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Women narrate later life remarriage: Negotiating the cultural to create the personal

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Abstract

Narrative provides a window to experience in a way that is different from traditional research methods. In this study, narrative affords both a holistic vantage point on later life relationships, and at the same time, a “view from the inside”—older women's own accounts of single life, relationship development, and remarriage. The narratives were obtained in interviews with eight recently remarried women between the ages of sixty-five and eighty. A two-stage analysis addresses, first, the narrative content—the phenomenology of remarriage for these older women. The second stage focuses on process, analyzing how cultural-level narratives are drawn upon in the creation of the women's personal stories. Based upon these analyses, we discuss the ways that a narrative approach can inform our understanding of later life relationships, and we comment on the potential of narratives such as these to rewrite a script for older women's relationships.

Keywords

Older women; Identity; Relationships; Remarriage; Master narrative; Counter narrative; Narrative processes

Recent work on aging families has begun to recognize and emphasize the diversity of roles and experiences in later life relationships (for reviews of this literature, see Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Connidis, 2006; Cooney & Dunne, 2001). Intimate relationships in later life can take many forms and involve issues of both continuity and change. What we know about later life marriages tends to represent those experiences of long-term marriage. Therefore, there is a gap in our knowledge of how older adults make decisions about remarriage, how they experience the transition from widowed or divorced to married, and in what ways this new relationship affects their identity.

While the majority of older adults are married, demographic trends suggest that the chances of being single for significant portions of the life course because of marital disruption, either divorce or spousal death, are continuing to increase (Wu & Schimmele, 2007). The literature

on remarriage characteristically focuses on younger adulthood and the blending of younger families. While most remarriage takes place earlier in the life course, issues such as increasing life expectancy, rates of divorce and spousal bereavement, and the initiation of new relationships in later life makes the examination of the formation of these relationships a salient issue for study. This experience, in part, involves individual women and their journeys, but it also involves other people in their lives (e.g., children, friends), as well as messages that society imparts about romance, dating, remarriage, and sexuality for older women.

Partnerships forged in later life continue to be, for the most part, marginalized by society. Societal attitudes about older adults and aging in general—what we here refer to as the master narrative—have trivialized, or discounted, these relationships in a variety of ways. Older women seeking close relationships may be in “double jeopardy” from the impact of both ageism and sexism on attitudes around sexuality, (for a review of the literature on gender and ageism see Hatch, 2005). The intersection of ageism and sexism has a profound influence on the context in which new relationships are formed in later life. However, in recent years an alternative view has received growing attention, one founded on a different set of attitudes and assumptions about aging.

In telling their personal stories, people draw upon the available cultural narratives to construct their identities by selecting among these narratives, interpreting them, and sometimes revising them. This paper concerns the ways in which older women do this as they narrate the development of a new relationship leading to remarriage. As an introduction to our study, we describe and document cultural-level narratives regarding women's later life relationships. We then turn to the assumptions that frame this work and our specific goals. A consideration of related literature is reserved for the discussion, following presentation of the narrative analyses.

The cultural narratives

The predominant cultural narrative about intimate relationships in later life is grounded in a broader narrative of aging and discrimination, referred to as ageism (Butler, 1969). In this narrative, attributions are made simply on the basis of age, for example, that because an individual is elderly he or she will be less physically and cognitively competent than a younger person (Butler, 2005; Nelson, 2002). Evidence indicates that ageism, in various forms, continues to be widespread in our society (Coupland & Coupland, 1993; Palmore, 2001).

Research has examined and documented patterns of stereotypes of aging in television, advertising, and popular film that perpetuate double standards between men and women and the double jeopardy facing older women. Older female characters continue to be outnumbered by older men on television and film, despite the demographic evidence to the contrary, and are portrayed more negatively, as less attractive, achieving reduced success, possessing less power, and as defined by traditional social roles (Bazzini, McIntosh, Smith, Cook, & Harris, 1997; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005; Sanders, 2002). Older adults continue to be regarded as mainly asexual, based upon widely-held beliefs about a decreased interest in sex

among the elderly (Floyd & Weiss, 2001; and see discussion in Jones, 2002). Opportunities for partnering in later life are diminished by ageist attitudes (Coupland, 2000), and when it does occur, it is assumed to be for reasons of companionship, or perhaps financial support. The romantic narrative, so pervasive in stories of younger love, is less evident in narratives about finding love in later life.

For women, dismissive views toward later life relationships are exacerbated by sexism. Views of older women in relationships are bounded by gender stereotypes and expectations. Physical attractiveness and the maintenance of a youthful appearance are viewed as more important for women than for men (Halliwell & Dittman, 2003; Hurd, 2000; Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2008). Hurd Clarke and Griffin (2008) found that women participate in beauty work as a response to ageism and do so because of social messages around youthfulness and attractiveness, femininity, and sexual desirability. As concluded by the authors of a recent study concerning later life relationships, (Carpenter, Nathanson, & Kim, 2006), "...ageism and sexism combine to middle-aged women's particular disadvantage" (p. 93).

This occurrence of what is labeled "double jeopardy," or a combination of ageism and sexism, then, constitutes the master narrative for women who form new intimate relationships in later life. A master narrative is, by definition, one that is internalized by everyone in a society. In Andrews's (2002) words, they "...serve as a blueprint for all stories; they become the vehicle through which we comprehend not only the stories of others, but crucially of ourselves as well. ...Wittingly or unwittingly, we become the stories we know, and the master narrative is reproduced" (p. 1).

However, when the master narrative does not fit people's experiences, they can draw upon or create an alternative narrative, one that counters in some fashion the master narrative. One alternative to the master narrative regarding women's later life relationships has gained visibility in recent years. It is found in the scholarly literature on aging, where asexuality among the elderly has been labeled a myth (Deacon, Minichiello, & Plummer, 1995; Kennedy, Haque, & Zarankow, 1997). It is also found in the popular literature, for example, Eileen Simpson's book "Late Love," published in 1994. Simpson explores later life marriage through interviews, history, and literature, emphasizing the changing attitudes toward intimacy, and also the impediments to remarriage. Recently, popular books and film have become more explicit about portraying and celebrating older women's sexuality.¹ Thus, the counter narrative is one of permission, possibility, and agency for older women with respect to entering into later life relationships and to expressing their sexuality.

Assumptions and study goals

Our assumptions in formulating this research are, first, that identity is a narrative construction (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Bruner, 1987; Josselson, 1996; McAdams, 2001). It is through narrative that people define themselves in relation to their world, make connections between past, present, and future, and in general ascribe meaning to their lives.

¹Book examples are Gail Sheehy's "Sex and the Seasoned Woman" (2007), Joan Price's "Better than I Expected: Straight Talk about Sex after Sixty" (2005), and Dr. Ruth Westheimer's "Dr. Ruth's Sex after 50: Revving up the Romance, Passion & Excitement!" (2005). Examples of films include "Something's Gotta Give" (2003), "Calendar Girls" (2003), and "Last Chance Harvey" (2009).

Narrative is the means by which people at times do developmental work and construct identity transformations; it also is the means by which they maintain stability.

Our second assumption is that narratives reflect their cultural contexts. People's understandings about the world—assumptions about how things work, what's possible, and how to construe a life—come from this context in the form of a range of narrative practices (e.g., Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Yet even within the same societal niche, these understandings are not quite the same for any two individuals. In constructing their narratives, people actively select from cultural messages and construct personal meanings based on these messages (Valsiner, 1994). In the language of narrative, these selection and construction processes are sometimes labeled as narrative editing, narrative elasticity, narrative slippage, and so forth (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

In this study we pose two questions about women's narratives of remarriage in later life. The first concerns narrative content—the phenomenology of remarriage. This is a question about the meanings of remarriage, and more generally, relationship formation, for older women. While there are a number of studies concerning the correlates of later life relationship formation, few have assessed the meanings of these relationships for older adults.

The second question addresses narrative process. It is a question of how the cultural is appropriated, and transformed, by the individuals in constructing their identity narratives. As the women in this study narrate their relationships, they are taking stances vis-à-vis cultural narratives, and by taking these stances, they are positioning themselves and defining themselves relative to their context. They also, by telling their stories, feed back to the cultural, as these stories, and others like them, serve to confirm or revise the master narrative.

Method

Participants

Study participants were recruited primarily through word of mouth and flyers distributed by friends, family, and colleagues and posted at a retirement community in Central Texas. Selection criteria included women between the ages of 65 and 80 who had dated in later life. Following a phone call or email from potential participants, the first author contacted the woman and explained the project and asked her if she would be willing to discuss her relationships and sexual experiences and talk about how she thinks and feels about these topics. She was told the interview would take about one and a half to two hours, would be recorded, and that only the first author would have access to those recordings and her identity. Then, a follow-up letter was sent to each participant prior to the interview, providing a preliminary interview schedule, asking that the woman give thought to the topics ahead of time.

The volunteers for this study were eight white, middle-class, heterosexual women who had remarried in later life, and ranged in age from 64 to 77. Some additional characteristics of the participants, who are referred to by assigned names include the following: Two had experienced divorce (Martha and Karen), and one of these two women (Karen), as well as

the other six, were widows (two were widowed twice). Three are in their third marriages (Sara, Sally, and Karen), and five are married for the second time. They were single prior to their present marriages from six months to 17 years. The amount of time of dating and courtship for their current marriages ranged from less than a month to around eight months. Carol and Anne knew their current husbands from church; Sally knew her husband through work, but they had not seen each other in several years; Virginia married a man she met through her previous husband; Mary married a man she and her husband had been friends with for many years; and three married men they met either through a community function (Martha, square dancing), through family (Sara); or via a random encounter at the grocery store (Karen). At the time of the interview, the length of current marriage ranged from six weeks to five years.

Procedures

The data for this study came from semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author. The interviews were conducted in a conversational, flexible manner allowing the respondent the opportunity to introduce topics of interest to her and to provide an insider's perspective. The open-ended interview addressed the following general topic areas: (a) dating experiences in mid and later life; (b) the role of sex in relationships; (c) decision-making about relationships, including sexual decision-making and safer sex practices; (d) aging and sexuality; (e) comparison of these experiences with earlier points in time; and (f) the experience of remarriage. Interviews were conducted in either the participant's home or a place of their choosing. Prior to the beginning of the interview, respondents completed consent forms. Respondents participated on a volunteer basis and were not reimbursed for their time.

Analyses

The analyses presented here address our two research questions. We first present the results of the phenomenological analysis, documenting themes with specific examples from the narratives. We then use these themes in analyzing the ways in which cultural narratives come into play in constructing personal stories about remarriage.

Phenomenological analysis

For this analysis, transcribed interviews were analyzed according to the methods of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Osborn, 1997; Smith & Osborn, 2003). This approach was chosen because of the attention it gives to individual meanings while also drawing tentative conclusions across interviews, thus tapping more broadly into the phenomena of study. The procedures of IPA entail many successive steps in abstracting themes from specific content, first for each individual, and then across individuals. The analysis results in a phenomenological "picture" of lower-level concepts and higher-level themes for each individual, and then, as these are connected across individuals, a more general picture. The analysis was conducted by the first author, but all interviews were read and discussed by the first two authors, and the analysis emerged and was modified through these discussions.

We present here the themes at the most abstract level of this analysis—the primary themes that organized narratives of later life remarriage (Table 1). We note below instances where there are significant variations among the narratives with regard to these themes, but for the most part, this discussion emphasizes meanings that characterized the majority of the narratives.

While we find these results to be important in our understanding of women's intimate relationships in later life, specifically in the area of the formation of remarriage, the authors want to caution against generalizing these findings to all women in later life. The women were informed of the content prior to the interviews, and it is possible that women who did not want to talk about their marriage or sexuality or whose remarriages did not include a sexual component chose not to participate in this study.

Pre-relationship dating: Not that desperate

Half of the women interviewed had dated prior to the man they married, and half had not. Martha, Carol, Mary, and Karen had dated in varying amounts and enjoyed it to varying degrees. For Carol, it was an opportunity to spend time with a man and to be appreciated as a person again, instead of as a mother or widow. For the most part, these women did not date with the intention of finding a marriage partner, at least not initially. Carol and Martha said they had no interest in remarrying; they enjoyed the company and conversation of men. Both claimed to be naïve in regards to dating and found their kindness to men often misinterpreted, and they would choose to rebuff or redirect men's affections. For Mary and Karen, the desire to remarry was not initially their reason behind dating, but after a while, both wished to find someone with whom they could again share their lives.

For some of the women, dating was thought of with wariness, and for Sara, Anne, Sally, and Virginia, those fears had in part motivated them to avoid it altogether. Negative attitudes were based on stories from friends, memories of dating in adolescence, and fears founded in the unknown. Dating was associated with the potential for being taken advantage of financially, being pressured for sex, having to make conversation, and spending time with men whose interests they did not share.

“I am not that desperate” was a chorus repeated time and again. Mary expressed it in this way: “It [dating] wasn't something just to do if I didn't care for him or didn't like him...It wasn't worth the effort...Because I had a...very good life. I mean, I had a lot of friends, very active, very busy, and enjoyed my life. I mean, so I wasn't gonna go out and look for something else.” Another component of this theme was the wish to distance themselves from women they viewed as “man chasers.” No one joined singles' clubs, except a single's church class, because none liked the associations that went along with those activities and with behaviors associated with “those” women. They did not see themselves as aggressive, and it was important to their identities to remain in the role of pursued, not pursuer.

The decision to remarry: He's the one; why wait

Karen, Mary, and Virginia expressed a desire to marry again. Sara said she thought about it on occasion, but did not involve herself in any activities to meet someone. Sally, Anne, Carol, and Martha had no interest in remarrying. And yet each of them chose marriage

again. Further, the amount of time of courtship, or dating, prior to their current marriages ranged from less than a month to around eight months (Sara, less than a month; Sally, two months; Mary, three months; Virginia and Karen, six months; Martha, seven months; Carol and Anne, about eight months).

Given that five of the eight women said that they had previously had little or no interest in remarriage, the speed at which it occurred after meeting their future husband was one of the most intriguing aspects of these stories. Also intriguing are their explanations. Sally: "It's like...I kept thinking...I wanted to...And then I would sit down and say now, wait. You're just getting swept away in a whirlwind, and this really doesn't make sense. You need to sit down and really logically think about this...And, uh, everything seemed right." Martha, when asked what changed her mind about remarriage said, "this man."

For Virginia, who wanted to marry again, the decision was made in a two-week period after becoming re-acquainted with a friend of her first husband. "...it had been only six months after my husband passed away, and so I had told him that I was...it was too soon for me to make any kind of a commitment. I just felt like it was too soon...But, before the end of that week, well, we had done a lot of praying and a lot of consultation with friends, and he had done that also. We both did, and so on that next Thursday, we decided we would meet again on Saturday at the same place, and we did, and he proposed and I accepted, and then we married in July." "There was no reason to wait because we both knew how we felt and we knew that the only way this could have happened was that the Lord brought us together."

Sara, who was introduced to her future husband by her daughter, was unable to explain her decision-making process regarding remarriage, other than she just knew it was right: "I just think it was meant to be." "I knew he was something I wanted so much." "Well I just think...I-I-I I-uh, [attribute] it to God's will...for my life. And a blessing from him." "Well, I think it happens that way a lot, too, to women that are not looking, and then all the sudden someone comes in their life and...I've heard other women talk about it. You know, that 'Oh, I wasn't looking for so-and-so, but he came into my life.' You know?" So, although she was a little surprised at the timeframe of marrying within one month of meeting, she did not think it abnormal or something about which she should be concerned.

For Carol, the decision to marry her second husband centered around a five-second window of time wherein she said she could decide either to love this man or walk away. She was not interested in marriage again until he did his "sales pitch on me." She was not looking to get married, but "I think it was, um, somehow it's coupled back here with 'Yes, I can love this man and now that I love this man, I want to be with this man.'"

Overall, the brief time from first meeting (or re-acquaintance) to marriage, although noteworthy to us, was not narrated as remarkable by the women, nor was it spontaneously explained by most people. For several of the women, sex outside of marriage was not an option, and one said explicitly that this was a factor in the quick marriage. Most women, though, when questioned about the time frame, offered only vague explanations—it just seemed right, or it was God's will. Thus, we labeled this theme as "he's the one; why wait," which seemed to us the best descriptor for these explanations.

Characterizing the relationship

Women highlighted three main features of their current relationships, sometimes by way of contrast with what they felt they had missed in their past relationships. These features were romance, sexuality, and companionship.

Romance

The narratives were, among other things, unabashed love stories. “I probably am more in love with this man than I have ever been in love before. There's that feeling of total and complete contentment, of happiness, of, uh, for lack of a better word, comfort. You know?” (Karen). Martha was surprised to find herself a romantic person at this point in her life, a description she never would have used for herself in the past. She described her husband as demonstrative in that he puts his arm around her and holds her hand. They leave little love notes and glass hearts around the house for the other to find.

For Sara, as well, this relationship brought with it a romance she had never before experienced. She talked with candor about not loving her first two husbands, and being okay with that at the time. Now she feels she has found the love of her life. They hold hands in public, kiss good morning and goodnight every day, and say, “I love you.” They sit on their back porch and “and smooch a little bit...I have to pinch myself almost (laughs) physically (laughs)...to realize that this is...This is mine.”

Sexuality

Women registered surprise in an unanticipated reawakening of sexuality. Most believed that sex belonged only within marriage and as they did not expect to marry again, they did not believe that their futures included sex. Some had believed that older women did not experience sexual desire or enjoyment. And for some, there had not been a satisfying sex life in their past, so sexual enjoyment was not something that they anticipated in the future.

Neither Karen nor Sally had expected a sexual relationship, and both were quite pleased by their awakened sexual interest and desire. Martha had considered sex as a wifely duty in her first marriage, and so was surprised by her openness to having sex with her current husband. In fact, when they began kissing one night when dating, she was the one who suggested they have sex. “And, so after that [her first] marriage, I was not involved in sex at all...and didn't even care. Uh, but as the time went on, I realized it was a part of life, and by the time I got to [this husband], uh, I embraced it.”

Mary also talked of being surprised by the sex in her current relationship. Mary and her partner did not talk about sex prior to marriage, and Mary did not give consideration to his ability to perform sexually. She said that she would not have been bothered terribly if sex had not been possible. The fact that their friendship turned to love has been a pleasant surprise, as has their sexual relationship. For her, sex “wasn't that important...I guess that's the word, and we were both, I guess, surprised that it was as good as it was. Well, ummmm. I mean, it's just a great part of marriage. It's not THE most important part at all, but it is great, and our sex life is great.”

Feeling sexual is new for Sara, and she says it is because she is “older and wiser” and knows how a woman should be treated sexually. She would not have settled again for a relationship like her previous two marriages. She sees herself as sexual because she is able to attract a man (which she says embarrasses her to say), and because of how her husband treats her. He tells her that she is beautiful, and that makes her feel beautiful.

Most women said they had not anticipated a sexual relationship at this point in their lives, and that they would have been content with a marriage that did not include sexual intercourse. Because it was unexpected, it has a different meaning for them than it did earlier in their lives. For Carol, sex, in essence, is still sex, but the meaning has changed: “A climax is a climax is a climax...I mean, there's that...There is that...you know? Never doubt that physical release. There is that, but there is a sweeter emotional kind of flavor to it...and maybe because of experiences...life experiences, there is even sort of a spiritual realm to it.” Life experience has given her an appreciation of the relationship she now has. People say “I love you” all the time, but she feels that sex is the way they can express that love. “My act of sex or sex for me is what I can do for [husband]... What I can do for [him]...Or what [he] can do for me. It is like the icing on a cake that's already fabulous.” She feels that her current husband is the love of her life, and sex for them makes her relationship and her life more satisfying, fuller, and richer.

Both Mary and Sally wanted to dispel the myth of older women as not interested in sex. When asked, Mary says that idea is “a total myth because I think when you find someone you love, as long as everything is okay... You know, as long as the person doesn't have health problems, ...yeah, sex is important.” Sally believes that her sexuality has been reawakened by this relationship. In fact, one reason Sally said she wanted to participate in the interview was to dispel the myth that women her age are not interested in sex and are not sexual people. She said she is enjoying sex as much or more now than she ever has, and that is a surprise, “a real bonus” that she was not expecting at this point in her life.

Companionship

A third characteristic of the relationship mentioned by all women was companionship, a quality many of them had not prioritized in earlier marriages. When asked about her decision-making process to remarry, Anne said that she and her partner both enjoy home, reading, quiet, and being together. She was interested in a companion to do things with, and they enjoyed being together, so they decided to make it permanent. “He is very kind and good to my family, and he is very good to me, and so...and he's, you know...it just, just developed from that kind of a relationship to more thinking about ‘Well, we ought to make this a permanent situation,’ you know?”

Mary found being a widow to be a lonely experience. She had been married 47 years and missed having a male companion. “You miss having somebody that is special.” After five years, she reconnected with a man whose family had been friends with her family. She feels that when you are older, you think about things differently. This time, friendship and companionship were what she was seeking in a marriage. She said she would have been content if their marriage had stayed at that level, although she feels blessed that it has progressed from friendship to “true love.”

Self in the relationship: Negotiation of independence

All of the women had been living alone prior to their remarriage. Martha talked of feeling independent in her first marriage, but not really understanding what the concept meant, or what being truly independent involved, until her divorce. Martha: "I thought I was [independent]. I thought I was. But after I wasn't married... Now, after I was divorced, I wasn't as independent as I thought... But I sort of hated asking people for help. I wanted to be able to do it myself, and I really tried to learn to do things myself..." Martha's quote exemplifies the stories of most of the women in that they did not really give thought to their independence, or lack thereof, until the loss of their spouse. Most, although not all, described valuing independence during their years alone, and taking pride in their ability to handle things on their own.

The theme of negotiating independence in a new relationship was prominent in many of the narratives. However, remarriage was not interpreted as a decision to give up the independence that many of them valued. Remarriage was narrated more as a negotiation, a redefinition of independence, a willingness to compromise or re-define what independence meant for them. The women often had people in their lives that they depended on after their spouses died or they divorced—children or occasionally female friends or adult relatives. However, independence did not seem threatened or challenged by these relationships or dating relationships. It was a merging of their lives with an intimate partner that caused them to renegotiate the meaning of independence for themselves.

For Mary and Virginia, remarriage brought with it a release from the burdens of handling life on one's own. Mary wanted someone with whom to share life's joys and responsibilities. She enjoys that her second husband pays the bills and can take care of such things as servicing the car and paying taxes. However, she did not want to be seen as totally dependent on a man. She is clear to point out that even though in her first marriage her husband handled most of the money, she was not unaware or dependent. "I mean, of course, I worked, so I was independent in a sense. I mean, I knew what was going on. It wasn't that he kept me in the dark or anything..." When asked if it had been challenging giving up or sharing financial responsibilities after having done it on her own as a widow, Mary's comment was "Not really. Not for me it wasn't." However, she followed up that comment by saying that they signed a prenuptial agreement. She does not seem afraid to admit that she does not want the burden of making life's decisions on her own, but on the other hand, does not want to be seen as dependent, or perhaps ignorant or weak.

Martha had prided herself on establishing relationships with men based on friendship and economic independence. When Martha became involved with her current husband, she tried to pay her own way as she had done with previous partners, but he would not hear of it, and for the first time, she gave in. She was very articulate about her renegotiation of independence in this relationship as she reflected that her husband "wants, he wants me to be dependent upon him. He likes the... He likes... to take care of me... So, I think he... I think he needed to have somebody that needed him, and when you marry an independent person, I don't always show that need... I don't always... I can do it myself. You know?"

For both Martha and Carol, there is the understanding that they will probably be on their own again in the future. Maintaining some independence is protective. Martha: “I mean I might die first, but the odds are that he will, and I’ll be right back there. Well, I don’t want to revert to this little dependent person again.” Carol and Martha are both aware of what they learned to do on their own and do not want to lose those abilities if and when they are alone again. Their renegotiation of independence involves an acknowledgement of that and a willingness to both compromise for this relationship and work to maintain their sense of identity within this newly established interdependence.

Use of the cultural in creating the personal

In the introductory section of the paper, we identified a master narrative and a counter narrative relative to later life relationships. It was also noted that ageism and sexism create a potential double jeopardy that informs cultural-level themes and attitudes relevant for women in these relationships. To answer the second question of how women draw upon the cultural to create the personal, we examine the themes identified in the phenomenological analysis (Table 1) as they relate to these broader societal-level narratives. This analysis was guided by the literature on master and counter narratives (Andrews, 2002; Jones, 2002; May, 2004), a literature that will be referred to in the discussion. The analysis pointed to three ways that women draw upon the cultural to create their personal narratives, and one instance in which a guiding cultural narrative appears to be unavailable.²

Drawing upon master narratives

Women’s narratives of dating and remarriage in later life connect with master narratives in their discussions related to two themes. The first of these is “companionship” as an important priority in a relationship. This was narrated as a new priority, one that had not been as important in earlier relationships. This theme thus draws upon the master narrative which emphasizes the importance of companionship in later life relationships. However, as discussed below, the women draw upon the master narrative with significant qualifications: companionship is not viewed as an alternative to romance and intimacy, as in the master narrative, but rather as one important component of the relationship.

“Not that desperate” draws from a master narrative of traditional gender roles. Most of the women narrate the time prior to meeting their current husband as one of disinterest in dating, and more generally, disinterest in relationships and remarriage. But permeating this discourse of disinterest is a concern about self-presentation. They do not want to be perceived as desperate, or aggressive, or even as interested in a relationship. They distance themselves from women who, as one woman put it, comprise the casserole brigade, converging on a man’s house following the death of his spouse. Thus, the “not that desperate” theme draws directly from a traditional gender role master narrative of women as passive, the “chasees” rather than the chasers.

²Although the woman typically did not explicitly refute or confirm a master narrative, like Jones (2002), we argue that our knowledge of cultural narratives can serve as a basis for these analyses.

Drawing upon counter narratives

One way of resisting dominant master narratives is to select an existing counter narrative. This is exemplified by the women's discussion of the "sexuality" theme in characterizing their current relationships. With respect to this theme, they endorsed the counter narrative for older women that celebrates sexuality in later life relationships. This, however, was not a matter of long-held principle or beliefs. Most women registered surprise at their newly-found sexual interest and capacity. They thus narrate their own experiences, rather than general attitudes, as the basis for countering the master narrative of companionship *as a replacement for* sexuality in later life. One of the women went even further, explicitly targeting the countering of this master narrative as her purpose for doing the interview.

The discussion surrounding the theme of "negotiation of independence," we argue, also draws upon a counter narrative related to gender roles. While feminist perspectives hardly constitute a counter narrative in today's society, they nevertheless constitute a counter narrative for these women. Most identified themselves as traditional, for example, in talking of the roles they had played in past marriages, in their attitudes toward aggressive women (described above), and in their views of the inappropriateness of sex outside of marriage. Yet they had come to value and appreciate independence during their years of living alone, and to take pride in their accomplishments. Negotiating independence became an issue in the new relationship because of this experience (again, not because of any fundamental beliefs), but the fact of recognizing the need for negotiation draws on a feminist rather than traditional master narrative. Thus, in both of the above instances, they employed counter narratives to resist master narratives, but it was life experiences rather than world views that motivated this resistance.

Countering by appropriating a narrative typically applied to other age groups

Although there certainly exists romantic stories of later life relationships, romance does not figure prominently in the master narrative for such relationships. Within the master narrative, relationships are formed on more practical bases in later life—companionship, financial support, caretaking and the like. The "romance" theme, then, can be seen as a counter narrative when applied to later life relationships, one appropriated from a narrative typically associated with relationships earlier in life. As in the above examples, the countering in the women's narratives derives from experience with particular men rather than from general views about the nature of later life relationships. But as in the case of sexuality, most women would now proclaim that romance is indeed possible in later life relationships.

Lacking a guiding narrative

The final theme, "He's the one; why wait," came from the women's attempted explanations of the brief time period (for most, six months or less) between the initiation of the current relationship and the marriage. Women struggled to explain this, attributing it to "fate," "destiny," "soul mates," or "divine intervention," and many, in the end, said they just knew, at some point, that he was "the one." They thus explained the fact of the marriage, but not the time frame (other than one woman who said that she wanted to begin living with her partner, so they could have sex, as soon as possible). The women's narration of suddenly

knowing “he’s the one” draws from a romantic master narrative, as, perhaps, does the move to be with the person as soon as possible. No one mentioned the idea that “life is short” as a reason to marry quickly, but there was a sense of “now that I have found ‘the one,’ why wait to get married?” But on the whole, because of their difficulties in articulating their reasons for a quick marriage, it seems that a cultural-level narrative was not readily available to them in relation to this theme.

Discussion

Our analyses of women’s remarriage narratives addressed narrative content—the phenomenology of later life relationships and narrative process—how cultural messages come into play in creating the personal. In the next two sections we relate each of these analyses to the pertinent literature, and then in the final section, we discuss narrative as innovation.

Narrative as story

The women’s narratives in this study provide a perspective on later life relationships that has not so far been represented in the literature. These narratives differ from the methods of other studies in three important ways. First, they are stories that were guided, but not restricted, by the interviewer. Women were encouraged to simply talk about many aspects of their lives. Second, the narratives are not just about the present, but extend back to relationships earlier in life, then proceed through the period of life alone to the development of a new relationship. Thus they constitute a more far-reaching story than has been available from focused surveys or interviews. Third, for the first time, topics widely studied in the literature on single older adults can be viewed from the perspectives of women who have been married, then single (either through divorce or widowhood), and who are now remarried.

When relating the current findings to the previous literature, the narratives described by these women reflect several key themes in the literature on relationships in later life. One of these is attitudes about dating and remarriage among older, single adults. Some general conclusions from these studies are that women, compared to men, are less likely to date, and less likely to be interested in remarriage (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991; Davidson, 2001). In a study of older women who had been widowed for several years, Talbott (1998) reported that most considered remarriage as undesirable or unfeasible. Common explanations for the gender differences offered by investigators are the increasing shortage of men relative to women at older ages, and also the greater reluctance of women to relinquish the freedom of single life (Davidson, 2001).

As the women in this study looked back on their single years, they, also, for the most part, expressed a disinterest in dating and in remarriage. They, too, gave as reasons their satisfaction with the freedom of a single life. But after meeting their current husbands, they proceeded to remarry within a matter of months. In our analysis, we point to the potential importance of self-presentation related to gender role attitudes in women’s stance toward dating and remarriage: they do not want to be perceived as women who aggressively seek potential partners. One implication, then, for further work is to take self-presentation

concerns into account when surveying women's attitudes toward dating and remarriage. A second implication is that these attitudes may have little to do with the actual decision to remarry.

A second area of interest in the literature is the nature of attitudes toward later life relationships, and the impact of these attitudes. Young adults anticipate a decline in sexual interest in later years (Floyd & Weiss, 2001). Professionals have referred to the notion of asexual older people as a myth, and have suggested that this myth may affect the sexual attitudes and behaviors of older adults themselves (Deacon et al., 1995; Kellett, 2000; Kennedy et al., 1997). In fact, there is evidence that older adults themselves emphasize companionship rather than sex or romance in their dating relationships (Bulcroft & O'Connor-Roden, 1986; Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986). This myth may differentially affect women and men, and partly explain, along with other factors, gender differences in sexual activity in later life (Dello Buono, 1998).

Two features of the women's narratives relate to this topic. In talking about their years alone, prior to meeting their future husband, most women said they had endorsed the prevailing attitudes about partnering in later life. Companionship, they believed, was the main motive for new relationships. Sex, they believed, was an unimportant feature of relationships at their stage of life. To their surprise, all of that changed when they married. The sexuality in the relationship, and the romance, became important in addition to the companionship. As a result, their attitudes about sex in later life relationships changed quite dramatically. An implication, then, of these narratives for interpreting the impact of ageist attitudes on the sexual behavior of older adults is that people respond to a particular person, in a particular relationship, and not on the basis of prevailing attitudes. Among the women in our study, there is more evidence of the relationship influencing attitudes than the reverse.

Finally, some studies suggest that women are disinclined to remarry because they do not want to give up the freedom of a single life (Davidson, 2001). Carr (2004) points out the importance of independence for many widows, and the satisfaction and sense of mastery that comes with learning to do the things that their husbands used to do. Consistent with these findings, the women in our study talked of valuing their independence and taking pride in their ability to be self-sufficient during their single years. But after meeting their future husbands, the decision to remarry was not framed in either/or terms. They did not narrate independence versus remarriage, but rather *how* to negotiate a relationship in which independence was not relinquished, but was redefined as interdependence, a balancing of connecting and separating. The implication for research on attitudes of single, older women toward remarriage is that these attitudes do not necessarily prevent relationship formation and remarriage, but rather become transformed as relationships develop.

Narrative as process

In any narrative about a life, multiple identities are in play. In these women's narratives about remarriage, evident identities were (a) an older woman; (b) a "proper" woman, as defined by the traditional gender role narrative; (c) an independent woman; (d) a sexual woman; and (e) a companion. (There were others, too, that we have not focused on here—mother, friend, church member, good citizen.) These identities each link in some way to

cultural narratives, and in the process of identity construction, cultural narratives are selected, and interpreted, in ways unique to the individual (Valsiner, 1994).

Although there were many individual differences among the narratives of the eight women in our study, in our process analysis, we focused on the commonalities in how cultural narratives were selected to construct personal stories. This analysis showed that personal narratives drew upon the cultural in different ways, sometimes connecting with a master narrative, sometimes with a counter narrative, and in one instance, appropriating a cultural narrative typically associated with earlier-life relationships.

Some degree of struggle or tension typically is evident in people's narratives, especially when dominant cultural narratives are being resisted in some way (Jones, 2002; May, 2004). Spreckels (2002) makes this point with regard to gender and aging: "...older women struggle with having certain needs and desires while at the same time wanting to conform to societal norms" (p. 148). In contrast to this expectation, a striking feature of these narratives was the absence of any signs of struggle. Narrative tension did not exist between the identities of "older woman" and "proper woman," for example, and the identity of "sexual woman." So even though the women took up a counter narrative with regard to later life relationships, they seemed able to seamlessly integrate this counter narrative within their larger story. The reason that they were able to do this is that the societal-level counter narrative (relationships can be equally as passionate and romantic for the old as for the young) was legitimized, and transformed into a master narrative, by their adoption of a traditional view of gender roles and marriage. Within the framework of a traditional gender role (women do not initiate), and a societally-sanctioned partnering (marriage), there is no basis for conflict with the counter narrative regarding later life sexuality.

The identity of "independent woman," also a counter narrative for these traditional interviewees, was integrated into the narrative in a slightly different way. Rather than calling on another master narrative to integrate "independent woman" and "married woman," the narrators redefined independence, as we have described above. It is noteworthy that the narratives of these older women differ, in this respect, from relationship narratives of younger, less traditional, adult women (Watson & Bell, 2005). The younger women, ranging in age from 31 to 50, were not married, but most were in steady, long-term relationships. In these narratives, several unresolved conflicts were evident, all relating to cultural-level gender role narratives, and also to the romantic narrative. The existence of tension often leads to identity "work" in an effort to resolve the tension. This kind of work was not evident in the older women's narratives.

Older women did struggle in one way when attempting to explain their reason for a quick decision to marry. This struggle was not a matter of competing narratives, but seemed to result from the lack of a cultural narrative to guide their explanations. Another possibility is that they did not feel comfortable relaying the reasons for this quick decision in the interview setting, particularly if the explanation was that they were anxious to have sex (as one woman indicated). Older women, in general, may find it difficult to discuss the topic of sex (Jones, 2002).

This raises the question of whether the identified processes might vary with situation, or across time. Identity narratives are not static entities, but rather dynamic processes, ongoing, and variable depending on the context. The content surely changes over time and would have been quite different if the women had been interviewed prior to meeting their future husbands. The processes, in terms of the way cultural narratives were used, also would have differed to some extent, since the counter narrative of sexuality and romance resulted from their experiences in the new relationship. One of the interesting questions in narrative research, suggested some years ago by Harre (e.g., Van Langenhove & Harre, 1993), among others, is of the change in identity narratives over time, and the person-context exchanges that contribute to these changes.

Narrative as innovation

People draw upon the cultural in constructing their personal identity narratives, but personal narratives, in turn, affect the cultural. Langellier (2001; Langellier & Peterson, 2004), analyzing narrative as performance, emphasizes the import of the societal as well as personal implications of the telling. Identity is constructed through narrative, but at the same time, narrative can serve as a cultural critique. Regarding her analysis of a woman's story of getting a tattoo over her scar several years after a mastectomy, Langellier (2001) says, "Rhea's narrative performance is transgressive to the extent that it breaks the silence on breast cancer, breast loss, and tattoo, brings them into the realm of discourse, and contests their dominant, stigmatizing meanings" (p. 172).

Women's narratives about later life relationships also can also be read as performance, as narratives that in some ways break the silence. It is relevant to this point that some of the women volunteered for the study *in order* to tell their story. Most also commented at the end of the interview that they appreciated the opportunity to talk to somebody about their lives and their new partners. Their personal narratives conform to master narratives in some respects, and transgress against them in others. Given that there are multiple ways that a narrative might transgress against the master narrative for later life relationships (e.g., from a feminist perspective), what is the nature of the transgression performed by these women? What kind of new script for later life relationships might emerge from narratives such as theirs?

This new script would transgress, but only within the bounds of a fairly traditional outlook on relationships, and to some extent, gender roles. Maintaining an identity as an "appropriate" older woman was important to the women in our study; they did not want to be grouped with "those" women who chase men or who engage in what they viewed as gender inappropriate behaviors. They felt comfortable in a traditional female role, letting men take the lead in dating and sex. Most did not condone sex prior to marriage. They valued the role of wife, both as a social indicator that they were part of a couple, and as a means of self-fulfillment. Some of the women talked of feeling a bit lost and without purpose during their single years, and said that the remarriage had restored purpose to their lives.

But within these bounds, they transgress against the master narrative for later life relationships by proclaiming their joy with newly-found sexuality and romance. They

narrate this as surprising because of their life stage, and additionally, for some, because they had not experienced this kind of passion and romance in prior relationships. They transgress as well against a traditional gender role narrative in their talk of valuing independence as experienced while single, and the importance of negotiating this independence within their current relationship.

The new script that might emerge, then, from the stories of middle-class women in this cohort, born in the earlier to mid 20th century, might be quite different from a transgressive narrative imagined by a younger cohort. It is a narrative that subtly mixes and matches the traditional with the innovative, allowing the retention of firmly-held values about women's roles, and about marriage, while at the same time redefining the possibilities for sexual pleasure and romance. It is through the voices of women such as these that will emerge a viable alternative, for them, to the master narrative on later life relationships.

Conclusion

In this study we have explored later life relationships through content and process analyses of women's narratives of their past relationships, their single lives, the development of a new relationship, and remarriage. These women's stories add to our understanding of both shared and individualized aspects of relationship formation and remarriage in later life. While some of the results from this study reinforce our existing knowledge and understanding of later life relationships, they also add needed depth of understanding into the individual and cultural levels of the process of remarriage for older women. The results offer insight into the process of remarriage and how older women choose from available cultural narratives about love and romance while combating the double jeopardy found within these cultural messages that tell them that love, romance, sex, and a remarriage that involves these factors are meant for the young. The importance of the findings resides in what these women demonstrate in their journeys as they defy the expectation held by society, and even themselves, that older adults are asexual. This belief changed for these women with this relationship. Some of the women even participated in the interviews because they wanted to relay this message. It was a discovery they had made, and they wanted to dispel this widely-held belief.

Another important finding from this study centers on these women's ability to negotiate an interdependence within this new relationship. Most had established a sense of independence when single for which they were very proud. Research on widowhood and relationships in later life has found that one of the major reasons women do not wish to remarry is a lack of desire to give up this freedom and independence they have worked so hard to establish. These women reveal how they worked to partner with someone new and share their lives with these men while not sacrificing their sense of self as independent. This interdependence is not seen as a tension or struggle, but as a balance between what the individual wants while being in an intimate relationship with another person.

Connidis (2006) reminds us that “the accumulated experience of a lifetime puts a late-life marriage on a different footing from a marriage earlier in life” (p. 134). The women who were interviewed for this study exemplify this statement in how they went about deciding

about remarriage, what they were looking for in a marriage, and how they saw themselves as women. The decision to remarry and the timing between initiation of relationship and remarriage illustrates how the process of relationship formation and development can be both similar to and distinctly different from earlier in the life course. The experiences of having been married, raising children, and being in later life, provided these women a specific context within which they based their decision to remarry. In this way, their past relationships and experiences provided a background with which to compare and judge what they did and did not want in a marriage, and the insight to make a choice that they felt was best for them at this point in their lives.

The ways in which these kinds of narratives can inform our understanding of later life relationships are by: (a) providing an “insiders” view of single life and the formation of relationships; (b) giving a sense of the big picture—how relationships come about, and how they fit within and form the whole of a life including attitudes, values, sense of purpose, and the like; (c) providing a context for the interpretation of past research; and (d) showing how personal narratives intersect with cultural narratives about later life relationships, including how the cultural is appropriated by the personal, and how the personal can in turn feed back to, and affect, the cultural.

A narrative approach has appeal, as well, in bringing the person, rather than variables, into focus. It enables us to talk of Martha, or Carol, or Virginia, to consider the topics of dating, or remarriage, in the context of their lives, and thus to see connections that we would not see if these aspects of life were treated as isolated phenomena. These narratives reveal the ever-changing process of identity development for these women as they work within available cultural narratives to live their lives, make sense of their lives, and tell their stories. But we are aware, as well, that the stories of eight women are just that, eight women's stories. They may reflect the narratives of other middle-class, white, relatively healthy, traditional women who remarry in later life—that is a question for the future. They certainly do not reflect the narratives of those of other ethnicities, in other socioeconomic and health circumstances. That, too, is a question for future studies. While this approach and analysis continues to add depth to our understanding, it remains necessary that work in this area continues and that the diversity of experiences in developing intimate relationships in later life is explored.

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Table 1

Narrating remarriage in later life: the organizing themes.

Topic	Theme
Pre-relationship dating	Not that desperate
The decision to remarry	He's the one; why wait
Characterizing the relationship	Romance
	Sexuality
	Companionship
Self in the relationship	Negotiation of independence