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Dating after late-life spousal loss: Does it compromise relationships with adult children?

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ABSTRACT

In *Widowhood in an American City* (1973), Helena Lopata observed that widows struggle with new romantic relationships because their children often are resentful toward these new partners. Since the publication of Lopata's classic work, however, few studies have explored empirically the ways that widow(er)'s dating affects their relationships with children. We use prospective data from the Changing Lives of Older Couples study (CLOC) to explore: (1) the impact of bereaved spouses' dating on positive and negative aspects of parent–child relationships six and 18 months postloss; (2) the extent to which these associations are explained by preloss characteristics; and (3) the factors that moderate the association between widow(er) dating and parent–child relations. Multivariate analyses show that widowers who are interested in dating six months postloss report low levels of support and high levels of conflict with their children, yet widows report enhanced relationship quality. This pattern reflects the fact that men who are interested in dating do form new relationships, whereas women's interests are not translated into actual dating. Widowers' dating six months postloss compromises parent–child closeness among those with a history of strained parent–child relations, yet enhances closeness among those with historically good relationships. Dating takes a harsher toll on parent–daughter compared to parent–son relationships. Overall, dating threatens parent–child relationships in specific cases, yet it may also strengthen widow(er)'s parent–child bonds. We discuss the implications for the well-being of older widow(er)s and adult children.

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Introduction

In her classic study *Widowhood in an American City*, Helena Lopata (1973) provided one of the first detailed portraits of recently bereaved older women, revealing the far-ranging effects of widowhood on older women's social, emotional, and economic well-being. One of her most provocative findings was the complex role of new romantic relationships in widows' lives; the benefits of companionship and physical affection often were counterbalanced by the strains created in parent–child relationships: “widows report that their offspring resent

any man who enters the house as a companion ... of the mother” (p. 100).

Since the publication of Lopata's seminal works, several contemporary qualitative studies found that adult children may disapprove of their recently bereaved fathers (Rushton, 2007; Van den Hoonaard, 2010) and mothers (Bonnar, 2004; Davidson, 2002) dating, at least in the months immediately following the death. However, we know of no systematic empirical analyses that explore the effect of bereaved spouses' dating on positive and negative aspects of parent–child relationships, whether the impact varies based on how soon after the death a widow(er) begins dating, whether these patterns reflect pre-existing familial strains, and which factors may moderate these associations.

Our study investigates three research questions: (1) to what extent are positive and negative aspects of parent–child

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relationships affected by the widowed parent's dating six and 18 months postloss; (2) are these associations accounted for by prior relationship quality, health, and sociodemographic factors; and (3) do the effects of dating vary based on the parent's gender, gender of children, and the quality of parent-child relations prior to loss? Understanding how older widow(er)s' new relationships affect intergenerational relations is an increasingly important concern. More than 40% of women and 14% of men ages 65 and older are currently widowed (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2010), and an estimated 85% to 90% have at least one living child (Koropecj-Cox & Call, 2007). Social norms promoting greater acceptance of later-life sexual behavior, and improvements in older adults' health and longevity today suggest that future cohorts of widowed older adults may increasingly seek out new romantic relationships, and may struggle to integrate these new relationships into their family lives (Fisher, 2010).

Background

Dating among older widows and widowers

Following the death of a spouse, older widows and widowers must adjust emotionally and practically to the loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Most older bereaved spouses report symptoms of depression, sadness, anxiety, and loneliness within the first six to 12 months postloss, although major depression is rare (e.g., Bonanno et al., 2002). Social engagement, whether time spent with family, friends, or formal social organizations, is considered a critical pathway to readjustment (Ha, Carr, Utz, & Nesse, 2006; Utz, Carr, Nesse, & Wortman, 2002). New romantic partnerships also may facilitate adjustment to loss; the desire for a new romantic relationship may signify that one has come to terms with the finality of a spouse's death, and may establish a new identity to offset the identity of widow or widower (DiGiulio, 1989).

Surprisingly little is known about the romantic lives of older widows and widowers, however. Demographic analyses show that men are significantly more likely than women to date and remarry following the loss of their spouse. One of the few population-based studies to focus specifically on dating estimated that 30% of widowers yet just 7% of widows ages 55 and older had dated in the past month (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991). This gender imbalance partly reflects a highly skewed sex ratio among older adults. Older women have relatively few viable partners, given that women outnumber men 3 to 2 among persons ages 65 and older, and by 3 to 1 among persons 85 and older (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2010). Gender-typed socialization, allocation of social roles in the home, and personal preferences also may account for the gender gap in dating behavior. Given the traditional division of household labor among cohorts born in the early 20th century, men may have a greater need for a helpmate and confidante than women (Cancian & Oliker, 2000). Women have more intimate friendships and closer social ties with their grown children (especially their daughters) because gender role socialization privileges communion and emotional intimacy among women; these strong social ties may lessen the need to find companionship in a romantic partner (Lopata, 1979, 1996).

Potential implications of dating for older widows and widowers

Recent qualitative studies document the psychological, social, and interpersonal benefits of dating for older bereaved adults, yet they also reveal some of the concerns reported by widows, in particular. Open-ended interviews with widowed women reveal that they enjoy the companionship (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986; Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007), emotional and physical intimacy (Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Stevens, 2002), interesting discussions (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986; Stevens, 2002), and the feeling of being appreciated "as a woman" that may accompany dating (Watson & Stelle, 2011). However, several studies suggest that many older women do not see dating as a pathway to marriage, and instead enjoy dating for dating's sake (Watson & Stelle, 2011). As Davidson (2002: 51) observed, older widows want "someone to go out with" rather than "someone to come home to." Concerns about losing one's independence, becoming bored, having to care for an older ailing husband, or placing one's self at risk of exploitation also may dissuade older widows from seeking remarriage (Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Davidson, 2002; Lopata, 1996; Watson & Stelle, 2011). Qualitative studies suggest that widowers also desire emotional and physical intimacy with new romantic partners, yet they also seek out the instrumental support that their wives had provided, such as assistance with meals, homemaking and maintaining health regimens (Van den Hoonaard, 2010). One small-scale study noted that widowers may view dating as a form of "taking time off from grieving," and a step toward resuming a "normal" life (Riches & Dawson, 2000).

Quantitative studies based on larger samples also find evidence for the protective effects of dating on older widow(er)s' well-being. At the same time, they reveal potential sources of strain and distress. For example, one study of midlife adults found that widowed men who have remarried do not differ significantly from other married men with respect to a range of mental health outcomes including depression and alcohol use (Pudrovska & Carr, 2008; see also Schneider, Sledge, Shuchter, & Zisook, 1996). Similarly, widows who remarry report fewer concerns and stressors than widows who remain single (Gentry & Shulman, 1988). However, the protective effects of new romantic relationships are not universal and vary based on one's other personal relationships. For example, Carr (2004) found that among widowers with high levels of social and emotional support from friends and family, dating did not have an additional protective effect on their well-being. Emotional support from friends and children effectively replaced widowers' need for a new romantic relationship. Stressful familial relationships also may undermine the psychosocial benefits provided by new partnerships. For example, Gentry and Shulman (1988) found that remarriage created stress for widows who worried that their children and other family members disapproved of the union.

Although new romantic relationships following spousal death are generally a source of psychological well-being and social integration for older adults (especially men), mounting evidence suggests that widowed older adults who date – especially those who date "too soon" after the loss – may find their relationships with children to be strained (Moore & Stratton, 2001; Van den Hoonaard, 2010). Some evidence suggests that daughters may be particularly critical of their fathers' dating. In a study of relatively young widowers,

Boerner and Silverman (2001) found that daughters often assumed the household management or caregiving tasks previously provided by their mothers. When a widower's new romantic partner enters the scene, adult daughters may feel that their role is being undermined (Van den Hoonaard, 2010). Further, some evidence suggests that a daughter's grief for her mother may be compounded if her father dates or remarries too quickly after the loss (Riches & Dawson, 2000).

Despite this rich descriptive evidence, a number of unanswered questions persist. We know of no studies that directly examine whether the effects of widow(er) dating on parent–child relationships vary based on the timing of when one starts dating, the specific dimension of intergenerational relations considered (e.g., positive versus negative support), the parent's gender, children's gender, or history of parent–child relationships. Finally, prior studies do not address the possibility that an observed association between widow(er) dating and parent–child relations is spurious, reflecting a shared set of influences that affect both, such as one's mental health or preloss relationship quality.

Current study

We build on prior studies in several ways. First, we consider dating at two time points because social norms about “appropriate” grieving periods may prevent the recently bereaved from seeking romantic relationships too quickly after loss (Vinick, 1978) and may foster child criticism of a parent dating “too soon.” We examine dating six months postloss, when feelings of sadness and yearning for the deceased may be most intense (e.g., Umberson, 2003; Zisook & Shuchter, 1991) and social norms tend to discourage the pursuit of romantic relationships (Adams, 1985; Chandler, 1991), and 18 months postloss, at which time feelings of sadness and yearning may be less strong and bereaved spouses are encouraged to pursue new interests and relationships (Utz et al., 2002). We expect that early dating will exert a more severe toll on parent–child relationships, yet that this effect will fade by the 18 month follow-up.

Second, we recognize that parent–child relations are multi-faceted, encompassing both positive dimensions such as closeness and negative aspects such as criticism and conflict (Clarke, Preston, Raskin, & Bengtson, 1999; Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Ward, 2008). Both positive and negative interactions may exist in a single relationship; a healthy relationship may encompass both warmth/support and conflict (Giarrusso, Silverstein, Gans, & Bengtson, 2005). Although prior qualitative studies suggest that parental dating may spark conflict or criticism from children, we propose that it might also enhance emotional support and conversation. Older widow(er)s who are re-entering the dating market may turn to their children for advice and encouragement as they navigate the challenges of dating in a time period very different from the one that they likely faced as youthful daters. Thus, we examine the impact of widow(er)s' dating on three statistically and conceptually distinct aspects of parent–child relations: emotional support, criticism, and frequency of disagreements.

Third, we use two distinctive measures of dating — whether one is actually going out on dates, and whether one reports an *interest* in dating. We use this more expansive

definition than prior studies because traditional measures of repartnering status, including remarriage and exclusive dating, may not adequately capture the realities of older widows' romantic lives. As noted earlier, a highly imbalanced sex ratio may prevent older widowed women from dating and remarrying even if they are positively disposed to the notion. Older women who are *interested* in dating may take the necessary steps to form a romantic relationship, whether paying careful attention to their physical appearance, joining social organizations, or attending social events where eligible partners might be found. Population-based sample surveys show that very small proportions of older widows go on dates, with estimates ranging from 1% to 10% (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991; Carr, 2004; Stevens, 2002), depending on one's age and duration since loss. However, the proportion who reports an interest in dating is substantially higher, ranging from 6% to 42%, depending on the widow's age and time since loss (e.g., Carr, 2004; Stevens, 2002). Thus, we separately examine whether actual dating and having an interest in dating affect parent–child relations at the two study time points.

Fourth, we explore sources of heterogeneity in the association between widow(er) dating and parent–child relations. We specifically examine whether the impact differs for men versus women, parents of daughters only versus those with sons, and for those with good versus poor quality parent–child relations prior to the death. Qualitative studies suggest that daughters are more critical of their parents' dating than are sons, especially in the case of paternal dating. Some studies suggest that daughters often take on the role of a “surrogate” wife to their bereaved fathers, taking charge of household, health maintenance, and caregiving tasks. As such, they may be displaced from this role when the father begins dating and his romantic partner takes on these roles (e.g., Boerner & Silverman, 2001; Van den Hoonaard, 2010). Further, some small qualitative studies suggest that the mother–daughter bond is particularly strong, and daughters who are grieving the loss of their mothers will find it difficult to accept their fathers' new romantic partners (Riches & Dawson, 2000). However, it is also plausible that children are more critical of maternal rather than paternal dating; given how statistically rare dating is among older widows, adult children may find their mother's behavior atypical and problematic, whereas dating and repartnering may be considered an “expected” behavior among men (Carr, 2004).

We also expect that the impact of dating on parent–child relationships will vary based on one's relationship history, where poor quality relationships will be further threatened by parental dating, yet strong relationships will either improve or remain unaffected by parental dating. Research consistently shows that high-quality relationships are better able to withstand stressors and adapt to new situation than are poor quality relationships (e.g. Brock & Lawrence, 2008; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Although widow(er) dating may require readjustments on the part of both bereaved spouse and adult child, these adjustments may be easier for those who have a history of relatively low-conflict high-warmth relationships.

Finally, we recognize that the impact of an older widow(er)'s dating or dating interest on parent–child relationship may be spurious, reflecting a shared set of factors that affect both one's dating behavior and relationships with children. As

such, all analyses are adjusted for sociodemographic characteristics, physical and emotional health, and structural aspects of parent–child relations. Demographic factors including age, race, and gender are powerful predictors of both dating (e.g., Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991; Cooney & Dunne, 2001; Moorman, Booth, & Fingerman, 2006) and parent–child relationship quality among older widow(er)s (e.g., Carr, 2004; Talbott, 1990). Socioeconomic factors also affect both one's likelihood of repartnering, where those with the most resources are considered the most desirable partners (e.g., Sweeney, 1997), and parent–child relations (e.g., Antonucci, 1990). Physical health and mental health are well-documented influences on one's desire for and desirability as a romantic partner (e.g., Carr, 2004; Goldman, 1993) and also on the nature and quality of parent–child relations (e.g., Gans & Silverstein, 2006). Finally, subjective aspects of parent–child relationship quality such as emotional support and conflict, are related to structural aspects of relationships, including number of children, the gender composition of one's children, and frequency of contact (e.g., Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997), thus each is controlled in the multivariate analyses.

Method

Data

The Changing Lives of Older Couples (CLOC) is a prospective study of a two-stage area probability sample of 1532 married individuals from the Detroit Standardized Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA). Respondents were non-institutionalized English-speaking members of a married couple where the husband was age 65 or older. Approximately 65% of those contacted for an interview participated, consistent with response rates from other Detroit area studies. Baseline face-to-face interviews were conducted in 1987 and 1988. After the baseline interviews were completed, the CLOC investigators monitored spousal loss by reading obituaries in three Detroit-area newspapers and by using monthly death record tapes provided by the State of Michigan. The National Death Index was used to confirm deaths and obtain causes of death. Women were oversampled at the baseline interview in order to maximize the number of participants who would become widowed during the study period. The data are weighted to adjust for unequal probabilities of selection and response rate.

Of the 319 respondents who lost a spouse during the study period, 86% ($n = 276$) participated in at least one of the three follow-up interviews conducted six months (wave 1), 18 months (wave 2) and 48 months (wave 3) after the spouse's death. We focus on widow(er)s with living children; our analytic samples include the 193 and 155 widowed parents who participated in the six- and 18-month interviews, respectively. As with all studies of aging, the CLOC has modest attrition between the two follow-up waves; most non-participation at 18 months was due to death or compromised health. Supplementary analyses revealed that age and baseline anxiety increased the odds, and home ownership decreased the odds of attrition between the interview waves. Thus, the analytic sample is over-representative of slightly younger-old bereaved spouses who are residentially stable, and have lower levels of anxiety.

Variables

Dependent variables

We consider three conceptually and statistically distinct aspects of parent–child interactions: emotional support from children; criticism from children; and frequency of disagreements. *Emotional support* is assessed with two items: “How much do your children make you feel loved and cared for; and how much are they willing to listen when you need to talk about your worries or problems?” Scale alphas are .70 (baseline), .64 (six months), and .69 (18 months). Responses are averaged and standardized where higher scores reflect a higher level of support. *Critical interactions* are assessed with the single item “How much are your children critical of you or what you do?”¹ Response categories range from 1 to 5 (not at all, to a great deal). Items are drawn from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988).

Frequency of disagreements is evaluated with the question: “At this point in your life, how often do you and any of your children have unpleasant conflicts or disagreements? Would you say never, less than once a month, 1 to 3 times a month, about once a week, or more than once a week?” Higher values represent more frequent conflicts.

Independent variables

Our key predictor is whether one is currently dating, assessed with the question “Do you go out on dates?” The CLOC also appraises the frequency with which one dates. However, given the small proportion dating at either wave (5% at six months and 14% at 18 months), the number of cases dating would be too small to stratify by frequency. The majority of daters say that they go on dates weekly or 1–3 times per month.

Given the very small number of persons who date (i.e., 10 at six months, 9 of whom were men; and 21 at 18 months, 11 of whom are men), we also consider an indicator of whether one has “an interest in going out on dates.” At six months, 10 men and 9 women report an interest in dating; by 18 months these numbers increase to 12 men and 16 women. Not one CLOC participant had remarried or was cohabiting with a romantic partner at either of the follow-up interviews, thus our measure of new romantic relationships is limited to dating only.

Control variables

Analyses are adjusted for demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, health, and baseline measures of parent–child relations. *Demographic characteristics* include age (in years), sex (1 = female), and race (1 = black). *Socioeconomic status* encompasses education (years), home ownership (1 = owns home), and total household income (natural log).

Health characteristics include depressive symptoms and self-rated health. *Depressive symptoms* are assessed with a

¹ In preliminary analyses, we constructed a two-item scale comprising criticism and an item assessing the extent to which children “made too many demands” on the respondent. Alphas were unacceptably low (<.5), perhaps reflecting the fact that children may not make demands on older bereaved spouses. The “criticism” item is also more germane to our study, given qualitative work showing that children may show disapproval of parental dating (Van den Hoonaard, 2010).

subset of nine negative items (e.g., “I felt depressed”) from the widely used 20-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies depression (CES-D) scale (Radloff, 1977). Alphas range from .81 to .83 across the three waves. *Physical health* is assessed with the question: “How would you rate your health at the present time?” Responses of fair or poor are coded as 1; the omitted category includes those whose health is good or better.

Parent–child characteristics

All analyses are adjusted for number of living children, frequency of parent–child contact, and gender composition of children. Frequency of contact refers to the number of times in the 12 months prior to interview the respondent had contact with at least one of their children, whether contact by person, by phone, or by mail. Given the highly skewed distribution of the frequency of contact measure, we use a dichotomous indicator of whether one has weekly (versus less than weekly) contact. The CLOC does not ascertain the quality of one’s relationship with each child, but rather obtains an aggregated assessment of relations with “your children.” Thus, we do not know whether the respondent is thinking about one particular child, or an overall assessment when responding to the relationship quality measures. Likewise, we do not know the gender of the particular child or children to which one is referring. To ascertain the gender composition of one’s children, we constructed measures based on a child roster and indicate whether one has: *daughters only*, *sons only*, or *both sons and daughters*. Models also are adjusted for each outcome measure at the prior wave (i.e., specific measure of quality of parent–child relations at the preceding wave) to capture changes in parent–child relations due to dating.

Moderator variables

We evaluate whether the effects of dating and interest in dating on parent–child relations are moderated by *parent’s gender*, *gender of children*, and *quality of parent–child relations prior to loss*. All variables are measured as described above.

Analytic plan

We use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to predict the continuous outcome of emotional support, and ordinal regression models to predict the ordered categorical outcomes of frequency of disagreements and criticism. We evaluate whether dating and having an interest in dating at the six- and 18-month follow-ups is associated with contemporaneous parent–child relationship quality. We first estimated baseline models, adjusting for dating (or interest in dating) only. We subsequently controlled for demographics, SES, parent–child characteristics, health, and parent–child relations. All control variables are contemporaneous with the outcome measure, although we also adjust for relationship quality at the prior wave. To evaluate whether the effects of dating or interest in dating differ significantly based on the bereaved person’s gender, gender composition of children, and preloss parent–child relationship quality, we assess separate models evaluating two-way interaction terms. Because all but one of the persons (9 of the 10) dating six months postloss were men, we

do not evaluate a two-way interaction term between gender and dating behavior at that time.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1. As noted earlier, a very small proportion were dating six months postloss (5%), although twice as many (10%) reported an interest in dating at that time. By the 18 month follow-up, substantially higher proportions were dating (14%) and interested in dating (18%). The relatively low levels of actual dating and interest in dating in the CLOC sample likely reflect the age and gender composition of the sample; the average respondent was 70 years old at the baseline (i.e., preloss) interview and 71% were female. The majority were in good or better health, and on average depressive symptoms were higher at the six-month interview compared to the 18-month interview (.44 versus .15, standardized).

The average CLOC sample member had 2.9 living children; the majority had both sons and daughters (62%), while equal proportions had sons only or daughters only (18–19%). More than 70% reported weekly or more frequent contact with their children six months postloss, although this proportion declined slightly to 56% by the 18-month follow-up. Consistent with these high levels of contact, most reported high levels of emotional support yet low levels of conflict with and criticism from children. The latter two scores ranged from 1 to 4, with 4 reflecting the most troubled relationships. The mean levels reported ranged from just 1.4 to 1.8, although slightly more conflict and criticism was reported at the later wave. During the early months postloss, spouses and their adult children may be particularly careful to treat each other well (Ha, 2008), or social ties may be strengthened as the bereaved spouse relies on his or her children for emotional, economic, service, and social support (e.g., Lopata, 1979).

Multivariate analysis

The impact of “early” dating on parent–child relations

We first evaluated the effects of both dating behavior and interest six months postloss on three contemporaneous indicators of parent–child relations: support, criticism, and conflict. Results are presented in the left-hand columns of Table 2. In both the baseline and adjusted models, interest in dating was not associated with any of the three outcomes (models not shown). However, persons who were dating reported significantly lower levels of emotional support ($b = -.79, p < .01$) and (marginally) significantly more frequent conflict ($b = 1.42, p < .10$) with their children; no significant effects emerged for the outcome of criticism.

Parent–child relations six months postloss were affected by several other factors. Parents with at least weekly contact with their children reported significantly higher levels of emotional support ($b = .38, p < .01$), although frequent contact did not affect frequency of conflict. Conflict was more frequent among Blacks ($b = 1.15, p < .05$), highly educated persons ($b = .140, p < .05$), and those experiencing more frequent depressive symptoms ($b = .40, p < .001$). For both

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for all variables used in analysis, widowed parents in the changing lives of older couples (n = 193).

	Mean or proportion	SD	Valid n
<i>Dependent variables</i>			
Emotional support from children, W1	.144	.98	193
Emotional support from children, W2	.118	.98	155
Parent-child conflict, W1 (Range: 1–4)	1.45	.74	193
Parent-child conflict, W2 (Range: 1–4)	1.57	.84	155
Child criticism of parent, W1 (Range: 1–4)	1.51	.86	193
Child criticism of parent, W2 (Range: 1–4)	1.80	1.09	155
<i>Independent variables</i>			
Dating, W1	.05		193
Dating, W2	.14		155
Interested in dating, W1	.10		193
Interested in dating, W2	.18		155
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>			
Age (years)	70.41	6.92	193
Sex (1 = female)	.71		193
Race (1 = black)	.14		193
Education (in years)	11.25	2.89	193
Income (total household)	21,189	16,598	193
Income (natural log)	1.32	.53	193
Owens home (1 = yes)	.92		193
<i>Parent-child characteristics</i>			
Number of living children, W1	2.91	1.74	193
Number of living children, W2	2.91	1.83	155
Weekly contact, W1 (1 = weekly or more)	.71		193
Weekly contact, W2 (1 = weekly or more)	.56		155
Sons only	.18		193
Daughters only	.19		193
Sons and daughters	.62		193
Emotional support from children, BL	–.087	1.05	193
Parent-child conflict, BL (Range: 1–4)	1.56	.75	193
Child criticism of parent, BL (Range: 1–4)	1.89	.96	193
<i>Mental and physical health</i>			
Self-rated health (1 = fair/poor), W1	.29		193
Self-rated health (1 = fair/poor), W2	.23		155
CES-D, W1	.44	1.23	193
CES-D, W2	.15	.98	155

Note: Emotional support and CES-D scales are standardized.

outcomes, the most powerful predictor was parent-child relationship quality prior to the death (b = .42 for support, b = 1.06 for conflict, $p < .001$).

The impact of “on-time” dating on parent-child relations

We next evaluated the effects of dating behavior and interest 18 months postloss on the three outcome measures, presented in the right-hand column of Table 2. Again, interest in dating was not associated with any of the three outcomes. Actual dating behavior was associated with just one of the three outcomes: conflict. Persons who were dating 18 months postloss reported levels of conflict that were significantly higher (b = 1.13, $p < .05$) than their peers who were not dating. This effect was robust even when all demographics and conflict at the prior wave were controlled. More frequent conflicts also were reported by men (b = 1.58, $p < .001$), those with daughters only (b = 1.09, $p < .05$), and those with higher levels of conflict at the prior wave (b = 1.29, $p < .001$).

Table 2

The effect of dating on parent-child relations six and 18 months postloss, adjusted for demographic, health, and baseline parent-child relations.

	Six months		18 months
	Emotional support (OLS regression)	Conflict (ordinal regression)	Conflict (ordinal regression)
Is currently dating	–.785** (.307)	1.42 (.77) [†]	1.13* (.561)
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>			
Age	.006 (.010)	–.034 (.027)	–.040 (.032)
Female	.128 (.154)	.009 (.474)	–1.58*** (.463)
Black	–.281 (.187)	1.15* (.484)	–.242 (.603)
Education (in years)	.032 (.022)	.140* (.068)	–.135 [†] (.079)
Income (natural log)	.141 (.123)	–.556 (.374)	–.148 (.428)
Owens home	.080 (.22)	–1.02 [†] (.587)	.646 (.763)
<i>Parent-child characteristics</i>			
Number of children	.024 (.44)	.103 (.118)	.087 (.134)
Weekly or more frequent contact	.377** (.137)	–.426 (.394)	.221 (.459)
Sons only	.226 (.175)	–.147 (.551)	–.010 (.593)
Daughters only	–.066 (.173)	–.120 (.515)	1.09* (.544)
Parent-child relations, BL	.416*** (.062)	1.06*** (.244)	1.29*** (.278)
<i>Health</i>			
CES-D	–.050 (.051)	.400*** (.143)	.059 (.226)
Self-rated health, fair/poor	.050 (.146)	.220 (.438)	.216 (.477)
Constant	–1.23 (.884)		
Adjusted R ²	.35		.395
Nagelkerke pseudo R ²			.35
N			193
			155

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses) are shown for OLS models; ordinal regression estimates and standard errors (in parentheses) are shown for ordinal regression models.

- [†] $p < .10$.
- * $p < .05$.
- ** $p < .01$.
- *** $p < .001$.

For whom does dating affect parent-child relations?

We next re-evaluated all multivariate models to assess whether the effects of dating (18 months postloss) and interest in dating (at six and 18 months) on the three outcomes differed significantly based on three potential moderators: one's own gender, gender composition of children, and preloss parent-child relations. For the latter, we considered as a moderator the model's outcome measure (e.g., in models predicting emotional support at 18 months, we evaluated interactions between dating and emotional support preloss). All models used a Bonferroni's correction, to adjust for multiple comparisons. We found five statistically significant moderation effects. Interest in dating six months postloss affected emotional support and conflict levels differently for widows versus

widowers. By 18 months, the impact of parental dating or interest in dating on emotional support did not differ significantly by gender of parent, yet it did vary based on whether one has daughters only, versus sons only/sons and daughters. The impact of early dating on emotional support from children was moderated by preloss emotional support; we found no other significant moderating effects of preloss relationship quality. Coefficients for statistically significant interaction terms are presented in Table 3. For ease of presentation and interpretation, interactions (adjusted for all controls) are plotted in Figs. 1 through 4.

In the short-term following loss, men who were interested in dating reported much lower levels of support and more frequent conflict with their children than their female counterparts. Fig. 1 shows that men who were interested in dating reported levels of support that were .628 points lower than their female counterparts ($p < .01$), and .927 points lower than men who were not interested in dating. By contrast, women with an interest in dating reported levels of emotional support that were slightly higher (.29 vs. .08 SD) than their peers who did not report such an interest. Similarly, Fig. 2 shows that men who were interested in dating reported significantly higher levels of conflict than both their female counterparts, and their male peers who were not interested in dating. By contrast, women interested in dating reported slightly lower levels of parent–child conflict than women without such interest. Among those who reported an interest in dating, men had nearly four times the odds of reporting very frequent conflict, whereas women had only one-quarter the odds of having frequent conflict (relative to the reference category). When interpreting the results in Figs. 1 and 2, it is

important to remember that for men, an “interest” in dating was translated into actual dating; all but one of the ten men who reported an “interest” in dating were dating six months postloss, whereas just one of the nine women interested in dating was actually doing so.

Recalling that nearly all the daters at the six-month follow-up were men, the results in Fig. 3 provide insights into how dating may alter the levels of emotional support men receive from their children pre- and postloss. The black line shows the levels of emotional support received six-months postloss among dating men, contingent upon whether their baseline (preloss) levels of support were at the sample average, one standard deviation higher, or one standard deviation lower. The gray line shows comparable values for men who were not dating at the six month interview. Among men who reported poor quality relationships with their children prior to loss, dating six months postloss amplified these problematic relationships; they reported average levels of support that were -2.47 (standardized), compared to levels of $-.406$ among men who were not dating.

By contrast, among men who maintained high quality relationships with their children preloss (i.e., support levels one SD above the mean), dating had only a modest impact on their relationships postloss. Among men with historically good relationships, those who were dating ($M = .765$) versus not dating ($M = .406$) six months postloss differed only slightly in their relationships with children at that time, and dating men actually reported more emotional support than their peers who were not dating. In other words, a widowed father's dating does not threaten (and may even enhance) the quality of parent–child relationships that have been good historically,

Table 3
Moderating effects of parental dating by parent gender, children's gender, and preloss parent–child relationship quality, adjusted for all controls.

	Six-month follow-up (n = 193)		18-Month follow-up (n = 155)	
	OLS regression: emotional support	Ordinal regression: conflict	OLS regression: emotional support	
Is currently dating		-.85** (.303)	.066 (.196)	
Is interested in dating	-.927** (.325)			.058 (.181)
Gender (1 = female)	.076 (.156)			
Has daughters only			-.299† (.184)	-.342† (.193)
Parent–child relationship quality, preloss		.406*** (.061)		
<i>Interaction effects</i>				
Currently dating × gender				
Interested in dating × gender	1.15** (.416)			
Currently dating × daughters only				
Currently dating × baseline relationship quality		1.209* (.476)		
Adjusted R ²	.355	.369	.525	.495
Nagelkerke pseudo R ²			.36	

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses) are shown for OLS models; ordinal regression estimates and standard errors (in parentheses) are shown for ordinal regression models. Models are adjusted for demographics, socioeconomic status, baseline relationship quality, and family structure.

† $p < .10$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

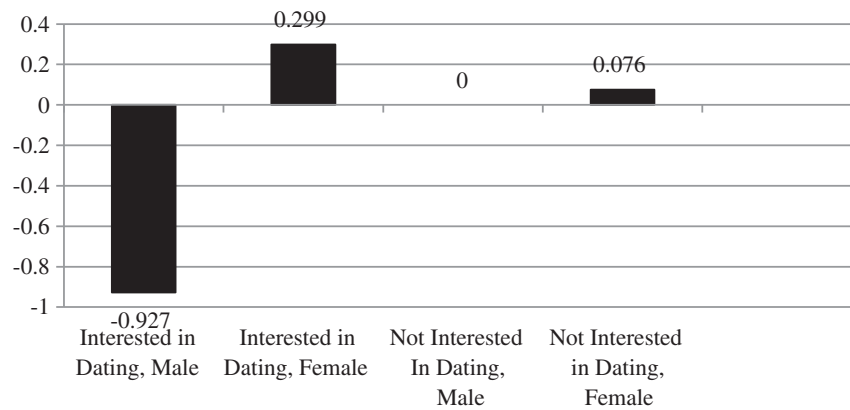


Fig. 1. Emotional support (standardized) from children six months postloss, by gender and interest in dating (adjusted for all control variables).

yet dating shortly after loss further compromises relationships that were tenuous even prior to the death.

At the 18-month follow-up, the impact of dating – whether actually dating (Fig. 4a) or merely having an interest (Fig. 4b) – was more problematic for widowed parents who have daughters only, consistent with prior studies suggesting that daughters are more critical than sons of parental dating (e.g., Van den Hoonaard, 2010). Among persons who had sons, dating did not have a significant impact on emotional support levels ($b = .066, p = .736$); by contrast, parents of daughters only who were dating reported emotional support levels that were nearly two standard deviations lower than their counterparts who were not dating. Similarly, among parents of sons, having an interest in dating did not significantly affect levels of parent–child conflict ($b = .058, p = .751$). However, those who had daughters only and reported an interest in dating reported levels of support that were -1.57 points lower than others. Persons with daughters only reported slightly lower levels of support even when they were not dating ($b = -.299, p < .10$) or interested in dating ($b = -.342, p < .10$).

Discussion

Our examination of widow(er)s' early (six months) and later (18 months) dating on parent–child relationships yielded three key findings. First, widowers are more likely than widows to be dating following loss, and men's desire to date is translated into actual dating, whereas women's desire is not.

This may partially explain one important gender difference detected in the impact of dating on parent–child relations. Among those who report an interest in dating six months postloss, men have significantly less supportive and more conflicted relationships with their children than do women, who actually report a slight advantage with respect to their relationships with children.

This pattern may reflect the fact that a widowed father's forming a new romantic relationship just six months after his wife (and the children's mother) has died violates cultural norms about “appropriate” grieving periods (Vinick, 1978). A man who dates “too soon” may send the message to his children that his marriage was not meaningful, or that the memory of his wife has quickly faded. A father's violation of important cultural norms regarding grief may be particularly painful to children who are already saddened by the loss of their mother. An equally plausible explanation, however, is that fathers who have strained relationships with their children may turn to dating or other relationships as a source of social support. Our analyses examining associations between dating and contemporaneous parent–child relations cannot ascertain definitively causal ordering. Additionally, fathers – especially those who feel guilty about dating too early – may generate “accounts” or “justifications” for their behavior, such as characterizing their relationships with children as not sufficiently supportive (e.g., Scott & Lyman, 1968).

By contrast, we suspect that the slight positive impact of a widows' (unrealized) desire to date on children's support

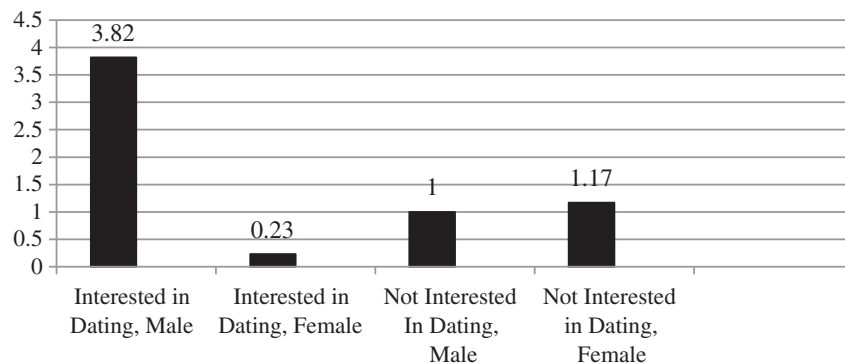


Fig. 2. Relative odds of having highly frequent parent–child conflict six months postloss, by gender and interest in dating (adjusted for all control variables). Note: exponentiated betas (or relative odds) are shown.

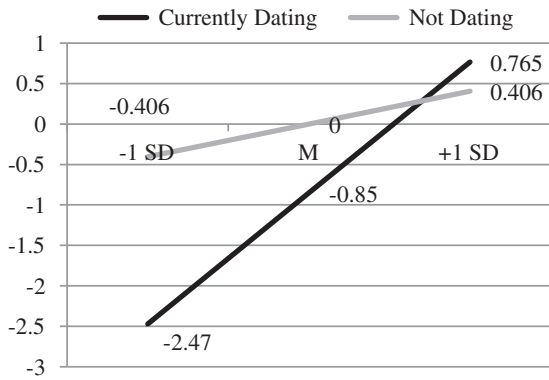


Fig. 3. Emotional support (standardized) from children six months postloss, by preloss parent-child relations and dating status (adjusted for all control variables).

may reflect conversations or even advice seeking. CLOC participants were married an average of 42 years, thus widows may turn to their children for advice on dating in a cultural climate very different than when they were young daters nearly five decades earlier. Additionally, women with an interest in dating only have not yet brought a new partner into the family system, and thus have not created the strains

identified by Lopata, who observed that “offspring resent any man who enters the house as a companion ... of the mother” (p. 100).

Second, the association between widowers' early dating and parent-child relations is conditional upon their relationship history. Men who reported very low levels of emotional closeness and support from their children prior to loss reported large decrements in support postloss, yet men who had historically good relationships evidenced slight improvements in parent-child closeness postloss. This finding is consistent with prior work showing that families with historically warm and close relationships fare better than troubled families when faced with a chronic or acute stressor, such as a familial death (e.g. Brock & Lawrence, 2008; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Yet our finding does not necessarily suggest that the father's dating threatens the quality of father-child relationship; it is equally plausible that a father's dating may be a response to unmet emotional needs. Men who, even prior to loss, report that their children do not make them feel “loved and cared for” and are not “willing to listen when you need to talk about your worries or problems,” may be highly motivated to date, as a new romantic partner may provide the emotional support the widower desires. This new support may render a widower

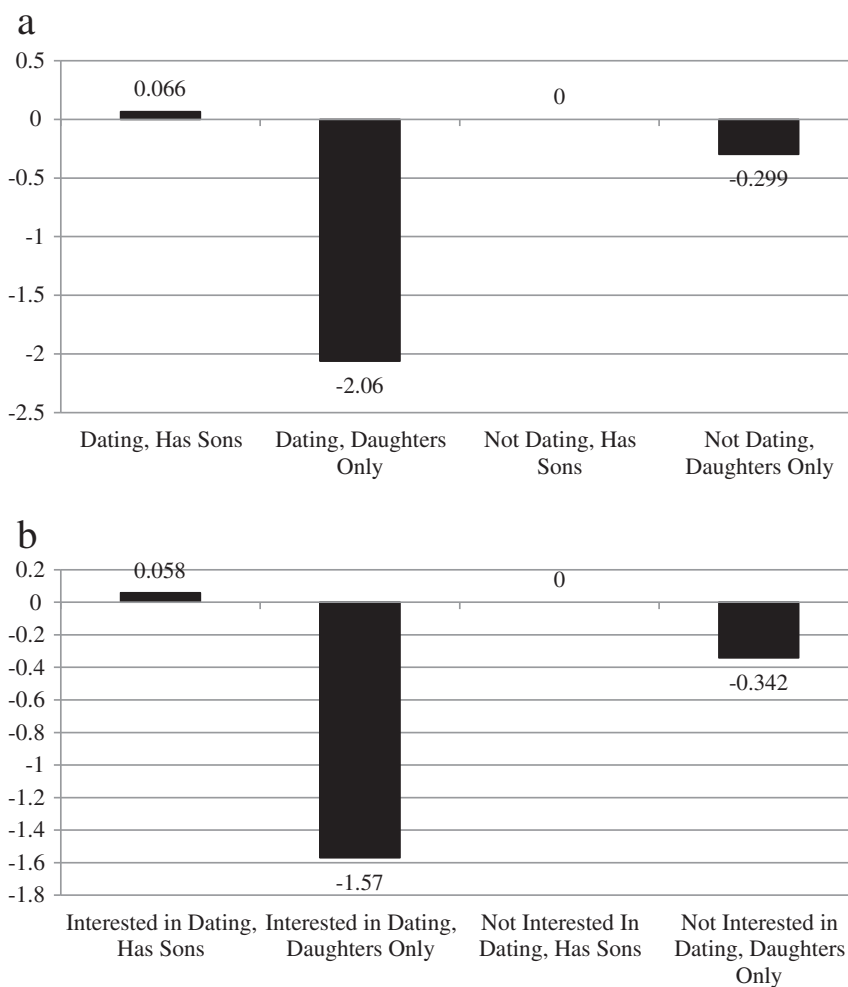


Fig. 4. a. Emotional support (standardized) from children 18 months postloss: Currently dating by gender composition of children (adjusted for all control variables). b. Emotional support from children 18 months postloss: interested in dating by gender composition of children (adjusted for all control variables).

less reliant on his children, further undermining the level of support received. Prior research based on the CLOC shows that widowers with high levels of support from children and friends are no more likely than widows to date, or to desire a new romantic partner (Carr, 2004). Our results suggest, then, that a widower's dating may be a reaction to unfulfilled emotional needs, and in turn, leads to a further cleavage between him and his children.

Third, we find that persons who are dating or interested in dating 18 months postloss report significantly lower levels of emotional support from children when they have daughters only (rather than sons). At first blush, this finding is counterintuitive. Most research on parent–child relationships shows that daughters offer more emotional and instrumental support to their aged parents than do sons (e.g., Lopata, 1979; Silverstein, Parrott, & Bengtson, 1995; Sutor & Pillemer, 2006), thus we might expect parent–daughter relationships to be particularly close, especially following a stressor such as widowhood. However, these bereaved daughters also may have had very close ties to their recently deceased parent; these strong ties to the decedent may make daughters particularly sensitive to and distressed by the surviving parent's pursuit of a new relationship (Riches & Dawson, 2000).

Unfortunately, the low incidence of dating in the CLOC precludes us from exploring whether fathers versus mothers of daughters experience strained relations as they begin to pursue new romantic ties. Taken together, our findings show that a widow(er)'s adjustment to loss is embedded in long-standing family relationships. A widow(er)'s dating is both a reflection of prior and a precursor of future parent–child relationships. These results are broadly consistent with Lopata's assertions that individual lives are embedded in rich social networks or “circles” of fellow actors (Lopata, 1994).

Limitations and future directions

Our study revealed that older bereaved spouses' dating (or interest in dating) does not have a uniformly harmful impact on parent–child relations. Rather, the impact of dating varies based on the time elapsed since loss, gender of parent, gender of children, and the quality of parent–child relations prior to the loss. However, our study has a number of limitations that prevent us from delving more fully into these patterns. First, a very small proportion of CLOC sample members were dating or interested in dating, especially among women. These patterns reflect the fact that the sample is comprised largely of older women ($M = 70$ years old, 71% female). A highly skewed male–female ratio among older adults may preclude many widows from dating, even if they would like to (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991; Carr, 2004; Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2010). As such, we can provide only a preliminary glimpse into sources of heterogeneity in the effects of widow(er) dating on parent–child relationships.

Second, relationship quality is assessed with a general appraisal referring to “your children,” thus we cannot ascertain whether one is thinking about one particular child, or an “average” across all children when evaluating their relationships. Moreover, the aggregated measure does not ascertain whether one is referring to sons or daughters; this is an important concern given that some recent qualitative work

suggests that daughters are more harsh critics of their widowed fathers' dating than are sons (e.g., Van den Hoonaard, 2010). We evaluated interaction terms of widow(er) dating and interest in dating by the gender composition of children, and found that widow(er)s with daughters only reported compromised relationships when they were dating. Future studies based on larger samples could potentially evaluate three-way interaction terms capturing parent gender, child gender, and dating, to evaluate the complex ways the gender of parent–child dyads affect adjustment to spousal loss. Additionally, studies that obtain data on specific parent–child dyads (rather than aggregated measures based on “your children”) could provide greater insights into parent–child relations following spousal loss, and whether these patterns are conditional upon one's relationship history.

Third, we focused exclusively on emotional aspects of the parent–child relationship such as perceived support and criticism. However, we did not evaluate the ways that other aspects of support, such as financial, social, or instrumental assistance change once a bereaved spouse starts dating (Lopata, 1979). It is plausible that children withdraw support from a parent if they perceive that the widow(er)'s new romantic partner is filling those needs. The withdrawal or reduction of support may be perceived as hurtful and exact an emotional toll on the bereaved.

Fourth, the CLOC did not differentiate between types of parent–child contact, and assessed frequency based on one's visits, letters and phone calls. Future studies that use a more expansive definition that includes email, Skype, or social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook may reveal the distinctive forms through which parent–child contact adjusts to spousal loss. Internet-based communication will be a particularly prominent form of communication for future cohorts of older adults; more than half of persons ages 65 and older currently use the internet, 82% of whom use email and one-third of whom use SNS (Zickhur & Madden, 2012). Thus, older adults' ways of relating and interacting with children are rapidly evolving.

Fifth, the CLOC study focuses on bereaved persons at set time points (e.g., six and 18 months postloss). However, widowed persons' timetables for dating, and the level of support or criticism they receive, may follow a different time courses. Future studies should explore the timing of when older adults begin dating, the factors that are associated with dating sooner rather than later, and variations in the reactions of children and other kin. Finally, we focused on widowed persons only, although spousal loss is just one of two pathways to marital dissolution. Future studies should compare the dating experiences of widowed and divorced parents and evaluate their distinctive impacts on parent–child relations. We suspect that the impact of an older divorced person's dating on parent–child relations would vary based on whether one initiated the divorce. Additionally, our measure of dating is limited in that we do not know whether it entails casual dating, cohabitation, living apart together (LAT), or some other interpretation offered by study respondents. Future studies should explore more fully the different forms that later-life romantic relationships take, and their implications for parent–child relations.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, our work is a step toward understanding one potential challenge faced by bereaved older spouses and their adult children: dating. Professionals who interact with older adults and their families, such as health care providers, geriatric social workers, and clergy, should recognize that early dating can be a contentious issue in families following spousal death. In particular, bereaved families in which fathers date soon after the loss and families with daughters may benefit from opportunities for conversation with an impartial third party. Yet practitioners and the significant others of older widow(er)s should recognize that parent–child relations also can be positively affected by the desire for or addition of a new partner into the widow(er)'s life.

Lopata's classic studies of widowhood were among the first to document processes of reformulating identities and readjusting upon exiting the role of spouses, and entering the role of widow. Her pathbreaking work has been hailed for its contributions to gender scholarship, social networks, social gerontology and life course sociology (Jacobs, 1981). Our work contributes to the study of bereaved spouses' dating by also considering the experiences of widowers, by tracking widowed persons' experience over time, and by exploring the ways that both positive and negative aspects of emotional support respond to the bereaved spouse's dating. We also reveal the positive consequences of dating for parent–child relations, especially among those bereaved persons who had historically strong relationships with their children. We hope that our work moves the study of widow(er)s' familial and romantic relationships further, in the tradition intended by Lopata.

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