differs greatly from that offered and accorded to women performing equivalent care for their sick husbands.

Being widowed is a state that can bring into sharp focus the absence of the need to give care or, indeed, the absence of the person who delivered such care. An aspect which may be part of the decision to repartner may reflect the nature of these conscious and unconscious caring activities and how they interact with the sense of selfhood. The aims of this article, therefore, are first, to examine the gendered division of emotional and caring labour in the marriages of older people, focusing primarily on the nature of selfishness; and secondly, to examine how the concepts of selfishness and unselfishness relate to the desire for repartnering after widowhood.

*Gender, unselfishness and caring*

C S Lewis, writing in 1942, provides an exemplary illustration of the gendered nature of selfishness and unselfishness through his fictional letters of the senior devil, Screwtape, to his nephew and apprentice, Wormwood:

A woman means by Unselfishness chiefly taking trouble for others; a man means not giving trouble to others. .... Thus while the woman thinks of doing good offices and the man of respecting other people's rights, each sex, without any obvious unreason, can and does regard the other as radically selfish. (Lewis 1982: 111)

'Taking trouble for others' and 'doing good offices' refers to how women interact with people around them: husband, children, parents, relatives, friends and neighbours. There has been considerable debate as to the foundation of women's responsibility for others.

Women have different organizing principles around which their psyches are structured. One of these principles is that they exist to serve other people's needs. (Baker Miller 1986: 62)

Whether these organising principles are inherently, or essentially gendered or whether, as Howard and Holland (1997) suggest, that because of their different life experiences women tend to develop a 'connective' self that values empathy and caring, the fact remains that it is women who carry out most of the caring activities. Chodorow (1991) argues that the different life experiences of males and females mean that girls are more socialised into having a self-identity of 'connectedness' which fosters interdependence whereas boys are more likely to evolve a self-identity of 'separateness' which fosters independence. Thus, she says, 'the basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate' (Chodorow 1991: 169). Males, socialised into independence and autonomy are much more likely to consider selfishness as 'indulgence', feeling sorry for themselves and showing weakness (Seidler 1989). Unselfishness, for men then, means getting on with things, not being a bother to people. Unselfishness for women, on the other hand, means bothering about people (Baker Miller 1986).

Klapper *et al.* (1994) identified the phenomenon of 'selfish grief' in the management of bereavement in their study of daughters who had lost a parent. Some daughters described themselves as selfish for wishing their mother still alive despite any suffering she may have endured before her death. Some also saw their grief as selfish if they were not responding to the needs of family members as a result of personal misery. One of the interviewees was made to feel guilty

because she was neglecting her husband during what was perceived as her prolonged period of intense mourning. For some of the daughters, there was also the feeling that they needed to suppress or undermine their grief ‘in fear of being selfish’ (1994: 38). The authors argue that in her struggles over care and responsibilities, a women must ‘transcend the traditional moral imperative in which she places other before self ...’ (1994: 40). I contend that little attention has been paid to the extent that the subsequent removal of the need to care, or being cared for, relates to gendered notions of selfishness and how consequently, these may relate to decisions about taking on a new cross-gender relationship.

### **The research in context**

This article examines material from a study of widows and widowers who were born before 1930 (at least 65 years old at the time of interview), widowed for a minimum of two years and still living independently. There is a consensus, that somewhere around the second anniversary of the death of a spouse, for the majority of bereaved men and women, there is a diminution of the degree of distress experienced (Parkes 1996). This two-year minimum period therefore permitted the greater ability to reflect on what was implicit within the marriage which was only really highlighted or considered once the partner had died (Davidson 2000*a*). Twenty-five widows and 26 widowers were interviewed in-depth, with a semi-structured interview guide and encouraged to talk about their history, marriage, present life and future (Davidson 1999). Men were deliberately over-represented in the sample since the purpose of the study was to make a direct comparison between the sexes. The sample was collected from a variety of sources including health and welfare professionals, friends, colleagues and through the widowed people themselves, and was heterogeneous in terms of income, health status, housing conditions and social networks, but not ethnicity – only three respondents, one widow and two widowers, were born outside the UK. They were white, and had all lived in the UK for at least 50 years.

The age range for both widows and widowers in the sample was 65 to 92 years, but the average age of the widows was 75 years while that for the widowers was 78 years. The average length of their ‘only or last’ marriage was 36 years for the widows and 38 years for the widowers. The men had the longest as well as the shortest marriages: more men than women had celebrated their Golden (50th) wedding anniversary

TABLE 1. Characteristics of the sample of widows and widowers

Number	Widows 25	Widowers 26
Average age (and range)	75 (65–92)	78 (65–92)
Average length of only or last Marriage (and range)	36 (8–57)	38 (3–56)
Second or subsequent marriage	2	9
Average length of widowhood (since only or last marriage) (and range)	14 (3–43)	7 (2–17)
Personal Savings		
Under £16k	10	6
Over £16k	15	20
In receipt of benefits	6	3
Home owner	17	14
Sheltered Accommodation:		
Private	1	3
Local Authority	2	0
Rented:		
Private	1	4
Local Authority	0	2
		(1 with adult son)
Grace and favour (rent free)	1	1
Other:		
Previously Local Authority, bought by adult child	3	1
Lives with daughter in separate annex	0	1

(seven as compared to three women), but men also had the shortest ‘last’ marriages because more had remarried after a first bereavement or following divorce. Two of the 25 women had been married twice, one was widowed very shortly after marriage during World War II and one had divorced, as compared to nine of the 26 men, two of whom had remarried after divorce and seven after widowhood. One widower has subsequently married for the third time, having been widowed twice.

There was one focal point to which all the respondents frequently referred as having the most profound influence on their lives, and that was the Second World War, 1939–1945. In 1945, there was an overwhelming desire for radical social change: fuller social justice, a lessening of class differences and better opportunities for all children (Thomson 1965). The respondents reported that after the War they knew that ‘nothing was ever going to be the same again’. Thompson reports that in the post-war period there was

... the upheaval (and extensive abandonment) of traditional values, and the quest for new values felt to be more appropriate to life in a rapidly changing, materialistic and scientific civilisation. (Thomson 1965: 273).

Nevertheless, there was also a concerted post-war political and social movement intent on reconstituting idealised nuclear family life with the husband and father as breadwinner, wife and mother as homemaker (Oakley 1975). It was within this framework of reactive and reactionary ideologies, that this cohort of respondents located their marital experience.

Four unstructured pilot interviews (with two widows and two widowers) were conducted, transcribed and analysed for themes to be incorporated in a semi-structured schedule for the main sample. A major theme to emerge from these first interviews, was of new partnership formation and the feasibility and desirability of such action, in other words, the constraints and choices around sharing one's life again. Therefore, the remaining respondents were asked if they would consider getting married again and then, if not already in one, whether they would like a cross-gender relationship. The key questions which evolved from the pilot interviews and pertinent to this paper are on considerations of remarriage, and compensations in being widowed:

*Considerations of remarriage*

- Would you like to remarry?
- Do you think you ever will?
- Why is that? [Probe fully: advantages, disadvantages. Obstacles: loyalty to spouse, financial, health, children, what people think]
- What about a romantic relationship?

*Any advantages*

- In spite of the problems of widowhood, several people have told me that there are some compensations. Can you think of any advantages of being widowed?

Tape recorded interviews took place in the respondent's own home and lasted between two and three hours, although the visit usually lasted much longer. The transcriptions were entered into WimMax Pro, a qualitative software package and analysed using grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Strauss 1993). The iterative procedure revealed a complex picture of relationship and friendship matrices which transcended the simple dichotomy of whether an older widow or widower wished or otherwise for a new partnership. An important sub-theme to emerge was how the gendered perceptions of selfishness and unselfishness impacted on late life repartnership choices.



The findings from this small, unrepresentative sample cannot be generalised to the present population of older widows and widowers, nor to other cohorts. Rather, it offers an insight into the lived experience and narrative of a group of older widows and widowers, socialised by Victorian parents, and growing older at the start of the 21st century.

### **The gendered meanings of selfishness**

The meaning of what passes for unselfishness and selfishness was primarily set by the women inasmuch as they had a much clearer concept of how their lives were organised around the responsibility of thinking about and looking after others. The constant 'looking after' a husband of course did not necessarily involve nursing a sick man; rather, it was the invisible daily routine of noticing, interpreting and responding to the needs of a partner, as described by Howard and Hollander (1997), especially a man with whom the woman had lived for many years and with whom she may have had virtually constant contact since retirement or the onset of illness.

The word 'selfish' was frequently volunteered by the widows, when describing their lives now, as opposed to when they were married. In this respect, they viewed themselves during marriage as 'unselfish' and as such held the moral high ground over men. All of the 25 widows made reference to the self-centred behaviour of their husband. Selfish was the word used explicitly by 15 to describe how they viewed the lives that men lead throughout marriage and have always led. Cynthia described both her father and her husband as being 'lovely', 'generous' and 'smashing'. Yet she says:

Cynthia: As I'm saying. The best of men are selfish, they will do what they want to do. (Mrs C. F. aged 66)

On her wedding day, her father announced at the reception that he was leaving to play in the final of a bowls tournament. She viewed this as the ultimate in selfishness, on her special day, yet he thought she was being selfish by her being upset at his departure. That her bridegroom did not think her father's behaviour was censurable added to her conviction of the selfishness of men.

There was a well-defined sense of what was appropriate 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviours and attitudes.

Susan: I mean, my husband never changed a nappy, never bathed a child, never had to cook a meal. And I think it's the same on the other side.

The men looked after the money and that sort of thing. Looked after buying the cars and all that. I don't think many women did that sort of thing. (Mrs S. M. aged 65)

Although the strict gendered division of public and private spheres was moderated with post-war social revolution, the division of domestic labour persisted: it was still his work and her home; his duty 'to beget' the children and hers 'to bring them up' (Morgan 1991). Husbands were expected to be 'honoured and obeyed' and their wishes came first, it was seen as in the marriage contract and accepted.

Some of the widows gave examples of how selfish their husbands were, often citing their (husband's) requirement to watch their preferred television programme and they would add 'but that is what men do' or 'that is how men are'.

Margaret: If I had something on the television that I was watching and he walked in that door, it was turned over to what he wanted to see. I just let him get on with it. (Mrs M. C., aged 74)

Rosie: You see, with men about, you have to consider what he wants—if he wants to go out, if he wants to go somewhere. I always went with him. Many a time I didn't want to get up 5 o'clock in the morning to go fishing, but he wanted to. ... 'Cos I always say in marriage, 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em!' (Mrs R. D. aged 78)

However, the widows' views on the selfishness of men was a taken-for-granted: it was seen as both how the men behaved, and how they were expected to behave. In these widows' lives, therefore, there was an expectation that the men would 'do what they want to do' and they, as women, had no option other than to go along with them in the interest of harmony.

Interestingly, when the widowers were asked about TV channel choices, none recalled any conflict. However, when probed, they said it was likely that if there was something on she didn't want to watch that he did, she would occupy herself otherwise.

Kevin: No, we didn't argue over the television.

Int: What about sports programmes?

Kevin: I don't think she watched much sport, except tennis, which I find boring – but it was mostly during the day she watched that. I love football which she didn't. She would busy herself doing something else if she didn't want to watch something. (Mr K. L. aged 70)

Kevin did not perceive his wanting to watch football as being selfish, since his wife watched tennis (which he did not enjoy), albeit, it was during the day when he was at work.

One of the obvious consequences of widowhood for women is that they are no longer required to look after another individual to the same

degree as they did whilst married. The widows were conducting 'sentient activity' as characterised by Mason (1996) throughout their marriage, thus, it is only when it is no longer required or received that the importance of these activities is recognised. For the widows, relinquishing the role of 'chiefly taking trouble for others' and being in the position, for some for the first time in their lives, of having only to consider themselves, meant they saw themselves as having shifted from being selfless to selfish, a characteristic they would normally attribute to men.

#### *Widows and selfishness*

Selfishness, to the widows meant doing what they wanted, when they wanted and not having to consider the needs of a partner. Parallel to the older women's admission of selfishness, now that they were widowed and lived alone, was a sense of guilt at enjoying the freedom and autonomy which accompanies their release from their responsibilities as a wife.

June: I've become terribly selfish since living on my own.

Int: Is there anything wrong with being selfish?

June: Oh, I think so. Consideration for other people. If you don't, if you're not thinking of other people, considering other people, life could be pretty empty really. (Mrs J. M. aged 67)

Int: Is there anything wrong with being selfish?

Cynthia: Well, I feel a bit guilty sometimes. You know, that I can do what I want to do and go out when I want to go out. Watch whatever television I want. I do feel a bit guilty. (Mrs C. F. aged 66)

Sally: Yes, there is freedom to do what I want – but it's being awfully selfish! (Mrs S. H. aged 71)

These quotes were typical of the responses of virtually all the widows in this study: for them, the new-found freedom of widowhood equalled selfishness.

The widows did respond to the needs of friends, or adult children and grandchildren, but they indicated that what they did was mostly within their control and rarely did this entail looking after someone as intensively as they had their spouse. This element of control bestows an autonomy hitherto not experienced when in their marital relationship. To a much greater degree, they were able to dictate when they would or could look after grandchildren (or in two cases, niece's children), for example. One widow, Susan (aged 65) had her divorced son and his two children almost every weekend which was when he had access to them. Where he was staying during the week was not suitable because he lived in a mobile home, and his former wife and the children lived

in the marital home. The grandmother's house became their second home. This widow pointed out that this helping role was carried out, for the most part, with great enjoyment and the wish to help her son and her grandchildren. However, if she was unwell, or going away for an occasional weekend with the Horticultural Club, her son had to make alternative arrangements. This opting out of responsibility would not have been possible with her husband. The only time she went away without him she had had to make elaborate preparations for meals and so on. He complained so bitterly at her absence that she said she 'couldn't be bothered to go through all that again'.

#### *Widowers and selfishness*

For the widowers, selfishness or unselfishness was not an issue and the word was seldom mentioned. If it was, it was in the context of their grief management, similar to that described by Klapper *et al.* (1994) in their study. Only three of the widowers as opposed to 15 widows in the study *explicitly* mentioned the issue of selfishness, either as it applied to them or to their spouse. Eric said he had been so angry when his wife died but said that this was being self-indulgent.

Eric: I think I was more cross than anything. It was almost as if, 'Why did you have to go and leave me?', that sort of crossness. Which is basically very selfish, isn't it? There is a lot of self-pity and anger. (Mr E. J. aged 74)

His selfishness equated to feeling sorry for himself rather than feeling guilty about not having to consider another. Ian never really forgave himself for not being with his dying wife and admitted to 'wallowing' in selfish anger for a long time.

Ian: I wasn't with her when she died. I had gone into work to finish an important contract. The hospital tried to get me all day, all day, they said. I was so *angry* with myself – very selfish I suppose, especially the reason I wasn't there. (Mr I. C. aged 72)

Tom was the only widower to say that his wife had been selfish, but he said it did not trouble him.

Tom: I suppose on account of her disability, she was very selfish, in some ways ... but I didn't really mind and I was lost when she first died. (Mr T. D. aged 76)

Tom's wife had been disabled for several years before he had taken early retirement in order to look after her once she became wheelchair-bound. Tom did recognise that his wife's selfishness was as a result of her disability. He had established a new 'career' in caring for her for

27 years. However, despite her perceived selfishness, it was he who remained in control of what they did and where they went.

Tom: I used to do all the cooking and all that sort of thing. I did everything for her. I'd get her up in the morning, wash her, dress her. I used to have to put her bra on and everything. Then I'd wash her hair, put curlers in, take them out. No particular style just tidy. I got a good sort of routine. Then we'd go out. Me pushing her in the wheelchair like. Always went out. (Mr T. D. aged 76)

After her death, he lost his reason for getting up in the morning and without a wheelchair to push, said he did not know what to do with his hands. Tom's account contrasts with the widows' reflections where they felt that their husband had been selfish when they were well *and* when they were sick, and to most widows, the reduced need to care was viewed as a relief.

Rubinstein (1986) in his study of widowers, noted that the older men coped better when they had some structure built into their day; one based on a pattern similar to when they were in employment. Added to this was the sense of achievement and admiration as described by Rose and Bruce (1995).

Paul: The District Nurses said they didn't know how I coped for so long. (Mr P. D. aged 73)

Not one of the ten widowers who had cared for their wife admitted to any sense of relief when she had died and said that they felt lost without the routine they had established while looking after her.

Unlike widows, the widowers did not equate selfishness with freedom, or advantages in widowhood with freedom.

Jock: Yeah, but I don't see you get much more freedom. In fact, I don't think you get so much. I admit, well, I could before, I could say 'I'm going so and so' and I would go there if I wanted to. (Mr J. S. aged 70)

Many of the widowers thought they were less free because they had to fulfil the domestic duties formerly carried out by their spouse. Mikail was Polish and had come to the UK in 1940. He married his Romanian wife and stayed in the UK after the Second World War.

Mikail: If you love your wife and she do everything, you miss her. I not sorry I marry. Because she was really good. And she was co-operative. Now hard to get out, have to do everything myself. (Mr M. A. aged 84)

For the widowers, the absence of a wife deprived them of the taken-for-granted sentient activities carried out for them by their wives (Mason 1996). Moreover, sentient activity, when it ceases on the death of the spouse, was described as a liberation by the women but a loss by the men.

**Women grieve, men replace?**

Although none of the widows or widowers had remarried since the loss of their (last) spouse, they were asked about any past or present relationships they had had since bereavement. In this paper, the term ‘relationship’ refers to an exclusive, romantic liaison, regardless of the degree of physical intimacy involved. By definition, since they would have been excluded from the sample criterion, none of the 25 widows and 26 widowers had remarried at the time of interview.

Eight of the widowers had had exclusive cross-gender romantic relationships, seven of whom were still in a relationship and three of these had had ‘serial’ non-co-residential relationships. Joe, the youngest widower at 65, did subsequently marry, six months after the interview, for the third time, having been widowed twice. However, only one of the widows, Beryl, described later, had ever formed a longstanding new relationship.

*Widows and new romantic partnerships*

Four women, all widowed under the age of 61, had considered a new partnership in the past, but not any longer, for reasons discussed in detail elsewhere (Davidson 2000b). Only one widow said she would like to get married again at the time of interview: Ingrid was a childless, healthy and wealthy 74-year-old who had belonged to a number of social and sports clubs with her husband. She had many friends at her Bowls and Bridge clubs, but she missed their couple-orientated social life, and did not feel comfortable going to functions alone.

Ingrid: I think I would quite like to, if I found the right person. For the companionship really. It’s awful – you never get invited as a single woman anywhere. Or if you do you think ‘Oh Lord, I’m: a bit *de trop*, on my own’. But if Mr Right came along I might consider it.  
(Mrs I. G. aged 74)

Although none of the other widows would contemplate getting married again, several of them said that they would like to have a ‘gentleman friend’ for companionship: to accompany them to restaurants or the theatre, go shopping and perhaps on holiday together. Ideally, this man should have a car. What the widows missed most was the passport to the public sphere where, in a couple-companionate society, they did not feel at ease on their own.

Fourteen of the widows did say that one of the reasons they had not established another relationship was because they would not be able to replace their husband. Nevertheless, the principal reason the widows

gave for not embarking on, or pursuing a possible relationship was that they were not prepared to relinquish the freedom and independence they had enjoyed since coming to terms with living alone.

Alice: A man can be a pest especially when he gets older. A widower moved into the flat upstairs a few months ago and he has been very friendly indeed. I thought to myself 'he's not getting his feet under my table and that's definite'. You know what I mean. I had a husband and five children and that's enough in any woman's lifetime. (Mrs A. S. aged 80)

The widows did not want to make another, what Howard and Hollander (1997) call 'homemaker's investment', accrued over years of learning the likes and dislikes of another partner. Many of them said that they had 'done their duty' or 'done their bit' and did not want to start over again. They also had a jaundiced view of what men wanted of them.

Cynthia: [I don't want to] take the responsibility of washing for somebody and ironing for somebody. First it's the 'home cooked meal', then it's the shirt that needs ironing. No. And I couldn't bear to have an old man kiss me or anything. Oh no. Not any more. ... And I can do what I want to do. It is selfish, absolute selfishness. So I'd rather just live my life as it is now. No obligations. I've done my bit. (Mrs C. F. aged 66)

Janet was amusing:

Janet: No, I wouldn't want to marry again. You know, if you get 'life' you only do 25 years. I did 50! (Mrs J. B. aged 75)

The widows had been prepared and, for most of them, happy, to look after the man they had married when they were young and lived with for a number of decades, but they were not prepared to 'take on another man'. Beryl, mentioned above, had had a 'gentleman friend' for 10 years before his increasing frailty precipitated a move into the home of one of his daughters. When asked if she had considered marrying him during their time together, Beryl said she had anticipated that he might have to be looked after at some stage and so she decided against it.

Beryl: G. wasn't able to look after himself and I was a bit worried. I thought, well, I can't look after – well, as you get older, can you? Your husband, that you've had for years, you don't think about nursing do you. But that's it. (Mrs B. L. aged 83)

When considering 'taking on' another man, the widows reflected the prevailing social norm of marrying a man older than they were.

Mary: I just couldn't be bothered, I mean. It would have to be an old man for a start, I mean I'm 70. Who wants to marry a man about 75? Oh, I couldn't go to bed with an old man like that. I couldn't bear the thought of it. No. No thanks. Yes, and why should I lumber myself with another man? I'll have to cook for him, wash for him, go to bed with him. Oh no, I couldn't be bothered with that. (Mrs M. B. aged 70)

This analysis challenges the perceived wisdom that widows do not establish new relationships because, like Queen Victoria mentioned in the introduction, they maintain a prolonged grieving for their dead spouse, or that there are insufficient numbers of eligible men from which to choose. Rather, as Lily said 'I *never* thought I would say this, but I am quite enjoying my life as it is at the moment' (Mrs L. H. aged 75). For most of the women in this cohort, widowhood had been the first time in their life that they had lived alone, the first time they had been in control of their finances, the first time they could do as they wished. However much they missed their spouse and would value a companion, they were not prepared to give up their new way of life. Table 2 shows a breakdown of the reasons offered as to why the widows and widowers had not remarried.

From Table 2 it can be seen that the widows were far more prepared than the widowers to engage in a discussion about their reasons for not having remarried, volunteering 79 responses compared with 26. The widowers only volunteered one reason and closed out the conversation. Most of the widows gave several reasons and the most frequently offered was that they did not want to look after another man, followed by the contention that nobody could take their dead husband's place. Most of them said they had been happy to care for the spouse they married when young, with whom they had grown old. It was not just the prospect of nursing a sick partner to which they objected, but also the day-to-day work entailed in cooking, cleaning and washing which they were unprepared to take on.

#### *Widowers and new romantic partnerships*

Table 2 shows that none of the widowers articulated that the prospect of caring for another spouse or loss of freedom was the reason for their not having remarried. Only two of the 26 widowers positively wished to remarry and, as mentioned above, Joe, 65 and already widowed twice, married his partner six months after the interview. Richard, 76, childless, healthy and wealthy, was very keen to share his life again. For both Joe and Richard, it was the loneliness they found unbearable:



TABLE 2. Frequency of reasons given for not having remarried, by gender

Reason given	Widows (n = 25)	Widowers (n = 26)
Does not want to look after another	23	0
Cannot replace spouse	20	9
Enjoyment of freedom	14	0
Not want to repeat unhappy marriage	5	0
Never fancied anyone (widows)	3	—
Not met the right person (yet) (widowers)	—	8
Discouraged by adult children	4	0
Too set in ways	3	2
Not want sex	5	0
Nobody would want me	2	6
Problems of inheritance	0	1
Total number of responses	79	26
Average number of responses	3:1	1:1

Joe: ‘Cos I didn’t like being on my own. This being on my own, I found it very difficult. You can easily slide into the drinking, which I did. I was back at work and I enjoyed my work and, but I would come home at night. I was going stir crazy of an evening, so I thought ‘I’ve got to meet someone and start getting out again’. And that’s why I did that [contacted a dating agency]. ... I can live on my own, I can do everything, I can cook and everything. But I like company. I think loneliness – to be on your own. I thought, there’s other people out there like me, so why not two people to be happy? (Mr J. E. aged 65)

Richard: Yes, I’d be delighted to. I mean, the trouble about being on your own is, it doesn’t matter how busy you are, at times, you are very lonely. And certainly if the right person came along, I would be only too pleased to get married. Just like that. (Mr R. H. aged 76)

Although there were certain similarities between Richard and Ingrid (health and wealth) nevertheless, Ingrid wanted someone to go out with, whereas Richard (and Joe) wanted somebody to come home to.

Richard did not have a relationship when interviewed but seven of the other widowers did, including Joe. Joe was the only one of these who wanted to convert the relationship to marriage. Typically, the widowers who had a relationship were under the age of 75, were car drivers and enjoyed good or very good health. From this group of men, the most frequently offered explanation for not wishing to marry was, because they were not in love with their partner.

Ian: I can accept a relationship, sure. Marriage, no, I can’t imagine it. I can’t. Because I’d compare all the time. And I’d feel guilty. ... I’d feel guilty that I wasn’t in love with the person that I married. (Mr I. C. aged 72)

Int: Do you think F [present partner] would like to get married?

Les: She wants to, yes. I don't want to. It's very difficult. I don't want to hurt her, but the whole time I have to sort of hold her back, you know. ... Friendship, fine, but that's it. She wants marriage, but there's no way. ... I don't love her. (Mr L. E. aged 68)

Eleven other widowers said they would consider, or had considered a relationship or marriage 'if the right person came along' but were not actively looking. This group of widowers, with two exceptions, Tom at 76 and Russell at 79, were under the age of 75. Thirteen, half the widowers, said they would under no circumstances get married again, nor had they ever considered doing so. This group tended to be older (11 were over the age of 80) and were in poor health, two had experienced long-term marriages (three over 40 years and seven over 50 years) and eight were not currently driving a car. Two had been married and widowed twice.

In contrast, the 20 widows who said they had never considered remarriage, belonged to all age groups and had widely differing financial and health status. Of the remaining five, one would have liked to remarry, as mentioned above, and the other four who had once considered remarriage but no longer, had been widowed between the ages of 38 and 61 years.

For the widowers, the most frequent reasons offered for not having remarried were that 'nobody could replace their spouse', they 'hadn't fancied anyone', and 'nobody would want them now', the last reason was primarily because of their age and poor health status. The widowers, therefore, could be divided into two groups of approximately equal numbers: those who currently had, or would consider a relationship, and those who would never consider one. These two halves were also distinguished by age with the dividing line at about 80 years old. The older the widower, the longer he had been married, the less likely he was to desire a new relationship.

The younger widowers without a partner tended to say that they 'wouldn't rule out' a relationship but it just had not happened yet. The widows tended to say that they actively rejected the prospect of a new partnership. The analysis suggests therefore that widowers' choices and constraints were more likely to be predicated on age and health status, whereas the widows were more likely to rule out a new relationship because they valued their independence, regardless of age and health status.

## **Conclusion**

Selfishness can be regarded as a gendered issue within marriage. Men tend to regard selfishness as feeling sorry for themselves and this is seen more as a weakness, their having been socialised into showing strength and independence in adversity. When men say they 'are feeling sorry for themselves', they consider they are being selfish. Older women regard selfishness (that is, by their definition) as not taking others into consideration, as a bad characteristic. They therefore admit to feeling guilty when, as older women living alone, they 'allow themselves' to become selfish, that is, do what they want – almost against their 'better nature'. Selfishness within, or freedom without a relationship were not contributory factors for men in not desiring a new relationship. Rather, external factors, such as old age, length of marriage and poor health were common characteristics in those men who did not consider taking on another partner.

The widows were much less likely than the widowers to have considered remarriage and, unlike the widowers, none of them had current romantic, cross-gender relationships. Whatever the quality of their own previous marital relationship, all the widows considered that men lived selfish lives. For this older cohort, as adults in a heterosexual dyadic relationship, both sexes viewed the man as the one in control and the woman as the empathetic, caring partner. This selfishness, as perceived by women, was, however, thought to be the way men normally behaved, and it was easier to give into it than to cause arguments. After the death of her husband, a widow no longer needs to maintain her role as a 'constant' carer and for most women in this study, this was considered to be an advantage of living alone, but it was also described as being 'selfish'.

Regardless of age, length of widowhood or marriage, freedom from having to look after someone was the principal reason offered by widows for not desiring a new partnership. For some, there was an expressed desire to have someone to accompany them in the public sphere, but overwhelmingly, they saw 'strings attached' to any form of relationship and were not prepared to compromise their current freedom – the price to pay in this exchange, they considered, was too high.

It is paradoxical, then, that when widowed, men, socialised into independence and self-reliance, are far more likely than women, whose socialisation emphasises interpersonal relationships, to seek a new cross-gender romantic relationship. The popular image of young men relinquishing their freedom on marriage seems to be reversed in later

life: it is women who resist being dragged kicking and screaming up the aisle.

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