

Societal trends and lifecourse events affecting diversity in later life

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Key points

- Developments started in the second half of the 20th century result in new demographic values and behaviour among young adults and among older adults. Standard life biographies are replaced by choice biographies involving diverse lifestyles and life strategies.
- Consequently, in addition to the current partner status, the partner history needs to be taken into account.
- Partner status and partner history together affect the social integration of older adults as far as children and the broader family are concerned. This is illustrated with empirical research among older adults in the Netherlands.
- Policy makers need to take into account the diversity in support needs as related to the aforementioned variety in social contacts of older adults.

Key readings

- Coleman, M., Ganong, L. and Fine, M. (2000) 'Reinvestigating remarriage: another decade of progress', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol 62, pp 1288-307.
- De Jong Gierveld, J. and Dykstra, P.A. (2002) 'The longterm rewards of parenting: older adults' marital history and the likelihood of receiving support from adult children', *Ageing International*, vol 27, no 3, pp 49-69.

Introduction

In the context of the description, and investigation of the mechanisms behind late-life diversity, the lifecourse perspective is broadly accepted as a useful paradigm.

[Lifecourse theory] locates people in a historical context and life stage, highlights the differential timing and connectedness of people's lives, and stresses the role of individuals in shaping their own lives. (Elder, 1995, p 47)

Two of the facets of the lifecourse theory will be addressed in this chapter: historical time and life events, both of which affect the individual's 'biography'.

The historical time underlines the importance of historical changes at the macro level for life patterns, opportunities and restrictions facing both younger and older adults. The severe economic problems of the Great Depression and the consequences of the Second World War are frequently mentioned as examples in this context. The effects of particular historical changes will vary in type and relative influence across the lifecourse, and might thus be different for younger and older adults. In this chapter, the demographic and social effects of changes in the socio-structural and socio-cultural components of society starting around 1968/70 in different regions of Europe will be addressed. Research up until now has pointed out that young adults are deeply affected by these trends: new types of demographic behaviour and attitudes can be seen (Van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1988; Liefbroer, 1999). I intend to investigate if and to what extent, older adults' lives have also been affected by these more recent changes. In this chapter, I will briefly describe some of the macro-level trends, and in doing so I will try to answer the first research question:

- Are older adults' behaviour and attitudes affected and shaped by the socio-structural developments and the changing values and norms of the final decades of the 20th century?

Life events are related to how individuals move through life. Events (transitions, status passages) and trajectories (the phases of life delineated by the events that occur at given points in time) characterise the personal 'biography' (Dykstra and Van Wissen, 1999): In the second, micro-level section of this chapter, I would like to illustrate the relationship between specific characteristics (life events) of the persons' biography and diversity in later life. More specifically, I would like to investigate widowhood versus divorce, and living alone versus repartnering, as well as the consequences of these events for the social embeddedness and social well-being of older adults. Empirical investigation of ageing and social embeddedness has been approached almost exclusively from the perspective of the current marital status. In this chapter, I would like to illustrate that it might be important to take into account older adults' marital histories as well. So, the second research question is:

- Starting from the life events of widowhood, divorce and repartnering, what can be said about late-life diversity among older adults, and more specifically diversity as far as social embeddedness and social well-being are concerned?

Societal trends

The period starting around 1960/70 can be characterised as a period of in-depth societal changes in several countries of Europe. Behavioural patterns, norms and attitudes concerning fertility, and the formation and dissolution of

unions that had been changing for several decennia already are from that point in time affecting the broader audience of (young) adults. These changes are caused and supported by in-depth socio-structural changes, cultural changes and technological innovations (Van de Kaa, 1987, 1994; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1988; Liefbroer, 1998, 1999; Lesthaeghe and Neels, 2001).

Important facets of the socio-structural changes that have taken place are a general increase in wealth, social security programmes, and health provision for both younger and older persons. During the second half of the 20th century, educational advancement has improved substantially. More young male and female adults than ever before are continuing full-time education up to high school and university levels. These changes have contributed to the increase of young women and mothers participating in the labour force, and in an important change in the relationships between men and women, more particularly in the position of women in society. The prolonged period spent in education, in particular of women, has also affected patterns of union formation and fertility (Van de Kaa, 1987). In several countries, combining motherhood and employment is difficult due to shortages in day-care facilities and an unequal division of labour, including family responsibilities, between husbands and wives. The expectation that they will be confronted with these obstacles is the reason why in many countries women, especially the better educated, now prefer to postpone union formation, marriage and the birth of a first child (Liefbroer and De Jong Gierveld, 1993). At the beginning of the 21st century, the mean mother's age at first birth had risen to 29 years in the Netherlands, Switzerland and a number of their neighbouring countries.

Cultural changes that have taken place in Europe have influenced the system of norms and values cherished by young and older adults, and values matter for all-important choices in life (Lesthaeghe and Moors, 2000). The past few decades have seen a decline in normative control on the behaviour of young adults, enabling them to fulfil their wishes and preferences to a much greater extent than their peers were able to do in the past. The authority of existing normative institutions, the authority of parents and the authority of the church have been eroded. Not only has the authority to exert normative control declined in recent decades, but the wish to exert such control has diminished as well (Liefbroer, 1999). These changes are linked to processes such as secularisation (Lesthaeghe and Neels, 2001) and individualisation, which affect the opportunities of individuals to decide for themselves how they wish to organise their lives.

Standard biographies, which entail a fixed ordering of life events (leaving the parental home to marry, followed by childbirth, the mother taking care of children and the home, being married until the death of one of the partners and continuing life as a widow or widower, living alone or co-residing with one of the children) have been – to a certain extent – replaced by choice biographies (Du Bois-Reymond and De Jong Gierveld, 1993). Choice biographies include the dominance of personal preferences concerning one's life and lifestyle over traditional, standard pathways, a trend that set in at the

beginning of the 1950s, gained a massive group of followers by the end of the 1960s, and still persists. Characteristic of choice biographies is the growing diversity in living arrangements and combinations of realised life events. A biography may include such events as leaving the parental home to start living independently, followed by unmarried cohabitation, end of the unmarried cohabitation and return to the parental home, leaving the parental home for the second time, unmarried cohabitation, marriage, postponement of parenthood, separation and divorce, and so on. Young adults will be the first to accept and follow these new behavioural patterns.

I would like to make a plea for the investigation of the preferences for personal decision making concerning one's life and lifestyle, and choice biographies, among older adults as well. A first indicator of an individualistic lifestyle among older people is living independently in a one-person household after widowhood, in contrast to co-residence, the latter being connected to lifestyles that favour traditional patterns of family life. In the Census round 1990/91, it is pointed out that by far the majority of widowed men and women aged 50-80 years in northern, western and southern Europe are living in a one-person household (De Jong Gierveld et al, 2001).

The most influential technological innovation that triggered the new societal trends in European demographic behaviour was the introduction and widespread distribution of reliable contraceptives during the 1960s. The general availability of these products has enabled couples and individuals to regulate the number, timing and spacing of their children. Moreover, the influence of TV in the same period over the lives of people has further enhanced the acceptance of new lifestyles and informed younger and older people about new ways of life (Van de Kaa, 1994; Liefbroer, 1999).

The three broad sets of macro factors – socio-structural changes, cultural changes and technological innovations – together influenced the personal values, norms and preferences of broad layers of society. In addition, people had the possibility to actually realise their preferences during the course of their lives, so new biographies became an option for an ever-increasing proportion of the European population.

Empirical research by Liefbroer and Dykstra (2000) pointed out that in this context the year 1970 is indeed to be considered as a 'watershed' between the demographic attitudes and behaviours in the Netherlands before and after 1970. Based on several aspects of life (such as labour market participation of young mothers and divorce rates), the crucial developments of the 1960s and 1970s are illustrated.

Young adults in particular were affected by these developments, in that they re-evaluated union formation and marriage and postponed life decisions resulting in non-reversible outcomes such as childbearing. Investigation has yet to be carried out as to whether older adults were also affected by these developments. We hypothesise that ideas about marital and partner status – divorce, followed by living alone, remarriage, unmarried cohabitation or living

apart together (LAT) – are being widely reconsidered among older people in Europe (De Jong Gierveld, 2002).

Lifecourse differentiation among older adults

A fairly large proportion of current older adults has been confronted with life events that were rather uncommon during their younger, formative years. Either as a consequence of their own or others' decisions, many older adults nowadays follow pathways other than those laid down in the standard biography. Divorce is one of the central life events in the non-standard biography. In addition, widowhood is postponed to higher ages, both for women and men. Older adults are well aware that living alone after divorce or widowhood increases the risk of loneliness (Walker, 1993), and that repartnering might provide them with a strong emotional bond and alleviate loneliness (De Jong Gierveld, 1998). Finding a new partner is a course that might especially attract men who feel deprived of the taken-for-granted sentient activities carried out for them by their former wives (Dykstra, 1990; Mason, 1996). Others, especially widows who might have cared for ailing former spouses, will hesitate to relinquish their new-found freedom and independence (Pyke, 1994; Lopata, 1996). The demographic imbalance in sex ratio favours men in finding a new partner at an advanced age, and for women the pool of suitable men diminishes as they age. This is intensified because males at higher ages tend to prefer females who are significantly younger than them (Morgan and Kunkel, 1998). When considering whether to take a new partner, the widowed or divorced woman or man has to weigh the pros and cons carefully. One of the issues to be considered is type of living arrangement: remarriage, unmarried cohabitation or LAT (Chevan, 1996; Davidson, 2002; Stevens, 2002; Peters and Liefbroer, 1997; Coleman et al, 2000; Karlsson and Borell, 2002).

Most older adults who adhere to traditional values will opt for remarriage, and those who incorporate more individualistic ideas will favour a consensual union or LAT (De Jong Gierveld and Peeters, 2002). Research has pointed out the financial and social consequences of divorce and subsequent repartnering, mostly concentrating on younger or middle-aged adults. The long-term consequences of divorce and repartnering on the social aspects of life, social embeddedness and well-being of older adults has not yet attracted much research. Moreover, the phenomenon has been approached almost exclusively from the perspective of the current marital status. Wolf et al (1997), for example, have shown that the children of widows and widowers 'step in' when their parents need help. In this chapter, I would like to illustrate that it might be important to take into account older adults' marital histories as part of their individual lifecourses because it might help elicit several facets of diversity in later life. In doing this, I have chosen to elaborate on some outcomes of survey research among older adults in the Netherlands.

Design of empirical research

This section makes use of data from the *Living arrangements and social networks of older adults* survey (Knipscheer et al, 1995). In 1992, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 4,494 men and women aged 55-89 years. The response rate was 62%. The sample can be considered as representative for the Dutch population aged 55+ (Broese van Groenou et al, 1995). Considering the non-response problems when interviewing an elderly population, the results are satisfactory, too. The sample was stratified according to sex and year of birth. Names and addresses came from the registers of 11 municipalities in the Netherlands: the city of Amsterdam and two rural communities in the western part of the country; one city and four rural communities in the north-eastern part; and one city and two rural communities in the south.

For this specific analysis, 10 subgroups of respondents were selected:

- women and men still in first marriage;
- women and men ever been widowed and never divorced, living alone;
- women and men ever been widowed and never divorced, repartnered;
- women and men ever having been divorced and live alone;
- women and men ever having been divorced, repartnered.

We refrained from introducing older adults' official marital status, because this is no longer a reliable indicator of their partner status and living arrangements.

Based on the principle of the lifecourse, various details were requested about the beginning, the continuation and the dissolution of each of the partner relationships in his or her life. Current partner status is asked:

1. Are you currently living with someone (= person of the opposite or the same sex) whom you consider to be a partner? In the Netherlands, as in more European countries, the partner in this context is explicitly meant and understood as an intimate, (potential) sexual relationship.
2. Is there someone with whom you do not share living quarters but do consider being a partner?

A second selection criterion was the availability of data about social network and social well-being. Respondents who did not answer these questions, and respondents without living children, have been omitted from this analysis. This provided us with a subsample of 3,325 men and women. In one of the sections of this study, we concentrate on repartnering at 50+, omitting those repartnered before the age of 50. This reduced the subsample to 3,204 respondents.

The number of surviving children is the first of the social network characteristics used in this study. Second, for each of the surviving children, we asked the respondents whether they were in touch with them regularly and whether they were important to them. Third, we asked the respondents to

indicate the frequency of contact (face-to-face, by telephone or otherwise) with each child on a scale ranging from daily to several times per year.

Loneliness is defined as an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (quality of) certain relationships. Loneliness includes situations where the number of existing relationships is smaller than desirable or acceptable, as well as situations where the intimacy wished for has not been realised (De Jong Gierveld, 1998). Loneliness is measured by the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (De Jong Gierveld and Kamphuis, 1985; De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg, 1999). The 11-item scale includes positively and negatively formulated items and has good psychometric properties (Van Tilburg and De Leeuw, 1991). The scale ranges from 0 (not lonely) to 11 (ultimately lonely). Respondents with a scale score of three or more are lonely.

The sample

Table 12.1 shows the respondents' demographic and social statistics. Men aged 55–89 are more frequently in first marriage and women are less frequently in first marriage but over-represented among the widowed living alone. Differences in life expectancy between men and women and differences in age at first marriage are the most important determinants of this finding. Of the ever-

Table 12.1: Descriptive statistics of the respondents by sex and lifecourse types

	n	Mean age ¹	Mean number of children alive ²
<i>Men</i>			
First marriage	1,185	70.6 ^b	3.2 ^{a,b}
Widowed, alone	237	80.4 ^d	3.4 ^{a,b}
Widowed, repartnered	113	75.5 ^c	3.6 ^b
<i>of which repartnered after 50</i>	72	76.8	3.6
Ever divorced, alone	41	70.1 ^b	3.1 ^{a,b}
Ever divorced, repartnered	85	69.8 ^b	2.7 ^a
<i>of which repartnered after 50</i>	44	70.2	2.6
<i>Women</i>			
First marriage	808	66.7 ^a	3.2 ^{a,b}
Widowed, alone	699	77.0 ^c	3.5 ^b
Widowed, repartnered	40	69.3 ^b	3.5 ^b
<i>of which repartnered after 50</i>	21	72.3	2.9
Ever divorced, alone	81	69.8 ^b	3.2 ^{a,b}
Ever divorced, repartnered	36	65.3 ^a	3.3 ^{a,b}
<i>of which repartnered after 50</i>	16	66.9	4.3

Notes: $n=3,325$.

¹ Anova: $F_{(325,9)}=92.087, p < 0.001$. Results from Waller-Duncan tests for the 10 main subgroups are provided. Not overlapping letter codes per column indicate significant differences between the subgroups, for example, women in first marriage (indicated by 'a') are significantly younger than ever-divorced women living alone ('b'), and both subgroups are significantly younger than widows living alone ('c').

² Anova: $F_{(325,9)}=2.306, p < 0.05$. Results from Waller-Duncan tests for the 10 main subgroups are provided. Not overlapping letter codes per column indicate significant differences between the subgroups.

widowed men in this sample, 32% have repartnered, compared with only 5% of the widows. Repartnering is a characteristic of all age groups, but in Table 12.1 shows that half or more of the repartnering widowed men and women start a new partner relationship after the age of 50.

Ever having been divorced intensifies the heterogeneity and diversity in older adults' biographies compared with their peers some decades ago. The majority of the ever-divorced men (67%) have repartnered, compared with a minority of ever-divorced women (31%). Although the age at which people are confronted with the death of the partner is in general higher than the mean age at divorce, the portion of respondents who started a new partner relationship after age 50 is still around 45% or 50% of all the divorced repartnering in this sample.

Mean age of the respondents differs significantly when comparing men and women in the various lifecourse types: widowers living alone are by far the oldest group, followed by widows living alone, and women either in first marriage or repartnered after divorce belong to the youngest age groups.

The mean number of children varies significantly from relatively low for ever-divorced and repartnered men, to high-for widowed men and women. These differences might be related to the age structure of the sample, widows and widowers being among the oldest groups of respondents and having formed a family at a time when having several children was the social norm. In the following sections I take this into account by controlling phenomena for age differences in the sample.

Results

Interconnectedness with children

In this section, I concentrate on the interconnectedness with children and, in doing so, select from the repartnered those who started the current partner relationship relatively recently, for example, after age 50. Table 12.2 shows that after controlling for differences in age between the respondents, the variations in mean number of living children are not significant for the subgroups of lifecourse types and gender. However, the differences in the mean numbers of children mentioned in the social network proved to be significantly different for the older adults in the various lifecourse types, for example, men in first marriage and widowers have significantly higher average numbers of children in their social network than divorced men. Moreover, Table 12.2 shows that the mean numbers of children contacted on a weekly basis or more frequently differs significantly: widows living alone are at the top of the list with a mean number of 2.3 children contacted at least weekly.

Men and women still in first marriages and widowers living alone follow with 2.2 and 2.1 respectively as mean numbers of children contacted at least weekly. Other subgroups lag behind; this is especially so for the ever-divorced men. For this group, living alone or being repartnered does not make much

difference; the mean number of children contacted weekly is 1.0. And, although the number of living children for widowers alone (3.2) and divorced men alone (3.1) is only marginally different, the number of weekly contacts with children differs enormously between widowers alone (2.1), and divorced men alone (1.0). Although the mean number of living children for older widows living alone as well as for divorced women alone is high, the differences elicited in Table 12.2 for mean number of children contacted at least weekly differs significantly between 2.3 for widows alone and 1.5 for divorced women living alone.

Older adults and loneliness

According to the data of Table 12.2, respondents of several lifecourse types have a mean loneliness score that is 3.0 or higher, indicating moderate or extreme loneliness: widowers living alone (3.6), ever-divorced men living alone (4.3), and ever-divorced women living alone (3.8). Those in first marriage form the most important subgroups with lower mean loneliness scores.

Table 12.2: Interconnectedness with children, and loneliness of older adults with at least one child alive, corrected for differences in age; by sex, and lifecourse types; results of Multiple Classification Analyses

	<i>n</i>	Number of children alive ¹	Number of children in network ²	Number of children contacted weekly ³	Loneliness score ⁴
<i>Men</i>					
First marriage	1,185	3.3	2.8	2.2	1.6
Widowed, alone	237	3.2	2.6	2.1	3.6
Widowed, repartnered after 50	72	3.5	2.9	1.7	2.2
Ever divorced, alone	41	3.1	2.4	1.0	4.3
Ever divorced, repartnered after 50	44	2.6	1.7	1.0	2.9
<i>Women</i>					
First marriage	808	3.3	2.7	2.1	1.7
Widowed, alone	699	3.4	2.8	2.3	2.9
Widowed, repartnered after 50	21	2.9	2.3	1.7	2.7
Ever divorced, alone	81	3.2	2.2	1.5	3.8
Ever divorced, repartnered after 50	16	–	–	–	–

Notes: *n*=3,204.

¹ $F_{(3204, 8)} = 1.825, p = 0.059$, not significant

² $F_{(3199, 8)} = 3.484, p < 0.001$

³ $F_{(3199, 8)} = 10.145, p < 0.001$

⁴ $F_{(3199, 8)} = 29.813, p < 0.001$

Conclusions

The aim of this study was first, to present the leading characteristics of the social and demographic changes that started around 1960/70 all over Europe. Socio-structural and cultural changes have had a major impact on the demographic attitudes and behaviour of young adults, but they have also affected the living conditions of older adults. These societal trends were illustrated in the first section of this chapter. The second section addressed the effects of the aforementioned trends on diversity in later life. Here, I differentiated older adults in 10 subgroups according to gender, current partner status, and partner history. Detailed characteristics of the start, the continuation and the dissolution of (each of the) partner relationships of the respondents were used to investigate their social embeddedness within the family.

The results of the study underscore the importance of looking at the diversity of the biographical history to understand the variations in familial embeddedness of older adults and the likelihood of being confronted with loneliness. Social embeddedness within the familial network as measured via the frequency of contacts with children is high among women and men in first marriage. Reciprocity in support giving and receiving between the older parental couple and their adult children is mentioned by Klein Ikkink et al (1999) as a driving mechanism in this context. Moreover, the number of children contacted on at least a weekly basis is high among widows and widowers living alone. Apparently children step in to provide instrumental and emotional support when older parents are becoming widowed (Lopata, 1996; Wolf et al, 1997).

The mechanisms mentioned for parental first-marriage couples in frequent contact with their children is not recognisable in the relationship of adult children and their widowed and subsequently repartnered parents. The repartnered parents are characterised by less frequent contact with children than those in first marriages. Embeddedness after repartnering might be affected by a confusing readjustment process. First, the repartnering may be a stressful event for both partners (Henry and Lovelace, 1995), because many changes have to be faced, such as moving to a new home and adapting to new household rules. Repartnered older adults require time and energy to 'invest' in each other, which may result in their having less time for their children and grandchildren (Spitze and Logan, 1992). Second, people who start a new partner relationship at an older age are confronted with a lack of social norms and guidelines regarding their role. Older partners may be unsure about how to relate to married stepchildren and their families (Coleman et al, 2000). One also has to take into account that the repartnering of a parent may profoundly affect any children in the new relationship. A child may feel distressed when someone takes the special place of a deceased father or mother. And a neglected aspect of the reaction of adult children towards their parent and a new partner is the resentment associated with the use of the family home by the new partner, and uncertainty about the future. What about the inheritance, for example? This may lead to ambiguous feelings.

The subgroups of divorced older adults are worth investigating separately. Here the gender differences are very prominent: divorced fathers (be they living alone or repartnered) score lowest in frequency of contact with children – much lower than divorced women.

The pattern of social embeddedness of older adults according to lifecourse patterns is also reflected in the patterns of loneliness registered.

Future policies should take into account not only older adults' situation of currently living with a partner versus living alone, but also the diversity in social embeddedness as related to the more detailed partner history of older adults.

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