Continuity and Discontinuity: The Case of Second Couplehood in Old Age

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Purpose: Continuity and discontinuity are controversial concepts in social theories on aging. The aim of this article is to explore these concepts using the experiences of older persons living in second couplehood in old age as a case in point. Design and Method: Based on a larger qualitative study on second couplehood in old age, following the existential-phenomenological tradition, a theoretical sample of 20 couples was chosen. Forty individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, tape-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Results: A continuity-discontinuity continuum and a value-attribution pole emerged from data analysis. Continuity was experienced as the exception and discontinuity as the rule. Implications: Findings are discussed in light of social theories on aging, raising questions regarding the role of continuity and discontinuity in old age development. Practical implications are suggested.

Key Words: Old age, Second couplehood, Continuity and discontinuity, Human development, Social gerontology theories, Normative aging, Qualitative research, Life-long marital relationships

Increased life expectancy has led to alternative intimate partner relationships for older persons (Cooney & Dunne, 2001). Second couplehood in old age is a case in point. Continuity and discontinuity are controversial concepts in social theories on aging. The aim of this article is to explore these concepts using the experiences of older persons living in second couplehood in old age as a case in point.
(P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1996; Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007). Nevertheless, continuity and discontinuity is still a controversial issue regarding normative aging and is, as yet, inconclusive. This is reflected through some primary classical social theories on old age such as disengagement theory (e.g., Cumming, 1963), activity theory (e.g., Lemon, Bengston, & Peterson, 1972), and continuity theory (Atchley, 1989). Disengagement theory views normative aging as the desire to detach from a middle-aged lifestyle. It indicates that discontinuity is desirable in the eyes of both the older people and of society (Cumming, 1963). In contrast, activity theory (e.g., Lemon et al., 1972) and continuity theory (Atchley, 1989) perceive continuity to be the normative aging process. Activity theory defines normative aging as continuing an active middle-aged lifestyle (Lemon et al., 1972). Continuity theory represents the preservation of internal constructions of “self” and external constructions of social relationships and environments (Atchley, 1989).

Controversies about the role of continuity and discontinuity belong also to a broader debate relating to human development. Progressive hierarchical integration models emphasize continuity as indicating development, whereas progressive differentiation models view discontinuity as development (Lerner, 2002). Yet, a meta-model of selection, optimization, and compensation (SOC) of human development indicates how individuals adapt to change (Freund & Baltes, 2002), thus combining continuity with discontinuity.

The common perception of old age is as a period of loss and deterioration (P. B. Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980), a time for settling unresolved issues, preparing for death (Erikson, 1998), and at best, as a time for preserving gains to compensate for losses (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990). In contrast, empirical studies on late-life widowhood and its consequences (e.g., Koren & Lowenstein, 2008) point to the ability to develop, by providing an incentive to create new meanings in life following grief and pain (May, 1983). In addition, studies on positive aging relate to human resources accumulated throughout the years enabling growth and development that continues until the end of one’s life (Gergen & Gergen, 2003).

Existential–phenomenology (May, 1983) strengthens these notions by understanding human development through individual experiences, seeking common themes, and claiming unpredictability (Starr, 1982–1983). It does not ignore the stages of life but explores how people react to change and how they attach meaning to their life’s development, creating human development according to people’s subjective and inter-subjective perceptions (Starr, 1982–1983).

Continuity and discontinuity are defined in the literature on aging (Atchley, 1989; Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007) and on human development (Freund & Baltes, 2002; Lerner, 2002). Discontinuity in human development usually signifies some form of change, whereas continuity implies maintaining the status quo (Lerner, 2002). Continuity and discontinuity include descriptions of and explanations for behavior, which are not necessarily undivided. They also relate to a qualitative level referring to essence and to a quantitative level referring to more or to less (Lerner, 2002). A gerontological approach relates to internal and external continuity and discontinuity in aging. Internal refers to self and identity, whereas external refers to relationship structures and social behavior (Atchley, 1989). A lifespan perspective of human development in general and of aging in particular suggests a meta-model (SOC). It suggests that people select goals and activities that allow them to function in an optimal way and to compensate for losses along the life span using strengths that remain (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1996). As such, SOC views change as adaptation rather than growth. A more recent approach is an innovation theory of successful aging. This is based on empirical findings that internal continuity of self-preservation and striking out in an entirely new direction are possible in old age (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007). Such an approach leaves room for continuity and adaptation as well as for growth. These definitions and approaches are used when discussing the findings.

This article addresses the following: (1) How continuity and discontinuity are experienced individually and dyadically by older people living in second couplehood in old age; (2) how continuity and discontinuity fit in with normative ways of living in old age; and (3) how perceptions of continuity and discontinuity among older persons living in second couplehood could contribute to altering society’s outlook on old age.

**Methods**

This article is based on a larger qualitative study addressing the meaning of second couplehood in
old age from a dyadic perspective (Koren, 2008). Previous studies on second couplehood in old age focused on men’s and women’s individual perspectives of the phenomenon but interviewed only one member of each couple (e.g., Schlesinger & Schlesinger, 2009). This article relates to the dyad as the unit of study. Following the existential–phenomenological tradition enabled the capture of various “lived experiences” of participants as individuals and as part of a couple, providing in-depth insight into the phenomenon from a dyadic perspective. The Ethics Committee of the University of Haifa Research Authority on Humans approved the study. Data for this article belong to one of the four themes identified in the larger study, titled: “Continuity and discontinuity of second couplehood in relation to life-long marital relationships.”

**Participants and Procedure**

Theoretical sampling was used to achieve the widest sample theoretically possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were 20 couples chosen according to the following criteria: Older people who created second couplehood at the age of 65 years and older for men and 60 years and older for women; were previously in a life-long marriage, having raised a family including grownup children who had left home and grandchildren; and the relationship had ended due to widowhood or divorce. Couples were either remarried, cohabiting, or LAT. All participants were independent adults who could consent to participate in the study. They were sufficiently fluent in Hebrew to provide in-depth descriptions. Due to the study’s dyadic nature, both members of the couple had to agree to participate.

Participants were identified through neighborhood clubs for older persons, various informal networks and with the assistance of professionals working with older persons who could access the relevant population in communities throughout the country. All participants signed a letter of consent that included assurance of confidentiality.

The actual sample included men aged 70–92 years and women aged 66–88 years. Prior to entering second couplehood, 34 participants were widowed and 6 were divorced. Duration of long-term marriage was 27–65 years for the widowed and 20–31 years for the divorced. Seven couples were LAT, 10 were cohabiting, and 3 were remarried (It is not known how this reflects the actual distribution of the phenomenon because no official information is available about the percentage of second couplehood in old age or the distribution of its various forms within the older population. Other findings based on data from the larger study revealed that the phenomenon is not yet socially accepted, regardless of the form that the second couplehood takes [remarriage, unmarried cohabitation, and LAT; Koren & Eisikovits, 2011]. It may be that the lack of official information supports these findings.). Participants perceived themselves to be in good to very good health and reported their socioeconomic status as middle to upper-middle class. All were Jewish; most declared themselves as secular, about a quarter traditional and the rest religious.

Previous data analysis revealed that 8 participants perceived their long-term marriage as better than their second couplehood, 12 participants perceived their second couplehood as better than their first, and 20 stated that the two relationships were different and could not be compared.

**Data Collection**

Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews based on an interview guide developed by the researcher, drawing on key issues relating to second couplehood in old age identified in the literature. The “grand-tour” opening question (Spradley, 1979) was: “Tell me the story of your second couplehood in old age.” The interview guide included three main content domains: (1) the dyadic unit of second couplehood, including such questions as: How did you and your spouse decide on living arrangements and on the degree of the formality of your relationship? How do significant others accept your relationship, if at all? (2) the experience of old age included such questions as: How does your spouse perceive you in terms of being old and how do you perceive him/her? (3) the experience of human development related to such questions as: Tell me about turning points in your life and how they influenced your current state of being in second couplehood.

Forty individual interviews lasting 1.5–2.5 hr were conducted separately, to enable each member of the couple to narrate freely and discuss their own unique experiences (Arskey, 1996). This enabled each spouse to raise material that might not have emerged in joint interviews, especially when discussing sensitive topics or criticizing the spouse (Morris, 2001).
Analysis

Interviews were conducted separately but analyzed individually and dyadically for overlaps and contrasts as the couple was the unit of analysis (for details, see Eisikovits & Koren, 2010). The existential–phenomenological perspective enabled understanding the essence of the phenomenon and identification of multiple meanings ascribed by participants (Mustakas, 1994). Data were organized and coded using ATLAS.ti 5.0 (2005). First, horizontalization using open coding by individual cases was performed. This enabled the development of content categories for each interview. Subsequently, cross-case analysis was performed by identifying themes that cut across interviews. Units of meaning were identified and grouped into four major themes and subthemes within each, assisting transfer of unit of analysis from the individual to the couple level. This was achieved by examining how each theme and subtheme that emerged from cross-case analysis on the individual level was addressed by both members of a dyad. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached (Padgett, 1998).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was achieved as follows: First, tape-recorded interviews and their verbatim transcriptions enabled verification from the original, ensuring referential adequacy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Second, the researchers of the larger study simultaneously performed separate analyses. The identified themes were compared and negotiated until agreement was achieved, on which variations were found. Third, a group of colleagues familiar with qualitative methods asked provocative questions relating to the analysis, which assisted in acquiring additional insights beyond those of the researchers, thus achieving credibility by peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Fourth, negative case analysis was performed, resulting in the finding of continuity as the exception. This strengthened the finding that discontinuity is the rule (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as in the biblical Hebrew saying: “The exception testifies the rule.” Fifth, dyadic analysis provided a means for achieving trustworthiness similar to triangulation because the more sources available for interpreting data, the more reliable the findings become. In addition to the researcher’s interpretation of each individual partner’s quotes, a third interpretation was derived by combining the two individual perspectives. Although this additional interpretation was enriching, it was also limiting because the two interpretations were interdependent and therefore mutually restrictive (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010).

Data are presented in the form of quotes from both partners for each theme addressed because the couple was the unit of analysis. This is necessary to present the experience from a dyadic perspective. All quotes were translated from Hebrew. Identifying details have been altered to maintain confidentiality.

Results

The majority of participants perceived second couplehood in old age as discontinuous to their life-long marriage. Those who perceived it as continuous were the exception. Discontinuity lies within continuity and vice versa. However, for each individual participant, either one or the other was more significant, which assisted in identifying whether continuity or discontinuity was dominant in each second couplehood relationship (The theme of continuity and discontinuity was inductively derived through data analysis of the larger study. Therefore, identification of couplehood relationships in terms of continuity and discontinuity was not achieved by direct questioning but rather by data interpretation, as illustrated through the quotes presented.).

Another dimension was value attribution: whether participants attributed a “better or worse” value to second couplehood in old age in terms of continuity or discontinuity or whether they perceived second couplehood as different from first couplehood and therefore detached from value. The following themes emerged: (1) continuity of life-long marital relationships: the exception; (2) discontinuity of life-long marital relationships: the rule, (i) comparing the purpose of second couplehood to that of life-long marital relationships, (ii) the becoming of “self,” (iii) will versus obligation, and (iv) sexuality and sex life.

Continuity of Life-Long Marital Relationships: The Exception

Situations in which both members of the couple perceived second couplehood as continuous was found to be the exception. Quotes from the following couple are illustrative:

Nachman: Truthfully, I don’t find any difference than with my wife, of blessed memory, we lived
100% OK and with Malka it’s the same . . . that’s what I was used to . . . and the best part is that the children and grandchildren accept Malka . . . she runs the home, we consult each other on financial matters, there’s no big difference . . . that’s why I say that I’m really happy because it’s a kind of continuation. (Man, aged 77, widowed, long-term marriage, 44 years, cohabitation, 6 years in 2nd couplehood)

Nachman begins by stating that his present couplehood is identical to his life-long first marriage by describing how his family willingly accepts his spouse and his relationship with her. The continuity of his present couplehood when compared with his life-long marriage is manifest in gender roles and serves as justification for living in second couplehood in old age, along with his family’s acceptance of the relationship and his happiness. His spouse has similar perceptions:

Malka: You know, I guess I found in him the things that . . . I was used to, I had a good marriage and I found an incredible person, beyond my expectations . . . look, when you have a good marriage with someone who respects you . . . you don’t want to settle for less . . . he (my former husband) was very considerate . . . and with him (my present partner) I found the same. (Woman, aged 66, widowed, long-term marriage, 39 years, cohabitation, 6 years in 2nd couplehood)

Similar to Nachman, Malka finds it necessary to emphasize how her second couplehood in old age is continuous with her life-long marriage in her spouse’s treatment of her.

Second couplehood for both spouses is a certain duplication of their life-long first marriages. Living in cohabitation is socially discontinuous in status. However, the continuous aspect of the relationship dynamics seems to be dominant in comparison to their life-long marriages. They both emphasize the continuity by relating to similar parameters of couplehood, which they find necessary to justify their present situation.

Discontinuity of Life-Long Marital Relationships: The Rule

Most participants were found to perceive second couplehood as discontinuous, as illustrated by the following couple:

Barak: I didn’t know how to do it. Today, I’m smarter. I thought I could do it in the same way as I had for 36 years, but it couldn’t be done, but . . . I wish that all couples in second couplehood could experience the way we live; that things will not be worse for them, only better . . . I feel privileged, I don’t know what Hodaya thinks, but I’m privileged to have been granted a good partner. I love her, I respect her, I do not underestimate her . . . (Man, aged 80, widowed, long-term marriage, 36 years, cohabitation, 10 years in 2nd couplehood)

Barak’s first priority was to experience second couplehood in old age as similar to his life-long marriage. However, once he realized the impossibility of this, he changed his outlook. His partner could then view him differently, enabling the creation of a relationship that was discontinuous with his previous life-long marriage. He does not disclose what makes his current relationship discontinuous, but we understand that he does not attach value to discontinuity. He indicates his respect for his partner, which means a lot to her, especially as this is different from her previous life-long marriage. This is illustrated below:

Hodaya: . . . I want to go to the theater; I go and he doesn’t. No hard feelings. He gives me unlimited freedom and I give him freedom; that’s very important. My first husband gave me freedom, but out of indifference; do you understand the difference? He (my present partner) gives me freedom because he understands my needs; there’s a big difference. The outcome is the same, but not the motive, and the motive is important, you bet it is, it makes all the difference. (Woman, aged 70, divorced, long-term marriage, 30 years, cohabitation, 10 years in 2nd couplehood)

Hodaya brings up discontinuity within continuity through indicating that the reason for behavior is more important than its outcome. In this aspect, her second couplehood is perceived as more discontinuous than continuous because the similar behavior was triggered by essentially different reasons, which were more significant than the behavior itself.

Both spouses experience continuity and discontinuity, but the discontinuous experiences are more significant. Barak perceives both his first and second couplehoods as good and loving relationships and therefore continuous. However, his experience of discontinuity plays a more significant role in defining the nature of his current romantic relationship without diminishing the role of love but indicating its essentiality. For Hodaya, continuity is expressed in behavior outcome. However, more important to her is the different reasons for the same outcome; defining her current relationship as more discontinuous.
Comparing The Purpose of Second Couplehood with That of Life-Long Marital Relationships

This theme presents discontinuity while comparing the purpose of creating second couplehood with that of creating life-long marriages. It also shows how one spouse attributes negative value to discontinuity, whereas the partner perceives it as different, without value attribution.

Batya: In second couplehood, it’s him and her, the couple, it remains the couple. It’s like throwing a stone in the water and there are circles. The circle is his children, my children, his friends, my friends, but in the middle, it’s the stone you throw, the couple.

With the husband (in life-long marriage), the stone is a rock; husband, wife, children, grandchildren, it’s a wider world. There’s a big difference, these are like two different planets that shouldn’t be compared. (Woman, aged 71, widowed, long-term marriage, 37 years, cohabitation, 8 years in 2nd couplehood)

Second couplehood in old age does not represent continuity of Batya’s life-long marriage, but another planet indicating two different worlds that do not intersect. She describes the difference through a metaphor of the ripples created by throwing a stone into the water. The primary unit in life-long marriages includes not only the spousal relationship but also their offspring. In second couplehood in old age, the primary unit is the couple, and significant others are considered a separate unit. Batya perceives these two phenomena as essentially different without preferring one over the other. The following quote illustrates Batya’s perception of gender roles in second couplehood in old age:

Batya: One of the advantages of old age is doing what you want, not what you are made to do, like in my (long-term) marriage . . . . He (my current partner) took it for granted that I would cook and do his laundry, but I won’t do things if I don’t want to. I said: “You can stand on your head if you like. But when I cook for myself, I’ll cook extra for you, when I do my laundry, you are welcome to add yours, but don’t expect it to be my duty“ (Woman, aged 71, widowed, long-term marriage, 37 years, cohabitation, 8 years in 2nd couplehood).

For Batya, old age means enjoying herself, doing only what she wants to do without obligations. She does not expect second couplehood to change this, particularly because of its entirely different purpose from long-term marital relationships.

The following quote brings a metaphor used by Batya’s partner, as a means to describe and explain his perception of the difference between first and second couplehood including gender roles:

Eyal: Look, (life-long marriage) is to build your life with your family, it’s what you want to achieve, more or less . . . (In second couplehood) you have to adapt yourself to your partner. She didn’t hesitate to announce that I shouldn’t expect her to cook or do my laundry. I was hoping this would change . . . but it didn’t . . . me, I’m in it (second couplehood) for convenience . . . there are two mountains, and you have to find the middle road. I’m on the middle road now. She’s one mountain and I’m another . . . so that they’ll meet somewhere and there won’t be a void, but a middle road. (Man, aged 78, widowed, long-term marriage, 43 years, cohabitation, 8 years in 2nd couplehood)

Eyal perceives his life-long marriage as better than his second couplehood. To describe the nature of second couplehood in old age, Eyal uses the metaphor of two mountains, each symbolizing one member of the couple with a road adjoining them. This contrasts his life-long marriage, in which Eyal perceives the spouses as two separate mountains uniting into one. Remaining as two entities with a connecting road symbolizes the compromises and the convenience of second couplehood. The maximum that can be achieved is building a bridge; nothing new is created compared with the achievements in life-long marriages. This situation is apparently convenient for Eyal, even though it is not his optimal hoped-for relationship. He explains the differences as related to different periods in the life course resulting from different motivations for creating couplehood. This means coming to terms with the lack of continuity of second couplehood with his life-long marriage, although in an ideal world, he would desire this. His development as a person is his ability to recognize the benefits in his life with his current spouse and to stay in the relationship despite the discontinuity of the dynamics and the form of the couplehood as cohabitation.

Both partners perceive second couplehood in old age as discontinuous. The differences between them relate to two aspects: one is each spouse’s individual process and the other is value attribution to continuity and discontinuity. From the beginning, Batya did not expect second couplehood to resemble her life-long marriage, whereas Eyal fantasized that it would. He had to undergo a process of change to live in peace with discontinuity. This does not mean that he does not prefer the pattern of his life-long marriage. From his statement, he attributes negative value to discontinuity in second couplehood in old age. Batya, on the other hand, perceives each phenomenon as
The Becoming of “Self”

This theme relates to both spouses’ ability to experience the becoming of “self” as individuals within their current relationship, in contrast to the experiences in their life-long marriages. Iris’s story is illustrative:

Iris: I think that in my (life-long) marriage, there was love at first sight. There was a lot of togetherness because we worked together, we were actually together all the time . . . spouses aren’t used to being together so much because they both work and there aren’t many opportunities. We were together all the time and as I wasn’t an independent girl from home, I was not independent when I was married, either. When I was widowed, it was a shock all round because all of a sudden, I didn’t know what a bank looked like. He dealt with all that, and besides, we were together all the time. We went everywhere together, he even came with me when I needed to buy something; he always came with me. (Woman, aged 66, widowed, life-long marriage, 27 years, LAT, 4 years in 2nd couplehood)

Dominant in her life-long marriage was the experience of total we-ness (togetherness) without I-ness (separateness). This is emphasized not only through the content of her narrative but also by her discourse, opening sentences about her life-long marriage with “I.” “I” is “we.” She describes a marriage based on love at first sight that began progressing slowly in the relationship and it suited me. It’s never too late to find happiness. (Man, aged 73, widowed, long-term marriage, 48 years, LAT, 4 years in 2nd couplehood)

Discontinuity prevailed in the pattern of falling in love and creating couplehood. Second couplehood developed very slowly compared with her life-long marriage, which began with love at first sight. Iris is able to be assertive about the type of couplehood relationship that suits her; she is able to determine the degree of I-ness and we-ness, enabling a balance, without having to give up her separateness within their togetherness. This is illustrated through her insistence that they do not live in the same apartment, indicating discontinuity of the nature of couplehood experienced in her life-long marriage, enabling her to develop as an individual within a couplehood relationship. Her partner’s story is as follows:

Gilad: My second couplehood is 180 degrees different from my (life-long) marriage. Where there was stubbornness here, there is gentleness, when there was a fight here, there is talking . . . it’s difficult to say that there was love like I have today. There was mutual respect, but not warmth. Because of lack of warmth, I had to, how shall I say it? I went to foreign pastures. (Man, aged 73, widowed, long-term marriage, 48 years, LAT, 4 years in 2nd couplehood)

This experience not only describes discontinuity of what second couplehood represents compared with life-long marriage but also attributes value to the discontinuity. Gilad places moral terms of respect and disrespect against terms of warmth and lack of warmth. This comparison creates discontinuity and accounts for the necessity to find a woman outside his life-long marriage without harming his deceased wife’s dignity. By so doing, he is able to kill two birds with one stone. The next quote illustrates second couplehood as a good experience in old age, which he never thought possible:

Gilad: . . . What she gives me is quite something . . . We love and love and love, it’s unbelievable how an older couple can hug and kiss all the time. No, one doesn’t see this, it’s honest and true, the need of two lovers, in love. When we are apart for two days, we miss each other very much. Yes, I believe it’s never too late to find happiness. (Man, aged 73, widowed, long-term marriage, 48 years, LAT, 4 years in 2nd couplehood)

Gilad’s second couplehood experience is characterized by physical expressions of love through kissing and hugging and by emotional expression through missing each other because they live apart, enhancing their romantic experience. Gilad’s ability to create and experience a couplehood relationship
that is different than his life-long marriage enables him to develop as an individual in later life, by attaching meaning to the experience that it is never too late for change. This experience has come to him as a surprise and was not part of how he imagined old age, referring to discontinuity from a positive viewpoint.

The joint meaning of second couplehood for both partners is providing a framework for the development of self in old age. For Iris, this is expressed by her ability to experience couplehood in which I-ness has room alongside we-ness with her partner. Years of widowhood lead her to independence; creating a “self” she does not want to lose within couplehood. LAT assists her with this. Gilad’s ability to create couplehood, in which he can experience warmth and love within the relationship without having to seek for it outside, enhances his development as a whole person, indicating a change toward a “self” that was committed to all aspects of the relationship. Both partners are able to enjoy a different experience of couplehood that is discontinuous to their previous one, contributing to their development of self. Whereas Gilad attributes a good value to the discontinuity, Iris describes the two relationships as different, without value attribution.

### Will Versus Obligation

This theme relates to the difference between second couplehood in old age and life-long marriages relating to motivations for “doing” within a relationship. The quote below relates to care-giving:

**Nissim:** There’s a difference (between first and second couplehood), my wife, I couldn’t leave her, because she was sick, when I was sick she took care of me and I took care of her all these years when she was bedridden.

**Interviewer:** And what about Sarah?

**Nissim:** I’m not interested in leaving her . . . I don’t have to care for her but I want to, I want us to be together (Male, age 91, widowed, life-long marriage, 43 years, LAT, 4 years in 2nd couplehood)

The meaning of second couplehood for Nissim is the difference in motivation to provide care-giving. His partner is frail, needs assistance, and is sometimes hospitalized. Nissim makes it clear that the reason he cares for Sarah is because he wants to, in contrast to his care for his deceased wife, which was mainly out of obligation. The care-giving behavior is continuous, but the reasons for care-giving are discontinuous, and this is where the significant difference lies.

Sarah presents a similar narrative relating to “doing” in general:

**Sarah:** There is a difference (between first and second couplehood), he’s not my husband; he’s my lover. For my husband, I did things because he demanded it. With Nissim, it’s different; I feel that I want to do things for him. **Wanting:** that’s the difference (Female, age 84, widowed, life-long marriage, 50 years, LAT, 4 years in 2nd couplehood).

Sarah and Nissim share continuity in behavior. In second couplehood, they experience “doing” the same things as in their life-long marriages. However, their motivation is discontinuous; Nissim’s reason for taking care of Sarah and Sarah’s reason for doing what Nissim wants is because this is their wish, rather than their obligation, which was expected in their life-long marital relationships.

The obligation of “doing” in general and of care-giving in particular in life-long marriages is normative. However, in a second couplehood in old age that is experienced as non-normative (Koren & Eisikovits, 2011), when “doing” depends on desire and not on obligation, the consequences might be undesirable: An unwilling spouse might not provide help.

### Sexuality and Sex Life

The discovery of sexuality in old age and how sex life in second couplehood is experienced as discontinuous to the participants’ life-long marriages is illustrated in the following quotes:

**Hannah:** . . . from the sexual aspect, at the age of 70 it’s unbelievable, but my husband wasn’t interested. I don’t know, he wasn’t enthusiastic, this whole issue was very marginal, neglected and that has accumulated over the years . . . when he was sick, I had to completely disengage from sex, and when I started to date men, I discovered that it interests me very much and I didn’t realize that this could happen in old age. But it was very intense. Two of the men whom I dated were very nice and I invited them . . . I had sex with them and it was tremendous, but I didn’t want them for an ongoing relationship, it was just for the experience. After that, with Dov (my current partner), it became something so beautiful, so romantic, so wonderful, it’s really a kind of beautiful second chapter in life. (Woman, aged 70, widowed, life-long marriage, 48 years, cohabitation, 2 years in 2nd couplehood)
Hannah’s husband’s death was a turning point in her life. Her attitude changed. Instead of being a victim and holding her husband responsible for her inadequate sex life, she initiates encounters with men. Before she establishes a permanent couplehood relationship, she allows herself to explore her sexuality and the potential fulfillment that sex can provide. This turning point offered the opportunity for a fulfilling sexual and emotional relationship, which occurred in old age and helped to question the myth that what had not been experienced by a certain age would never be experienced. This demonstrates how second couplehood can serve as an opportunity for essential change. Second couplehood, therefore, was not only discontinuous to a life-long marriage but also to the attitude to life in general and sexuality in particular. The following quote illustrates her partner’s life-long marriage in contrast to his current experience:

Dov: You can’t compare! Because my wife was a different character altogether, in this aspect she was extreme. She didn’t want sex with me at all, to such an extreme that in the end, she went to one part of the house and I to the other . . . . In my current relationship, when she feels like it, she comes to me and when I feel like it, I go to her. It’s mutual, nothing is forced or under pressure. I’ve learned and decided to change my ways. I won’t go into details, but sex is part of our relationship and I believe we are both very satisfied. (Man, aged 70, divorced, life-long marriage, 29 years, cohabitation, 2 years in 2nd couplehood)

Discontinuity is expressed in his statement that a life-long marriage cannot be compared with second couplehood. Similar to Hannah, he presents himself as a victim in his life-long marriage and withdraws from taking responsibility for past events. Later, we learn indirectly that the reason for his former wife’s distance might have been Dov’s abusive behavior. He states that he underwent a process of change and is able to create a relationship in old age that is mutually fulfilling, which is a new experience for him and, as such, is discontinuous to his previous relationship.

Both partners are examples of the possibility of taking responsibility and initiating change in old age. They both changed by taking control over their sexual behavior, helping them to repair their previous experience, indicating discontinuity to their life-long marriages.

Discussion

Data for this article were analyzed on a continuity–discontinuity continuum and on a value-attribution pole. Along this continuum were partners who experienced continuity within discontinuity and vice versa, and couples of which one partner experienced discontinuity and the other continuity.

Discontinuity was experienced as the rule and continuity as the exception. Most participants perceived second couplehood in old age as discontinuous to their life-long marital relationship, whereas some attributed value to discontinuity, perceiving their current relationship as better or worse than their previous one. Others did not attribute value to discontinuity, stating that each relationship was different, appropriate to its time, neither better nor worse than the other. A minority of participants perceived second couplehood in old age as continuous with their life-long marriage and attributed positive value to this similarity.

Most participants described experiences of second couplehood in old age as related to discontinuity and development. For example, following widowhood, women developed independence which they had never experienced before and wished to preserve in second couplehood. By being essentially different from their life-long marriage, this was considered discontinuous. This finding shows how internal continuity (Atchley, 1989) of the “self” through independence assisted the creation of external discontinuity (Atchley, 1989) of the couplehood relationship structure. This pointed to internal continuity alongside external discontinuity enabling development in old age.

Developmental change relates to combinations of continuity and discontinuity of the individual’s behavior and the reason for it (Lerner, 2002). For example, findings show continuity of wanting to be in a couplehood relationship throughout the life course but discontinuity in the reasons given, such as entering second couplehood for convenience and to enjoy life, rather than to raise a family. Another example is continuity in care-giving for spouse but discontinuity in the reasons for it; in life-long marriages, it is out of obligation, whereas in second couplehood, desire serves as motivation. These findings strengthen the innovation theory, which emphasizes that some people experience new ways of self-preservation, whereas others engage in completely new experiences (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007). The present findings add that
continuity and discontinuity can be experienced simultaneously by the same person.

Another component within development is quantitative and qualitative continuity. Quantitative change means more or less of the same, whereas qualitative change relates to essence (Lerner, 2002). The participants related to qualitative and quantitative change, for example, experiencing sexuality and sex as essentially different in second couplehood compared with their life-long marriages and with increased frequency of sex.

Change can be interpreted in various ways according to the theoretical orientation the researcher adopts because development is a theoretical rather than empirical concept (Lerner, 2002). Some people interpret development as continuity similar to Atchley’s (1989) theory, and others interpret development as discontinuous similar to Lomranz’s (1998) a-integration perspective, suggesting that a sense of inconsistency and discontinuity can be perceived as a normative human condition. Others still (e.g., innovation theory, Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007) show, empirically, how both continuity and discontinuity play a part in successful aging development.

The benefit of qualitative research is its inductive nature, reaching conclusions from material raised by the participants while constructing meaning with and through them (Mishler, 1986). Innovation theory (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007), derived through qualitative research, is a case in point. Another example is the use of the concept “elasticity of continuity,” meaning an individual’s view of and ability to utilize and stretch the boundaries of continuity (Walters et al., 2003) to explain how wives as care-givers to husbands with dementia perceive their marital relationships and their day-to-day life in terms of continuity and discontinuity.

Similar to theorists, participants do not represent a unanimous stand. Most participants perceive second couplehood in old age as mainly discontinuous and interpret it as development due to its essentially different characteristics, similar to self-reinvention innovation (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007). The minority who perceive it mainly as continuous perceive it also as development in terms of moving on by creating a second couplehood relationship rather than remaining single, similar to self-preservation innovation (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007). From this, it can be concluded that it is too simplistic to attribute development to either continuity or discontinuity in such a dichotomous fashion. The participants’ perspectives in this study strengthen previous research (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007) by revealing how second couplehood in old age includes elements of continuity alongside discontinuity. In addition, theoretical attempts to link between continuity and discontinuity as normative or non-normative aging do not fully consider the complex reality of older persons experiencing second couplehood in old age.

A continuum grounded in the data was constructed reflecting the participants’ attitudes, with continuity at one end and discontinuity at the other. Such a continuum enables both continuity and discontinuity in old age to be practiced simultaneously and to be considered acceptable.

In contrast, continuity theory of normal aging (Atchley, 1989) relates to various degrees of continuity on a continuum with too little continuity at one end, too much at the other, and optimum continuity in the center. Too much continuity indicates that a person feels stuck with no real opportunities for enriching life. Optimum continuity indicates that personal preferences fit in with social demands. Those who experience too little continuity perceive life as unpredictable. Going overboard could be considered discontinuity, placing it in an undesirable position.

Perceiving normal aging as such indicates bipolarity between normativity and continuity. Fry (1992) strengthens this idea: “Continuity is related to predictability, and society therefore puts pressure on aging individuals to maintain continuity and predictability (p. 284).” Second couplehood in old age is unaccepted and therefore unexpected in cultures that are placed between tradition and modernity (Koren & Eisikovits, 2011). Consequently, the phenomenon is likely to be perceived as more discontinuous to one’s life course within those cultures.

Older persons experiencing second couplehood in old age, from an existential–phenomenological perspective, do not have control over becoming widowed and do not have total control over becoming divorced because two persons are involved. However, they can control how they cope with termination of their life-long marriage in terms of taking responsibility for their lives (Spinelli, 1989). In comparison, continuity theory of normal aging (Atchley, 1989) refers to phenomena such as cognitive decline, over which a person has little or no control, known as throwness in existential–phenomenological terms. Furthermore, a person has very limited control over coping with this situation,
referred to as situated freedom of choice (Spinelli, 1989). These essential differences between the two phenomena could explain why discontinuity could be considered unacceptable in Atchley’s (1989) theory.

Limitations

This study is not limitation free. One limitation is that it includes only those in second couplehood who agreed to participate and remained together, leading to the assumption that most relationships were positive and contributed to healthy development. No knowledge is available about the characteristics of those who refused to participate, which could alter the picture.

Theoretical sampling ensured diversity derived from the literature review, which assisted in choosing relevant criteria. However, the sample was composed of participants with middle-high socio-economic backgrounds, who were not dependent on significant others. The sample lacked socio-economic diversities and multicultural representation, which might alter the picture. These are, therefore, recommended for consideration in further studies.

Practical Implications

Practical implications are considered on the micro level of intrapersonal development, on the mezzo level relating to interpersonal and intergenerational relationships in the family, and on the macro level of policy making to assist in promoting acceptance of the phenomenon within professional communities and among the general public.

On the micro level, findings could assist in perceiving old age as a period of change not only in the sense of adaptation (e.g., P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990) but also as change of “self” in the sense of growth, being open to new experiences (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007), such as learning about one’s sexuality. Findings could also assist not only in perceiving normative aging as continuity and discontinuity within different individuals (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007) but also as simultaneous experiences within the same individual.

On the mezzo level, findings could assist with solving possible spousal or intergenerational conflicts within families who have older members living in second couplehood in old age (Cooney & Dunne, 2001). Spouses or their grownup children could have expectations from the new spouse based on the norms of long-term marriages (Sherman & Boss, 2007). Emphasizing the unique characteristics of second couplehood in old age as being mainly discontinuous regarding reasons for behavior could contribute to understanding why spouses in such a relationship act differently regarding a range of activities. These may include care-giving out of personal choice rather than obligation or their perception of gender-based roles that are no longer taken for granted by both partners, thus reducing possible tensions and conflict.

The phenomenon could be encouraged on the macro level. Gerontology education programs could be recommended to include the phenomenon of second couplehood in old age in the curriculum. Attitudes toward the phenomenon should be examined in such programs because they could affect how professionals working with older people react to their clients (Bar-Tur, 2010) who are living in second couplehood. Gerontological social workers could encourage social clubs to initiate dating activities for single older persons. They could encourage residents in assisted living facilities to form couples. This, of course, would be conditional on the ability to persuade the management to be flexible and to change living arrangements according to couplehood status.

Social policy to promote acceptability of the phenomenon could be achieved by reexamining social security pensions and inheritance acts related to marital status and to automatically secure older persons’ income and children’s inheritance regardless of legal couplehood arrangements in old age.

Conclusions

Besides practical implications, theoretical contributions of the findings presented here are perhaps in the ability to perceive continuity and discontinuity as a continuum without attaching positive or negative attributes or perceiving them as outside normative aging. Some participants attributed value, whereas others related to the phenomenon as merely different, which could indicate ambivalence toward second couplehood in old age as a social phenomenon. It can be seen how, as lay persons, the participants are a step ahead of theory. This is known as cultural lag (Davidson & Fennell, 2004).

Social theories on aging attribute value to continuity and discontinuity; some (e.g., Cumming, 1963) attribute positive value to discontinuity and
others negative (e.g., Atchley, 1989). Others still (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007) relate to continuity and change as successful aging. As continuity and discontinuity serve as a condition for normative aging, value is attributed to old age itself. By excluding value attribution to continuity and discontinuity in old age from being a condition of normative aging, it is possible to perceive it as a period that is merely different from other periods in life, rather than better or worse.

References


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