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Time as a structuring condition behind new intimate relationships in later life

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ABSTRACT
Although mobility in and out of intimate relationships has become more common in later life, it has been a neglected issue in social gerontology. In this article, we ask what characterises the formation of new intimate relationships in later life, and whether there are any specific conditions that separate these from relationships in earlier stages of the lifecourse. On the basis of qualitative interviews with 28 persons aged 63–91 who have established a new intimate heterosexual relationship after the age of 60 or who are dating singles, we argue that time constitutes such a central structuring condition. We discuss and theorise two aspects of time – *post-(re)productive free time* and *remaining time* – which have an important formative power on new late-in-life relationships. We argue that together these aspects form a central existential structure of ageing in many Western societies – the paradoxical condition of having lots of available free time but little time left in life – which, besides influencing new late-in-life relationships, might also be relevant to other aspects of and choices in later life.

KEY WORDS – time, structuring condition, intimate relationship, later life.

Introduction

Until recently, research in social gerontology and family sociology about intimacy in old age has almost exclusively focused on people living in life-long marriages (*see e.g.* Bulanda 2011; Gilford 1986; Kulik 2002; Stinnett, Mittelstet Carter and Montgomery 1972; Walker and Luszcz 2009). Little research has focused on re-partnering in later life, and the forms these new intimate relationships take. One explanation for this negligence is that we are governed by dated assumptions about intimacy in old age being an aspect of marriage exclusively (Connidis 2001). Another explanation is the survival of a collective understanding of ageing in terms of disabilities and dependencies, rather than in terms of resources and possibilities.

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Still, re-partnering in later life is becoming more and more common, and there is much to suggest that these new relationships take forms other than institutionalised marriage (*see e.g.* Brown, Bulanda and Lee 2012). In *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Giddens (1992; *see also* Giddens 1991) argued that in late modern society people establish 'pure' relationships – relationships that are not based on external cultural, social and economical conditions and established forms (such as marriage) but instead on 'satisfactions or rewards generic to that relation itself' (Giddens 1991: 244). Giddens' argument is historical and focuses mainly on the redefinition of intimacy for people of reproductive age, as control of reproduction increases. However, since intimate relationships formed in later life are non-reproductive by definition, they should have a strong potential to be 'pure' in Giddens' sense.

There are many societal trends indicating that new intimate relationships have become an integrated part of old age in late modern societies. For example, the elderly are increasingly portrayed as sexually active in mainstream feature films (Bildtgård 2000; Vares 2009). Retirement magazines have started to reorient their content towards the increasingly healthy, wealthy and active 'third agers' through articles that encourage readers to seek and form new intimate relationships late in life (Jönsson 1998). The number of personal advertisements placed in Swedish dailies by older people has increased over the last couple of decades (Öberg 2000), and there are a number of books and pamphlets informing older people how to find new partners (*see e.g.* Butler and Lewis 2002; Ellis and Velten 1998; Gordon and Shimberg 2004).

In the last century, not only life expectancy but also divorce rates among middle-aged and older people increased all over the Western world, in what Brown and Lin (2012) call 'the gray divorce revolution'. Sweden can serve as an example of these demographic changes and their effects on re-partnering in later life.[1] In Sweden today, almost 2.4 million people (about a quarter of the population) are aged 60 or over, and more than a million of these (46%) are singles (divorced, widowed or never married). In this age group, over the 42 years between 1968 and 2010, the proportion of widows/widowers decreased while the proportion of divorcees more than quadrupled (from 4 to 17%) and the actual number of divorcees increased from 55,000 to almost 400,000 (Statistics Sweden, our calculations). While widowhood releases one potential partner to the 'partner market', divorce releases two. To summarise, movement in and out of relationships has increased in the past half-century, and older people are more likely to have experienced one or more intimate relationships during their lives.

There are clear gender differences. Since women in general live longer lives and tend to marry men older than themselves, the

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heterosexual market of available partners for old single women is much smaller than the corresponding market for old men, in Sweden as well as in the Western world generally. Among 700,000 eligible singles in Sweden aged 60–79 years in 2008, 58 per cent were women. The difference increases with age; in the same year, 76 per cent of the 300,000 singles aged 80+ were women (Statistics Sweden, our calculations).

Many people choose forms of intimacy other than marriage. Co-habitation (*i.e.* common-law marriage) has become increasingly common in the population aged 65+, from 2.5 per cent in 1989 to 5.1 per cent in 2002 (Statistics Sweden 2000–2001; The National Board of Health and Welfare 2004) and 6.1 per cent in 2011 (unpublished survey data from Statistics Sweden; the last figure concerns Swedes aged 65–90). It is more common among the young-old than the old-old and more common among men than women, but it has become more common in all age groups. In later years, an increasingly common form of intimate relationship is living apart together (LAT) (Borell 2001). LAT is a relationship form which approximates what Americans call 'going steady', but with a stronger sense of mutual obligations; it has become quite institutionalised in the Nordic countries over the last couple of decades (Ghazanfareeon Karlsson 2006; Levin and Trost 1999).

In conclusion, the intimate lives of older people have changed dramatically in later years and research has yet to catch up with this development. We know little about these relationships and what characterises them. In this article, we ask what characterises the formation of new intimate relationships in later life, and whether there are any specific conditions that separate them from relationships in earlier stages of the lifecourse. In the analysis, we focus on one important structural condition: the impact of time.

Previous research

Research on new intimate relationships in later life is of a relatively recent date. This research has focused on attitudes to dating (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1991; Montenegro 2003; Watson and Stelle 2011) and re-partnering (*e.g.* Carr 2004; Davidson 2002; de Jong Gierveld 2004*b*; Mehta 2002; Moore and Stratton 2004; Moorman, Booth and Fingerman 2006; Talbott 1998; van den Hoonaard 2004); the forms that new relationships take, such as marriage (*e.g.* de Jong Gierveld 2004*a*; Hurd Clarke 2005), co-habitation (*e.g.* Brown, Bulanda and Lee 2005, 2012; Brown, Lee and Bulanda 2006; Chevan 1996; Moustgaard and

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Martikainen 2009) or LAT (*e.g.* Borell and Ghazanfareeon Karlsson 2002; Ghazanfareeon Karlsson and Borell 2005); and the significance of new relationships for quality of life (*e.g.* Brown, Bulanda and Lee 2005; Davidson 2002; de Jong Gierveld 2004*b*; Moore and Stratton 2004; Peters and Liefbroer 1997).

Little research has focused on the impact of time on new intimate relationships in later life. One notable exception is the impact of earlier intimate relationship experiences on partnership choices and arrangements in old age. In a study from the United States of America (Talbott 1998), a majority out of 64 widows (61–85 years) said they were interested in or attracted to men, but a large majority were opposed to remarriage or considered it impossible. Widows from marriages of longer duration and those who had been married only once showed least interest in men and remarriage. In addition, widows with a history of unpleasant and unsatisfactory marriages were less interested in men and remarriage, compared to widows with satisfactory earlier marriages. On the other hand, Lopata (cited in Talbott 1998) has suggested that 'too positive' earlier marriages, where the deceased husband is idealised ('husband sanctification'), can be an obstacle for new relationships. International gerontological studies have also found that men enter new heterosexual relationships more actively than women (Davidson 2001, 2002), and that divorced men are more likely to desire a new partnership than widowed men (de Jong Gierveld 2003).

A reason for the differences in attitudes between the sexes might be the traditional division of domestic labour and the implied differences in relationship expectations. A number of studies suggest that widows are reluctant to remarry and/or move in with a new partner because they expect that this would mean having to take care of yet another shared household (Davidson 2001, 2002; *see also* Stevens 2004; van den Hoonaard 2004). Instead, many singles, at least in Sweden, prefer to keep separate households to enjoy both intimacy and autonomy (Borell and Ghazanfareeon Karlsson 2000; Ghazanfareeon Karlsson and Borell 2002; *see also* Ghazanfareeon Karlsson 2006). However, in new relationships, there is a possibility of negotiating entirely new relationship patterns based on mutual satisfaction rather than traditional forms (Koren 2011).

Thus, the issue of the impact of earlier relationship history (what we could call lived time) has, to some extent, been considered in social gerontology.[2] However, the issues of post-(re)productive free time and remaining time, which will be used as a theorising framework in this article, are to our knowledge absent from prior research about intimate relationships in later life. Yet, they are remarkably present in our own data, and we believe that they merit further investigation.

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An existential theory of time

In recent years, there has been a rise of interest in the concept of time within the social sciences in general (*e.g.* Adam 2004) as well as within social gerontology (Baars 2013; Baars and Visser 2007; McFadden and Atchley 2001). However, in social gerontology this discussion still seems limited. A review of the keywords in articles published in *Ageing & Society* between 1994 and 2011 revealed only four articles that included time as a keyword.[3] In the following, we consider the main theories on time and argue that a Heideggerian perspective, focusing on time as a life resource, constitutes a valuable addition to already-established perspectives on time within gerontology (such as lifecourse theory, narrative gerontology and developmental theory) for understanding the formation of new intimate relationships in later life.

In the social philosophy of time, a central distinction is between perspectives that view time as an objective category (natural or social) external to the individual, and perspectives which view time as a subjective experience, internal to the individual's mind. Durkheim is perhaps the best known proponent for a view of (chronological) time as a social category – internal to society but external to the individual – which is used to organise individual and historical time. Similarly, lifecourse theory argues that members of a society share cultural conceptions of how a normal life should be organised over time. Neugarten (1969) has argued that people share a cultural schedule or social clocks that determine when major life transitions should take place in order to be considered 'on time', and that there may be sanctions involved in being 'off time'. These social clocks or schedules will vary depending on the particular historical conditions that form the lifecourse patterns of a certain generation (Elder 1981; Hagestad and Neugarten 1985).

Of the frameworks for discussing time that are found in social gerontology, lifecourse theory is probably the most comprehensive. However, although time as an organising principle can be of value for understanding the particular historical conditions under which (for example) the third age has emerged, it says little about the *meaning of time* itself for people, which is the major theme in this article.

Time need not necessarily be approached as an objective category, but can also be viewed as a subjective experience. A number of social philosophers, from Heidegger to Mead and Schutz (Adam 2004) have viewed being *as* time. According to Mead and Schutz, the individual experiences the world from the perspective of a present with connections both backwards into the past and forwards into the future. Thus, people's history (in this case relationship history) is important for the way in which they perceive their

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present and for their expectations and hopes for the future, but people's expectations of the future also form the way they perceive their past and present. It follows that both the past and future are seen as constructs that are recurrently being renegotiated in order to maintain a sense of continuity in life. This thread has been taken up in particular by biographical research and narrative gerontology in research about how the human life is narrated.

However, neither narrative gerontology nor biographical studies retain much of the existential dimension of time, present in Heidegger's (and to some extent Mead's and Schultz's) work, of being *as* time, or time as *the form* of being. As will be shown below, this is highly important in our informants' stories. In *Being and Time* (Heidegger, Macquarrie and Robinson 2008), Heidegger investigates the meaning of being. In short, he argues that the existential structure of (human) being is characterised by being-in-the-world (*dasein*), in an everyday sense, alongside other beings and physical things (as opposed to some form of abstract existence). Being-in-the-world has two further characteristics: it is always already in the world (*thrown* into the world – most evidently at birth but more generally in every situation), and it is knowledgeable about itself as a being in the world (it can distance itself from its existence and understand it) and can thus imagine a different future and project itself into that future. These characteristics of being are temporal at their core: (human) being is in a present, marked by its history (time spent) and that of its environment, projecting itself towards a future (compare our concept of 'remaining time' below). Most importantly, being is finite – it has a beginning and an end. In other words, being *is* time, and time is a finite personal resource.

The idea that being *is* time is never clearer than in relation to the unavoidability of death, an insight which was an important part of Heidegger's work. Death is both certain and unpredictable, and it is against this finitude that the meaning of the life-project is measured. The certainty of death is a challenge to the individual to live life deliberately. One way of putting this might be that time wasted on inauthentic existence (not acknowledging the meaning of one's existence) cannot be regained.

Analysing being *as* time allows us to see time as a finite personal resource that we are all born with in different, albeit estimable, amounts, and which can be put to use in different life-projects. How is our time best spent? What shall we do with our lives in the years we have left? These are precisely the existential issues that our informants address in a concrete manner when they discuss their lives after retirement and after their children have left home (the 'empty nest'). The existential structure of this life phase is characterised by the paradox of having an increased amount of available free time at one's disposal – what we call 'post-(re)productive freedom' – but at

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the same time having little personal (life) time left – what we refer to as 'remaining time'. This existential structure offers both potential and limitation for engaging in new intimate relationships.

Method and analysis

This article is written within the wider framework of a project with the purpose of studying attitudes to, expectations of and experiences of new intimate relationships in later life, against the background of the transformation of intimacy (Giddens 1992) and new social and demographic conditions in the late modern lifecourse.

The analysis is based on qualitative interviews (ranging from 1 hour 5 minutes to 3 hours 16 minutes in length, average length 2 hours) with 28 Swedish interviewees, 10 men and 18 women, aged 63–91 (average age 74 for total group, 78.5 for men, 71 for women). The sample consisted of six dating singles or singles looking for a new relationship, and 22 people living in new relationships, who had met a new partner after the age of 60 and who at the time were either married (N=4), co-habiting (N=7) or in LAT relationships (N=11). For the 22 interviewees living in a new intimate relationship, the relationship had lasted from half a year to 14 years, with an average of five years. Eighteen of the interviews were conducted with both parts of a couple, as separate individual interviews, in different areas of their apartment. All informants had children from earlier relationships and all but one informant had been married earlier in life. The sample was recruited within a radius of about 300 km from the city of Stockholm in Sweden.

In order to answer the research question on experiences of new intimate relationships in later life, we selected informants who had initiated new relationships (or had the intention to do so), rather than using a random sample in which the majority had no such experiences. Interviewees were approached through advertisements, articles in the media and educational conferences arranged by retirees' organisations. Volunteers were then selected using a predefined structured sampling framework that assured representation from men and women, young-old and old-old people, and different forms of intimacy. The whole spectrum of intimacy forms, from dating singlehood to marriage, was included in order to capture the full diversity of the phenomenon. In other words, we used what Patton (2002: 243) refers to as a 'purposeful sampling strategy', or more specifically 'maximum variation sampling'; that is, purposefully considering a wide range of informants who could potentially provide rich information about the research question (*see also* Plummer 2001).

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This selection strategy has two important consequences. First, our sampling strategy based on voluntary participation resulted in interviewees characterised by positive attitudes towards new intimate relationships in later life. Second, it resulted in a sample dominated by urban middle-class and upper middle-class heterosexuals, even though we used recruiting advertisements in four local newspapers covering smaller towns and rural areas, and also asked for homosexual informants in order to extend the diversity of experiences of new intimate relationships in later life.

The interviews were carried out by the authors (either Torbjörn Bildtgård or Peter Öberg in each case) mainly in the informants' homes, then transcribed in full and analysed successively. Besides background information, the interviews followed a semi-structured guide covering four major themes: (a) everyday life as a single or in a new relationship, (b) the history of the present relationship, (c) the history of relationships over the full lifecourse, and (d) future perspectives on life as a single or in a relationship.

Instead of only repeating the informants' stories – what Wengraf (2000) calls 'recycling' – the goal of theorising the interpretations (*see e.g.* Bengtsson 2006; Roos 2005) is to 'translate' the stories into meaningful social gerontological knowledge through analytic generalisations. The analysis was carried out using principles from analytical induction (Znaniecki [1934] 1969; See also Öberg 1997) and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1994). This primarily means theory development taking place in close interplay with the empirical data through constant comparison of cases, searching for negative cases, conceptual development and theoretical coding. Part of the analysis was performed deductively by coding the data according to our research questions.[4] At the same time, inductive codes were created when new insights and hypotheses were generated through the reading of the data, working with the online software Dedoose to create memos and new codes. This dynamic process of integrating inductive and deductive elements of analysis can also be referred to as abductive reasoning (Charmaz 2006). The goal of the analysis was to find the question that the transcribed texts were giving an answer to (Alasuutari 1995), in order to turn the subjectively narrated relationship stories into social gerontologically interesting knowledge (*cf.* Apitzsch and Inowlocki 2000; Ferrarotti 2003; Roos 2005). In our case, the question was: how does time structure new intimate relationships in later life?

Using analytic induction to 'induce laws' (*see also* Denzin 1989*b*; Öberg 1997; Plummer 2001; Robinson 1951; Znaniecki [1934] 1969), we started from a deep analysis of a few cases in order to formulate tentatively an abstract hypothesis. The first hypothesis, which was inductively

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generated after coding only a few interview transcripts, and successively confirmed by later coding of the rest of the interviews, was that time was significant for the informants when they talked about their new relationships. We created two codes for the transcripts: the first was labelled 'time as a resource', and the second, which emerged later in the process, was labelled 'remaining time'. During the whole process, if any single case did not conform to our hypothesis of how time organises new intimate relationships in later life, we reformulated this hypothesis to suit. The end result was two aspects of time – *post-(re)productive free time* and *remaining time* – as well as a number of sub-themes, which are presented in the analysis below.

In order to increase the credibility of the analysis, during every step of the research process both authors first read the texts and made individual interpretations, before reaching common consensual interpretations. These interpretations were later discussed and critiqued in the wider framework of seminars among a research group in social gerontology. More generally, we have tried to increase the credibility of the analysis by making the process of achieving correspondence between data and interpretations as transparent as possible in article form.

The full project has been vetted and approved by the Swedish Central Ethical Review Board (reference 2010/158; www.epn.se). All participation in the interviews was fully voluntary (as guaranteed by the sampling strategy in which we were contacted by people who wanted to tell us about their intimate lives), and all participants signed a letter of consent which included assurance of confidentiality.

The impact of time

In the following, we will argue that the two themes of post-(re)productive free time and remaining time create conditions for new relationships in later life that differ from those in earlier periods in life, and that these conditions can have formative power over relationship choices and be conducive to very positive relationships.

Post-(re)productive free time

The lifestyle of the third age, after retirement and after one's children have left home (the 'empty nest'), is characterised by an increase in available free time – post-(re)productive freedom – that offers a potential for engaging in new intimate relationships.

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Time for new intimate relationships

Laslett (1989) argues that medical and welfare advances in the 20th century, which have increased the healthy lifespan as well as the living standard, have created a new life phase, a new *third age*, between the productive years of working life and the traditional frailty and dependency of deep old age (now pushed further up the age ladder). A defining feature of the third age is the gain of available free time which can be invested in personal interests, experiences and new relationships. It is this new historical life phase that our informants find themselves *thrown* into, and they recurrently make the observation that in comparison to earlier phases in their lives, they now have much more time to invest in their relationships. One central reason for this is what we can conceptualise as *post-reproductive freedom*: the informants no longer have the responsibility for children living at home and the diverse chores that come with that responsibility.

> The big difference from earlier periods in life is that there are no children who need to be taken care of any longer. That was a very important part of life before ... Now you can allow yourself to be egocentric 'together' to a much larger extent. Even if children and grandchildren are still important, they mainly take care of themselves. (IP 20, LAT man, 70)[5]

In contrast to earlier periods in life, family relations in this life phase have become a question of choice rather than necessity (although often an important choice), and the available time can be focused on each other and time spent together.

Retirement is an even more important source of liberated time. As many of the informants point out, life during the productive second age was often dominated by work and careers. Work competed directly with relationships and often had priority over them. Meanwhile, family life tended to be dictated by functional necessities. The time after retirement (which can be conceptualised as *post-productive freedom*) can be reserved for a relationship, as an 84-year-old married man explains:

> In this relationship we are together every day. There are few nights [in a 14-year relationship] that we haven't spent together side by side in bed. In my earlier relationship I had my job and I was travelling a lot. Some of the time I was stationed in [another town] and I had an apartment there while my [former] wife took care of herself here. She worked as a teacher and had to manage the kids by herself at home. [In my current relationship] there are no kids at home – we have no kids together. And we are together almost every day, almost every minute. Perhaps I'm exaggerating, but I feel that we are together all the time. (IP 23, married man, 84)

For those currently living in a new relationship, the free time generated by retirement and the empty nest directly translates into freedom to spend time with one's partner, doing and experiencing things together. The informants

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repeatedly talk about these new existential life conditions and describe them as providing a new and fundamentally different foundation for intimate relationships in later life. This is well expressed by the informant below:

When I was 20, a partner was a person that you started a family with; had children with, built a house and an economy with and raised kids with. And you had a job and a career and all that. But all of that is over now. The life we live now is a life of luxury in a way. It's so luxurious that it's insolent. (IP 7, LAT man, 68)

The luxury that the informant is referring to is the luxury of having ample time for each other in the relationship – something that he had not experienced earlier in life.

Deeper and more intimate relationships or loneliness

Post-(re)productive life releases free time that can be invested in intimate relationships. Our interviews show that the increased time spent together carries with it the *potential for deeper and more rewarding relationships* than in earlier periods of life. Many informants describe the current relationship in later life as the 'crown' of their relationship life.

Love is amazing, but I don't think that you can experience it before you reach our age. I really don't think so. Not this intensively and close. Because there is really nothing that gets in the way. You don't need to work, you don't need to get up in the morning. You have no kids, no parent–teacher conferences to attend. There are so many things that you have to do in life, and now that you have done them and can enjoy retirement, it's just wonderful! (IP 16, married woman, 68)

As Laslett (1989) points out, retirement opens up a life phase which, given health and a reasonably good economy, holds the potential for self-development through new experiences and the active pursuit of personal interests. However, many people prefer realising these potentials *with* somebody. For some, the partner is a vehicle for enjoying the third age – for travelling, going out, visiting cultural events, and so on – while for others being part of a twosome is a form of self-realisation in itself. Indeed, as some informants retrospectively recall about their earlier lives as single retirees, if one does not have a partner and is not surrounded by friends and family, the *increase in free time could increase the risk of loneliness.* For singles (as well as those who are not happy in their current relationship), the post-productive freedom of retirement can become a trigger for trying to find somebody new to share their newfound free time with. Indeed, some informants started looking for a new partner in close connection to retirement, claiming that they had been quite content being alone earlier in life while they were pursuing their career or being responsible for children as a single parent.

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I didn't have any need [for a partner] before. Now I have. I felt lonely when I retired ... Something was missing. I spent a lot of time alone in my apartment – it was quite simply boring. And then, when I met Björn [her new partner] everything became fun again. (IP 9, LAT woman, 66)

The abundance of available free time after retirement is perhaps even more threatening for those who are widowed and suddenly have no one to share their time with. For widowed persons, a new intimate relationship can represent a significant turning point in life (what Denzin 1989*a* calls an 'epiphany' of life), changing the experience of the remaining life-time from misery ('death's waiting room', in the words of some informants) to a new promising future.

Different conditions in age-heterogeneous relationships

Due to heterogeneous age norms, it is common for one partner to reach retirement ahead of the other, sometimes far ahead (usually the man). In these cases, differences in structural conditions between life phases can create conflicts of interest, if one partner continues to work while the other is looking for a meaningful way to spend his/her free time, as an older co-habiting woman recalls:

I'd been married to this young boy – he was 13 years younger than me – for 33 years or so. And when he was in the middle of his life and totally consumed by work, I had reached retirement. So what did I do? I realised that I had to find somebody new, so I started going dancing [and found a new partner]. (IP 26, co-habiting woman, 78)

Thus, the different existential structures of the second and third ages can be a reason to break up as well as to initiate a new relationship. To avoid a clash between the different possibilities available in different life phases, the younger partner may opt for early retirement. Among established couples in Sweden, early retirement is more common for people with a retired partner, compared to those without (Klevmarken 2010).

To conclude, our informants recurrently talked about their new intimate relationships against the background of the new existential conditions of later life, after the responsibilities of working life and child rearing: that of having much available time to invest in intimate relationships, new or potential. However, our informants' stories were also told against the background of life's finitude – of having little time left. We develop this latter theme below.

Remaining time

The second aspect of time, remaining time, refers to the relatively short expected remaining lifespan of persons in later life. Many of the informants

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have experienced potentially mortal incidents such as a heart attack or cancer, or are suffering from some kind of ailment that constantly reminds them of their mortality (even though most of them experience their health as good or rather good). If they are not unwell themselves, they often have people in their immediate surroundings who have become sick or died.

> I can see in my exercise group that the other participants tend to pass away at the age of 84–85 years ... We used to spend a lot of time with another couple, but now the wife in that couple is more or less on her death bed. (IP 27, co-habiting man, 82)

A very common and shocking reminder of the shortness of the remaining time is the death of a former partner, an experience which has often included closely following a sick and dying person for a period of time. As a consequence, a recurrent theme in the data is the realisation that life is finite and that the remaining time is relatively short, both for the individual and for the relationship – although this horizon might be more or less remote depending on the age and health of the informant. A number of insights follow from this.

'Fragile' relationships

For those in a relationship, a common insight is that the *relationship is fragile* and will most likely dissolve through the passing either of oneself or one's partner. As a consequence, time together is precious, and many of the informants are grateful for every new day that they get to spend with their partner:

> Every day I'm aware that you can't take anything for granted. I'm thankful for the day that I have been given and I'm thankful for the relationship that I have right now. But I'm aware that I can't own it – that it's a gift that I receive every day ... It affects me very much, this awareness that it can all end so quickly. (IP 6, LAT woman, 68)

Starting a new intimate relationship in later life means that being left alone is a realistic prospect, and one which many of the informants can relate to, having already experienced the passing of their former spouse. The insight that the relationship is unavoidably finite and thereby fragile deeply affects the informants' appreciation of their relationships, as is expressed explicitly in the quotation above. Some hope that they will be the first to pass away, or that they will pass away at the same time as their partner, so that they will not have to experience being left alone (again). There is also a strong feeling that the current relationship is likely to be the last; there is simply too little time left to start over again yet once more:

> The only thing you know for sure is that you will die. The question is how and when. It would be preferable to pass away quickly. But we don't think about that, her or me, because being alone again – no, I think it would be even worse the next time if I was

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left alone again . . . It is better to be widowed at 60, because then you have a chance to start over. But at 75–76 I'm happy to have a chance with Inger these last years. But if you're left alone at 80–81, then you're in death's waiting room. (IP 17, LAT man, 78)

In the interviews, 'being left alone' in the future is almost always synonymous with being widowed. Voluntary separation is not an expected future transition, and is very seldom considered an option among informants living in new relationships. This could be a result of the selective voluntary sampling, but also it is not seen as reasonable to separate this late in life. Moreover, because of the short remaining time, the risk of 'growing apart' is not perceived as a possibility:

When you're young, when you're 20, 22, 23 years old . . . There's nothing that says that the relationship will develop like this all the time [shows two parallel lines with his hands]. Normally you will grow apart in some respect. But now, for us – we'll never be able to grow apart. (IP 17, LAT man, 78)

All in all, the current relationship is perceived as something of a happy but unlikely and unexpected chance, which in contrast to earlier periods in life is not likely to repeat itself, and so is perceived as something very precious. As a consequence, the feeling is commonly expressed that one has to be careful with the relationship and be *especially considerate* with one's partner in old age:

When you reach 70 – I'm nearly 70 and Ove is 76 – you have lived most of your life. That's the simple truth. And then you have to be very considerate with each other. You have to show respect for life and for each other. You can't say and do things that your partner doesn't like. You have to be more considerate with each other than when you were young and both had your own jobs and could do things in your own way. (IP 16, married woman, 68)

I think it is very important to have a good relationship in old age. It's perhaps even more important than when you were young, I think, because when you're young you can always say – 'if this relationship fails there's always another'. But you can't think like that at my age – you can't afford to. (IP 2, single man, 91)

A sense of urgency

If one aspect of the increasing realisation of life's finitude is that relationships are fragile and partners have to care for each other, another is that life together must be lived deliberately. Although death is a constant companion, the informants often claim not to worry about it. If anything, the realisation that the remaining life together can be short increases the focus on enjoying and experiencing the present, or *seizing the day*.

If it's a happy relationship, you pretend that life is eternal. I think we both do it. We have this wonderful present, where every minute is important, and then life becomes long because every minute is of such high quality. (IP 21, co-habiting woman, 78)

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One aspect of seizing the day is a *sense of urgency*: one should not leave anything for tomorrow, but fulfil one's relationship plans before it is too late. Some couples take the quick decision to marry or, as in the example below, to move in together shortly after having met, arguing that late in life there is nothing to gain from being cautious:

> [We moved in together and got engaged very quickly] simply because we're so old that we don't have any time for reflection and all that. If we want something now we take it at once ... We have our future behind us. (IP 22, co-habiting man, 88)

There are many stories in our data that show how strong this sense of urgency is. Exceptionally, and in contrast to what is said about fragile and considerate relationships above, some of our informants mention that they or somebody they know had left their partner when the partner developed dementia, because they perceived this as practically having been widowed and they wanted to get on with their lives before it was too late. One informant even argued that one owes it to oneself to leave one's partner at the slightest sign of illness or disability, so as not to waste any of the precious remaining time:

> I've said [to my partner] that 'if I were to fall ill now ... you have to get on with your life. Let my children or the social services take care of me, because you shouldn't tie yourself up taking care of me for the rest of your life' ... I would be able to [do the same thing]. For example, now she has a problem with her legs. If it got worse and we were no longer able to hike in the mountains, it would be a great handicap, and then I have to say that I would definitely – oh, I don't know, it's hard ... I've spent my whole life being faithful, caring and responsible and now I have a few years left and I want to feel that I'm responsible only for myself ... Life is short. (IP 7, LAT man, 68)

It should be noted that the attitude in the quote above is exceptional. People's priorities seem to change when they are actually in an established relationship and the partner becomes the main focus of their life. Most of the informants currently in a new relationship feel that it is natural and acceptable to be the care-giver of their partner, should they fall ill.

However, the sense of urgency may also be a reason *not* to initiate new relationships, or may at least affect the choice of partner. Since finding a new relationship is intimately connected with fulfilling the promise of the third age, the health of one's partner is an important issue for singles and also for some informants living in a relationship. A potential partner's ill-health can be experienced as an obstacle to realising the dreams they have for their remaining time, or even as a pure waste of the precious resource of time. This is reflected by one informant's answer to the interviewer's question about what characterises an ideal partner:

> Rather [than age] the state of health I'd say, if I'm allowed to be cynical. I backed out of a relationship with a woman who turned out to have a chronic condition. (IP 20, LAT man, 70)

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The importance of health is perhaps best expressed by the single female participants, who jealously guard their autonomy and want to avoid becoming the nurse of (yet) another man. This issue has also been reported in previous research on LAT relationships (*see e.g.* Ghazanfareeon Karlsson and Borell 2002; Davidson 2001, 2002). The quotation from a single woman below illustrates this attitude:

> As a relatively healthy woman I won't take the risk of having to take care of somebody. I mean, at 60 I was willing to take that risk, and I would have helped Emil [former husband] of course, because that love was so profound. But not now – it would limit my life. (IP 14, single woman, 73)

Expiration date

The sense of urgency is perhaps best expressed by the old singles, who often feel that the time for finding a new partner is quickly slipping away – that soon they will be too old to be able to enjoy a new relationship or too frail to attract a partner:

> I've met plenty of men over the last few years. But these relationships have all been passing, mostly sexual, almost only sexual . . . But in the end I'll become too old and I'll bring [this dating lifestyle] to an end. I think that it'll end automatically, or else I'll find a fat old man that I never imagined I would [fall for]. (IP 10, single woman, 67)

For some people there is a feeling that it is already *too late*; for example, too late to create a new common household and leave behind the safety of one's home and history for an unknown future, or too late to get to know and trust a new and previously unknown partner if one's present partner should pass away. A consequence of this is that a striking number of the informants in our data-set have *returned to past relationships* or initiated relationships with former friends – people who they already know well, sometimes even intimately – arguing that it minimises the time that it takes to connect, and also reconnects them with their past.

> If I place a personal ad, and I get an answer from a 'happy 70-year-old in Skåne' [distant region], I won't be able to develop trust for that person until after another five or ten years. But when you have met in your youth and then reconnect 50 years later, then you already have that trust. (IP 17, LAT man, 78)

Like some other informants in our data, after being widowed the male informant in the quotation above had returned to a partner with whom he had had an intimate relationship earlier in his life (in this case, 50 years earlier).

With time, the horizon for active dating decreases and creates ambivalence towards new intimate relationships, because of the time it takes to establish a new relationship (including possibly breaking up from a

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former partner). This is the case with the single woman below, who had recently met a married man:

> He [a potential partner who is in a lifelong marriage] said 'if I had been 50 I would have had no doubt about what to do'. But now he's 70. And I replied 'no, don't rush off making a big fuss, please don't, not for me anyway' ... I'm 73 years old. In seven years I will be 80 – I might not even be alive by then. So there mustn't be any turmoil ... I'm 73 years old now. At that age you can't go about breaking up children, wife and family. They would think I was out of my mind ... And then it takes a couple of years. Since I've been divorced I know. You can't just walk out of the door. You have responsibilities towards the person you live with. And I mean, how old would we be then? I could even be dead and buried. There is no point even beginning. (IP 14, single woman, 73)

As the interviewee notes, both relationships and separations take time, and there is little time left. It could be argued that there is a certain 'expiration date' both for separations and for new relationships, and as people age in later life this date approaches.

To conclude, restricted remaining time can be a driving force towards initiating new intimate relationships in later life, but it can also be an obstacle. In any case, the remaining time horizon is highly significant for our interviewees when they discuss new intimate relationships.

Discussion

Above, we have argued that the two themes of post-(re)productive free time and remaining time are significant for the formation of new intimate relationships in later life, and create conditions for new relationships that differ from those in earlier periods of life. Below, we discuss our findings in relation to Heidegger's work on being and time, and argue that the existential structure of later life formed by our two time concepts might be useful not only for understanding new intimate relationships in later life but also for understanding being in later life in a more general sense.

Much of our (life) time is normally reserved for projects that are to some extent determined from the outside (such as tradition/necessity). The major project of the first 15–25 years of life is normally socialisation in different forms (what Laslett 1989 calls the first age). This is followed by adult life, which for most people is primarily reserved for two projects: work and reproduction (what Laslett 1989 calls the second age). In a Marxian perspective, a large amount of personal (life) time is sold off as abstract work for an employer to put to use in production, based on the goals of the employer rather than those of the workers. For most people, work demands

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much of their adult life-time. The second major adult life-project is bringing up children. Traditionally (and also in the lives of our informants) this has been the life-project of women in particular, who have spent much of their life-time on this project. Both work and bringing up children demand a lot of time, and other life-projects normally have to fit between these major projects. A very real difference in the conditions of life before and after retirement and parenting is that life after retirement is for the first time marked by having vast amounts of *available time* for (reasonably) self-selected life-projects, such as close or intimate relationships. This is aided by the fact that even if many of the informants are grandparents, their grandchildren do not consume much of their time.

If one side of the existential structure of later life is the availability of post-(re)productive free time, the other side is the growing awareness that (life)time is running out. Even if the particular socio-structural conditions of late modern society have extended the healthy lifespan and created a new life phase, a third age, which can be used for late-in-life self-realisation, there is still an inevitable end to life. If anything, the limit to life has become more predictable than ever. It is interesting to note that according to disengagement theory, a driving force behind disengagement is an 'awareness of finitude', defined as the amount of time the ageing person believes he or she has left before death (Sill 1980). In our research, the informants are clearly aware that the end of their lives is approaching, and they reflect on new relationships against this background. However, in contrast to the predictions of disengagement theory, most of our informants draw the conclusion that they have to make the most of whatever time remains, and that a new partner is one way of doing so (of course, this might be due to our sample, most of whom had met a new partner). Meeting a new partner is a major life event which allows people to redefine their remaining time. For example, before they met their new partner they might have been convinced that life was over (being in 'death's waiting room'), but afterwards they reconstruct this representation of their future as being given a new lease of life.

An important consequence of Heidegger's argument that being-in-the-world is being-already-in-the-world (the thrownness of being) is that it is dependent on the particular historical conditions under which it exists. It is clear that the existential structure of being in later life that we have described above is historically dependent. In contemporary Sweden, as in many other parts of the Western world, those born between and immediately after the two world wars belong to generations who have experienced rapid economic expansion, as well as gains in health and welfare. Now they find themselves (*thrown*) in a world where life expectancy is longer than before. Even if death remains unpredictable, as Heidegger suggests, due to medical advances and

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systems of risk reduction, death is a lot more predictable than it used to be historically, and most people can expect to live in relatively good health well into old age. Retirement age has not advanced accordingly. This is the background of the third age, which can be characterised as the *addition of available free time* to the average life – for this life-time, new projects such as new relationships can be imagined.

Above, we have argued that *the existential structure of being-in-the-world [dasein] in later life* in this particular socio-historical context is the paradoxical condition of *having lots of available time but little time left*. This has a very central role in determining attitudes to, expectations of and experiences of new intimate relationships in later life. By using time as a theorising frame in our analysis, we have shown how the two aspects, *post-(re)productive free time* and *remaining time*, are central to understanding both the conditions for the formation of new intimate relationships, and the meaning given to these relationships in later life.

However, these existential conditions are present not only for the Swedish age groups represented in our sample, but probably in many parts of the contemporary Western world, and are consequently relevant to analysing new intimate relationships there as well. Also, and importantly, this structure is probably applicable to the study of other areas of later life besides new intimate relationships. Most obviously, it is likely that many of our findings can be generalised to older people living in lifelong marriages, since the existential structure should be present in their lives as well. The effects might, however, be different at the end of lifelong relationships than at the beginning of new ones. In a broader sense, it seems reasonable that the existential structure might impact on life choices and actions in areas of later life other than intimate relationships. Of course, all of these arguments about the applicability of the structure identified in this article to different areas or contexts are of an analytical nature, and have yet to be empirically tested. Still, we would argue that the existential structure might be a fruitful point of departure for future social gerontological research.

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NOTES

1 Sweden is, in some respects, an extreme case of late (Western) modernity. It has one of the world's oldest populations, with a high life expectancy (men 79.5 years; women 84.5 years) and a large proportion of senior citizens (18.5% of the population are 65+). Also, its state-supported individualism (Berggren and Trägårdh 2006) gives a large amount of economic independence to the individual, resulting in one of the world's largest proportions of single households (24% in 2010) and comparatively high divorce rates. In 2010, almost half of dissolved marriages ended in divorce (45%), with the other half ending in widowhood (55%) (Öberg 2013). To the extent that other countries follow the same demographic developments as Sweden, the Swedish case might point to more general relationship trends in later life.

2 The impact of the relationship history (covered deductively by our interview theme: *the history of relationships over the full lifecourse*) will be presented in a forthcoming article.

3 Of these four articles, only two were relevant to the time concept, using 'temporality' as a keyword for discussing biographical change (Heikkinen 2000, 2004). The other two articles used the keywords 'time volunteering' and 'time series'.

4 The aims of the wider research project were to study attitudes to initiating new intimate relationships in later life; expectations of what a new intimate relationship might offer the individual (emotionally, sexually, socially, economically and in terms of informal care); factual experiences of new intimate relationships in later life and the forms these relationships take (marriage, co-habitation, LAT, dating, casual meetings, *etc.*); these attitudes, expectations and experiences against the background of earlier relationship careers; and how experiences of new relationships in later life affect the experiences of ageing and life satisfaction.

5 In parentheses: the number assigned to the interviewed person (IP), the type of relationship (married, co-habiting, LAT or single), sex and age.

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