

**Love, sex and intimacy in new late-life romantic relationships**

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## **Abstract**

Few studies exist which describe the actual initiation and progression of new late-life romantic relationships, particularly within an Australian context. This is surprising, as it is likely that the dynamics of romance in later life differ from romance amongst younger adults. Previous research which has looked specifically at heterosexual older adults has largely described their sexual functioning rather than the meaning they give to their loving partnerships. Because of this dearth of research, little is known about late life dating and mating habits. This thesis attempts to fill this gap, by investigating romantic relationships which begin in later life – after divorce or widowhood, or for those who have never married – with a special focus on relationships which are mediated via online technology. It presents findings from qualitative semi-structured interviews with 45 older adults, aged 60 years of age and over residing in Australia.

The findings show that the older adults in this study found new romantic partnerships as a consequence of their offline social activities and also by deliberately joining online dating websites. These partnerships were meaningful, important and sexually intimate. However, very few progressed to cohabitation or marriage, with most of the older adults preferring to date or live functionally separately, even when their relationships were long-term and committed, in order to avoid providing care-giving and instrumental support. This phenomenon, which is known in Europe as living apart together (LAT; Levin & Trost 1999), is only now coming to the attention of the Australian research community and only in a quantitative sense (see Reimondos, Evans & Gray 2011). With its qualitative focus, the current study therefore presents novel information. The findings indicate that these older adults were looking for and finding egalitarian 'pure'-type relationships (Giddens 1992) based on emotional and sexual equality but not necessarily based on cohabitation or monogamy. The thesis argues that these older adult LAT relationships embody a new family form within Australia and one which will only become more prevalent as society ages.

Anything less than mad, passionate, extraordinary love is a waste of time. There are too many mediocre things in life to deal with and love shouldn't be one of them

*Dream for an Insomniac*  
(DeBartolo 1996)

This thesis is dedicated to my Mum and Dad, Vi and Reg Powley, who have hearts of gold and a love beyond measure. YOU are my inspiration. Thank you my darlings. For everything.

## Acknowledgements

First of all I must acknowledge all the wonderful older women and men who gave of their time and their energy and who entrusted their stories to me. Their descriptions of love, sex and intimacy were life affirming and inspirational – and their desire to have their voices heard was the motivation I needed when the writing muse deserted me. Thank you.

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Well, here it is, at last. At times over the last two years I despaired that I would ever finish... Writing this thesis has been the hardest thing I have ever done.

## **Declaration**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award to the candidate of any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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Sue Malta

August 2013

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Old age and sexuality are regarded as a paradox. It is not possible to be old AND sexual – unless, of course, sexuality occurs within the confines of marriage or long-term cohabitation (Marsiglio & Donnelly 1991); but even then the general view is that sexuality diminishes with age (Denmark 2002). In keeping with this thinking, research into the intimate lives of older adults has been limited; and dating, romance and sexuality outside of marriage or cohabiting in late-life has subsequently been neglected. Likewise, older adult participation in the recent phenomenon of Internet dating has been summarily ignored by scholarly research.

A large number of older adults are single. Australian statistics indicate that more than one third of those over 65 are not married (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2006). It is therefore reasonable to expect that older adults are instigating new relationships in later life. Few studies exist which describe the actual initiation and progression of late-life romantic relationships, particularly within an Australian context. This is surprising, as it is likely that the dynamics of romance in later life differ from romance amongst younger adults (Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991: 246; Dickson, Hughes & Walker 2005). Previous research which has looked specifically at heterosexual older adults has largely described their sexual functioning rather than the meaning they give to their loving relationships (see Gott & Hinchliff 2003: 1618). Much of the research has subsequently been quantitative and has centred on medical issues, such as declines in sexual activity over time (for example Lindau et al. 2007), although there have been some recent exceptions (see for instance Waite et al. 2009). Such research is usually conducted within the context of long-term marriage, rather than amongst single, dating older adults (Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991), who may, arguably, have different romantic and sexual profiles.

Because of this dearth of research into older adult romance, little is known about their late-life dating and mating habits (Connidis 2006). My thesis attempts to fill this gap, by investigating romantic relationships which begin in later life – after divorce or widowhood, or for those who have never married – with a special focus on relationships which are mediated via online technology. It presents findings from qualitative semi-structured interviews with 45 older adults, aged 60 years of age and over residing in Australia.

Whilst online interviewing is steadily increasing in acceptance as a valid method of conducting qualitative research (see for instance, Fielding, Lee & Blank 2008; Hine 2005), with very limited exceptions (Xie 2005) researchers in ageing have generally not considered online interviewing techniques – such as instant messaging or email – as suitable or even effective means for interviewing older adults. Again, this is surprising, given the mounting evidence which shows older adults are technologically competent (Fox 2004) and they also represent the fastest growing segment of Internet users (ABS 2005a; Center for the Digital Future 2009; Ewing, Thomas & Schiessl 2008). The current study is therefore unique, in that it employs four different online and offline interviewing techniques to interview older adult participants: (i) face-to-face, (ii) telephone, (iii) synchronous computer-mediated communication (variously known as instant messaging, IM or private 'chat') and (iv) asynchronous electronic mail (email) correspondence.

In this study I investigated how and where these older adults met their new partners, their early dating experiences and the subsequent progression and consolidation of their new relationships into partnerships and what form they took. I was particularly interested to see if there were any differences/similarities between relationships which began online and those that began face to face. Further, as there was some ambivalence in the literature regarding the concepts of love, sex and intimacy and what they actually meant, I asked my participants whether such things actually existed in their new late-life relationships and, if so, how they would define them and how they compared to earlier stages of their lives. The degree to which their words reflect their *actual* lived experiences and practices is

unknown. Nevertheless, the stories in this thesis reveal the older adults' own perspectives of their own particular situations (Kvale 1996) and provide us with insight and understanding (Neuman 1997) into the world of late-life dating, romance and intimacy.

Twenty-seven years ago, Bulcroft and O'Connor (1986a,b) argued that there had been very little in the way of empirical investigation or theorising of older adult late-life romantic relationships. Little has changed in the intervening years. Perhaps this is because older adults represent a population which is socially insignificant and is therefore outside the remit of 'major sociological explanatory framework' (Askham 1995: 88)? Regardless of the reasons, the fact remains that theorising late-life romance is problematic. I therefore draw on the orthodoxy of the sociology of 'personal life' or what Gilding has argued was once known as the 'sociology of the family' (2010: 757) to illuminate the stories within this thesis. I pay particular attention to reflexivity and individualisation in today's contemporary relationships, especially the work of Giddens (1992) and Bauman (2003) and their concepts of the 'pure relationship' and 'liquid love' respectively. My study also embraces research from a variety of other fields, such as gerontology and social-psychology, for instance, the theory of socio-emotional selectivity (Carstensen 1992) as it pertains to older adults' desire to look for and become involved in new relationships.

My findings show that the older adults in this study sought new romantic relationships by deliberately joining dating services and they also developed new relationships as a consequence of their social activities. These relationships were meaningful, important and sexually intimate. However, I found that very few of the relationships progressed to cohabitation or marriage, with most of the older adults in the study preferring to date or live separately, even when their relationship was long-term and committed, in order to avoid providing care-giving and instrumental support. This phenomenon, which is known in Europe as living-apart-together (LAT; Levin & Trost 1999), is only now coming to the attention of the Australian research community and only in a quantitative sense (see Reimondos, Evans & Gray 2011).

With its qualitative focus, my research therefore presents novel information. The findings indicate that these older adults were looking for and finding egalitarian 'pure'-type relationships based on emotional and sexual equality but not necessarily based on cohabitation or monogamy. I argue that these older adult LAT relationships embody a new family form within Australia and one which will only become more prevalent as society ages. As such, these LAT relationships represent the new orthodoxy of personal life in their focus on individualisation and the maintenance of autonomy. At the same time, they continue to represent the past orthodoxy of the family as an institution, as evidenced by their continuing focus on children and grand-children in terms of care-giving and inheritance issues.

### **Structure of this thesis**

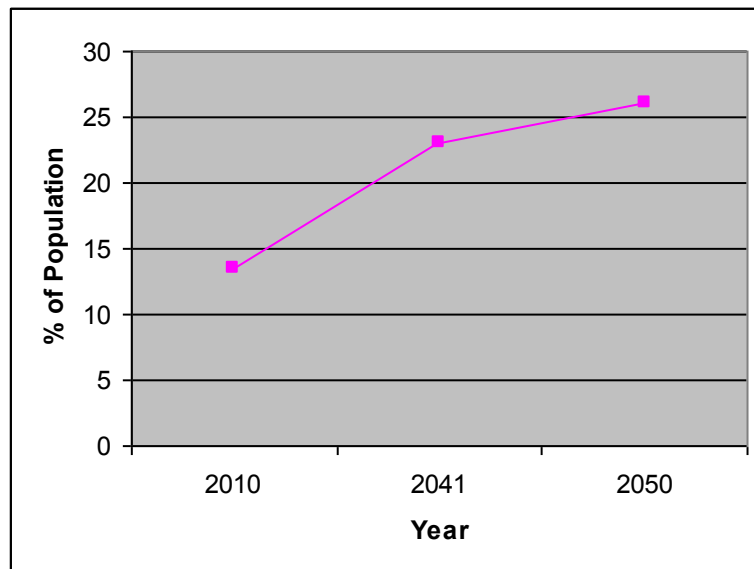
This thesis is presented over ten chapters. The next four chapters provide the foundation for the thesis. Chapter Two contains background information which provides a context for studying older adults and their late-life romantic relationships. It does so by providing an overview of structural ageing and looks briefly at issues of gender differences in population ageing, and retirement, as well as presenting the rationale for my definition of an older adult within the context of this study. It also provides a description and commentary on how older adults are subjected to ageism, in all areas of their lives and particularly in terms of their sexuality. It concludes with a discussion outlining older adults' use of computers and the Internet.

Chapter Three reviews the literature on late-life romantic relationships both offline and online and provides a critical reading of research to date. Chapter Four positions contemporary older adult partnerships within the framework of the sociology of the family and discusses relevant theories pertaining to late life relationship formation. The varied methods used in the study and my analytic approach to the data are outlined in Chapter Five, and Chapters Six, Seven, Eight and Nine present the results. To finish, Chapter Ten provides a summary and conclusion.

## Chapter Two: Contextual issues

### A “greying” population

The world is greying. In developed regions of the world, adults over the age of 60 will outnumber children by two to one<sup>1</sup> (United Nations Population Division 2003: 15). In Australia, increases in life expectancies and a sustained decline in fertility have led to a structural ageing of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2012). For instance, the percentage of the population aged 65 years and over was 13.5% in 2010 (ABS 2010a), and is expected to rise exponentially to 23% by 2041<sup>2</sup> (ABS 2011a) and to almost double (26%) by 2050 (ABS 2008a): equivalent to one in four Australians (see Figure 2.1).



\*Adapted from ABS (2008a; 2010a; 2011a)

**Figure 2.1** Proportion of population aged 65 years and over in Australia, by year (projected)

<sup>1</sup> Children aged 0 – 14 years of age

<sup>2</sup> Based on Series C data, assuming medium levels of life expectancy and low levels of fertility and overseas migration



In the USA, there were approximately 35 million people aged 65 and over in 2000, again, with the number expected to double (to approximately 71 million) by 2030 (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics 2004: 2). In the UK the projections are also very similar: those aged over 65 years are expected to equal 23% of the population by 2032 (Office for National Statistics 2008: 10). Some countries, however, will see their elderly populations increase in excess of 30% by 2025 (Japan, Italy, Germany, Greece, Spain and Belgium; World Health Organization (WHO) 2002: 8). According to the World Health Organization, this purported 'greying' of the population is a global phenomenon, with the number of older adults aged 60 years and over expected to rise by 223% between the years 1970 and 2025, faster than any other age group (WHO 2002: 6-7). In 2010, for instance, there were an estimated 524 million older adults aged 65 years and over, with the number expected to triple to a staggering 1.5 billion by 2050 (WHO 2011: 4).

### **Increased life expectancy**

The expected increase in the size of the elderly population is coupled with a corresponding increase in life expectancy. Not only will there be many more older adults in the population, they will survive longer than ever before (ABS 2006a). In Australia, life expectancy at birth increased by 23.3 years for women and 21.4 years for men over the last century (1901-2000): women are now expected to live approximately 83 years, and men 78 years (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2006). Furthermore, future projections are that by 2050-2051, life expectancy for Australians will increase to 88.0 years for women and 84.9 years for men (ABS 2006a: [4]). By the end of June 2012, there were 3479 people aged 100 years and over – an increase of 204% over the previous two decades (ABS 2012). Healthier lifestyles and improvements in health care – especially over the last 50 years – are the major drivers of this large decline in mortality (ABS 2011a: 1).

## **Gender differences in population ageing**

In Australia there is a gender difference in population ageing. In any given year, there are approximately 105 male babies born for every 100 female babies (ABS 2010a: [7]). Due to higher male mortality over the life span, however, there are many more adult women than men. The sex ratio of the total population in 2010 was 99.2 males per 100 females as at June 30 (ABS 2010a: [6]) and for those aged 85 years and over, women outnumbered men almost two to one (ABS 2010a: [5]). In the US this difference is even more pronounced, with nearly 2.5 women for every man over the age of 85 (He, Sengupta, Velkoff & DeBarros 2005). The lower proportion of males compared to females in the population – especially in the later years – can lead to an extended period of widowhood for many older adult women. Moreover, as the remarriage rate for older males is more than double that for older females (0.19% versus 0.08% respectively; ABS 2010b) the likelihood of remaining a widow is a likely prospect for many older women. The number of single older adults is also on the rise. Discounting those who have never married, in Australia the divorce rate amongst adults aged 60 and over has doubled over the last 20 years, to over 10% in 2010 (ABS 2010b). In 2009 the divorce rate in the US amongst those 65 years and over was also a comparable 9.6% (United States Census Bureau 2009).

## **Retirement**

Whilst life expectancy has shifted, retirement ages for most in the Western world have, until recently, remained stable. In Australia the mandated retirement age remained at 65 years for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Foskey 2001: 4). However, between 1983 and 2002, the *average* age of retirement stayed reasonably constant at approximately 60 years for men and 58 years for women (ABS 2005b: [3-4]). More current figures indicate that for recent retirees (over the last five years) the average age had increased slightly to 61.4 years (ABS 2011b: [2-3]). Given the increase in longevity, this means effectively that older adults today can expect to live a minimum of 15 – 23 years post-retirement. This extended life after retirement has important implications:

.....a twenty-year-old man in 1900 could scarcely have looked ahead to retirement at all; today such a man can expect to spend nearly one quarter of his adult lifetime in retirement. These added retirement years have important consequences for income, social involvement, leisure, health, and indeed nearly all aspects of the process of ageing (Riley 1987: 4).

The increase in the number and proportion of older adults in the population is of concern to all levels of government and policy makers, both nationally and internationally, because of three factors: (1) a reduction in economic growth associated with an ageing population (ABS 2006a: [1]; The Australian Government 2010: 9); (2) the *perceived* 'dependency' of this group (Angus & Reeve 2006: 137; WHO 2002: 9); and (3) the *anticipated* corresponding substantial increase in costs for additional aged health services, community care provisions and age-related pensions (ABS 2011a: 1; Productivity Commission 2005: 143; The Australian Government 2010: xv; WHO 2011: 19). This concern is highlighted by Gorman in a major report into ageing and development in the UK which states:

Older people, typically characterized as economically unproductive, dependent and passive, have been considered at best as irrelevant to the development and at worst as a threat to the prospects for increased prosperity (Gorman 1999: 4).

The tone and nature of these policy documents therefore carry distinctly negative connotations for older adults in societies the world over, despite the Australian Productivity Commission's caveat that "population ageing is *not* a crisis" (Productivity Commission 2005: xxxviii; emphasis in the original).

## **Defining "old"**

"Old" is, in effect, a broad social category; a category which indicates a particular life stage and one, which Victor (2005) defines as encompassing 'changes of role' – for instance from adult to elder – coupled with 'physical changes and other forms of social transition [for instance] becoming a grandparent' (page 6). However, as a definition such as this is both culturally- and historically-dependent, it is of little practical application as it is 'almost

impossible to operationalise' (page 7). For that reason, chronological age is routinely used as a marker of "old" age.

According to a World Health Organisation report, the United Nations stipulates that '60+ years' is generally the definition of an older or elderly person residing in non-African countries. This figure is based on historical-measures of the age at which a person in Western countries becomes eligible for retirement pensions – through both public (governmental) and private (occupational) schemes (WHO 2009: [1]). This definition seems both valid and well-founded from a sociological viewpoint, as it can be argued that people in their 60s are at a different life stage than those in their 50s. As one commentator states:

The ageing process is, of course, a biological reality which (despite medical interventions) has its own dynamic, largely beyond human control. However, it is also subject to the constructions by which each society makes sense of old age. In the developed world, chronological time (the age of education, working age, retirement age) plays a paramount role. The age of 60 or 65, roughly equivalent to retirement ages in most developed countries, is said to be the beginning of old age (Gorman 1999: 7)

In keeping with this view, and tying in with the average age of retirement in Australia, **older adult** is defined throughout this thesis as a person, man or woman, aged 60 years or older, who is currently retired or semi-retired from working outside the home.

## **Baby boomers?**

The ABS definition of a baby boomer is someone born during the demographic birth boom between 1946 and 1965 inclusive (ABS 2012), which means the estimated 80 million baby boomers began turning 60 in 2006 (Lawson 2003: 26). Baby boomers are noted for their liberal attitudes and a tendency for redefining the norms of whatever decade they are positioned in (Adams, Oye & Parker 2003: 413). The majority of the people who were interviewed for this thesis, however, were born before the recognised advent of the baby boomer generation, between the years 1915 – 1947. Moreover, today's Australian older

adults (60 years plus) are products of a conservative hetero-normative upbringing (Hawkes & Scott 2005: 106). These facts suggest that the 1960s sexual and cultural revolution (Szreter & Fisher 2010) which hit Australia in 1965 (see Cahill & Symons 2005), may have had less of an impact on many of these older adults than on latter generations. Equally, it could also be argued that today's older adults, who were born on the cusp of this time of immense societal change and who experienced their formative years as teenagers or young adults when it occurred, may well have been influenced by it. Indeed, some scholars have argued that they are more likely to pursue new romantic connections based on conceptions of equality than previous generations did (Blieszner & Roberto 2006). However, it has been shown that these older adults – typically referred to as 'Leading-edge' baby boomers – favour more traditional relationship roles. These roles position men as active (dominant) and the instigator of romantic and sexual conduct in relationships, and position women as passive (submissive) recipients of their attention (Hawkes 1996: 27). These relationships ultimately result in marriage: marriages which are centred on gendered notions of a male breadwinner and a female homemaker (Blieszner & Roberto 2006: 261). Subsequently, the new late-life romantic and sexual relationships of the older adults portrayed in this thesis may well reflect a more conservative cohort effect.

## **Ageism**

Structural ageing of populations has been accompanied by a move towards a greater understanding of the long-term health care and housing needs of older adults. Unfortunately, however, their status and value to society remains in question. In Western cultures, old age is typically viewed in a negative light (Birren & Schaie 2006: 389), and ageing is seen as a process of 'inevitable decline and deterioration' (Friedan 1993: 9) or even as a time of 'decline, retreat, and withdrawal' (Dychtwald 2005: 170). Ageism – seen as discrimination against people on the basis of their age (Giddens 2006: 196) – manifests itself through negative stereotypes and perceptions about older adults (WHO Online 2012) and is a fact of life for many older Australians (Gething et al. 2003: 2).

The term "ageism" was originally coined by Robert Butler, the founding director of the National Institute on Aging in the US (Butler 1969). He also identified three distinct – but related – aspects of ageism: attitudes and beliefs, behavioural discrimination and formalised policies and practices (Butler 1980). Since that time, empirical studies from a wide range of research disciplines such as sociology, gerontology, psychology and communication have shown that ageism occurs across generations and across cultures alike (see for example the extensive work of Cuddy, Norton & Fiske 2005; Palmore 2005; and the review chapter by Wilkinson & Ferraro 2004), but is, in the main, directed at older adults (Butler 2005). These studies have shown it is manifested in everyday life through the use of images, words, actions or attitudes. For example, ageism exists in the language used to talk to and about older adults, in mass media representations and, most detrimentally, in employment practices and in healthcare policies as well as in the behaviours of health professionals (Wilkinson & Ferraro 2004).

Whilst ageism can be both positive (for instance, "wise old woman") and negative ("dirty old man"), it is more generally negative (Cuddy et al. 2005; Kite & Johnson 1988). Angus and Reeve (2006) argue that 'negative images of aging' in particular, appear to have an 'enduring vitality' (page 137). This argument is supported by social psychological studies, in particular the work of Rebecca Levy, who found that negative perceptions of ageing begin early (around six years of age), where they are internalised and are then carried throughout life (Levy 1996; Levy, Ashman & Dror 2000).

Implicit ageism – that which is outside conscious awareness or control (Levy 2001: 578) – is by far the most subtle yet pervasive form of ageism (Bennett & Gaines 2010). As a group, older adults have become used to being typecast as frail, confused and a 'burden' on society (de Vaus, Gray & Stanton 2003: 19; Hoyer 1997: 39), despite much evidence showing that many older adults lead happy, productive and valuable post-retirement lives (Botham & Lumley 2004: 22; de Vaus et al., 2003: 19-20; Sneed & Whitbourne 2005: 375). Indeed a 2005 survey found that one in three adults in the UK thought older people were

incapable and incompetent (Age Concern 2006: 3). The WHO website states that stereotypes such as these 'can prevent older men and women from fully participating in social, political, economic, cultural, spiritual [and] civic' life (WHO Online 2012). Furthermore, as noted by Gorman in *The Ageing & Development Report*:

Older people's great capacity for productivity, independence and active involvement in the development of their communities and countries has been all too frequently overlooked. The benefits of older populations – the wealth of skill and experience that older people bring to the workplace, to public life and the family – are hardly noticed (Gorman 1999: 4).

Ageism is part of a set of oppressive social relations and is 'produced, reproduced, and contested' in expressions of popular culture (Laws 1995: 116). This idea was exemplified in a study which investigated the anti-ageing industry and the way it advertised its products (Calasanti 2007). The study found that the anti-ageing industry, through its sustained emphasis and promotion of youthfulness, serves as an illustration of broader practices of ageism operating within society and which continue to marginalise older adults. It is no wonder then that ageist stereotypes are both persistent and pervasive (Cuddy, Norton & Fiske 2005).

Research has also found that some older adults believe many of the ageist generalisations about themselves and, further, that these beliefs can – and do – have negative health and wellbeing ramifications (see for instance Levy 2009), including affecting their will to live (Levy et al. 2000). Such negative ageism extends to all aspects of older adult lives, including their sexuality (see Butler 2005) and has important harmful repercussions, as it means that older adult needs and priorities are often omitted from vital National health, research and policy agendas (Gott & Hinchliff 2003: 1617-1618).

### **The asexual older adult**

Despite research to the contrary, perceptions of the 'asexual' older adult, both implicit and explicit, have persisted over many years (see Butler 2005). For instance, Rubin in 1968

(pages 86-88) acknowledged that society regarded old age as the 'sexless older years' and that this 'socially harmful stereotype' was perpetuated by the:

general tradition of equating sex, love, and romance solely with youth; the psychological difficulty that children have of accepting the fact of parental intercourse; the tendency to think of aging as a disease rather than a normal process; [and] the focusing of studies upon hospitalized or institutionalized older people (Rubin 1968: 86-88)

Nearly thirty years later Schlesinger argued that society expected older adults to be 'grandparental, nonsexual, non-physical beings' (1996: 118) and that there existed 'a persistent belief that sex is not for the old' (page 117). Moreover, he argued that although there was now ample medical evidence showing that there were no physiological reasons precluding older adults from pursuing active sex lives, society continued to believe that older adult sexuality was taboo (page 119). More recently, Denmark suggested that 'one of the most pervasive myths in our society is the belief that a decrease in sexual interest and a diminished capacity for sexual behavior are an intrinsic part of the aging process' (2002: 17).

These views have been borne out in the qualitative work of Gott and colleagues, who investigated general practitioner (GP) attitudes to discussing sexual health issues with older people. The researchers found GPs in the UK viewed sexual health matters as not a 'legitimate' topic for discussion with their older patients (Gott, Hinchliff & Galena 2004: 2101). These health care professionals held stereotyped views of ageing and sexuality which were not based on medical experience as such, but on their own personal upbringing and religious beliefs, and what they perceived as 'wider societal images' of 'asexual' older people (see Gott et al. 2004: 2101). Such perceptions – which render ageing sexuality as invisible – are reflected structurally in government health care policies, where the sexual health needs of older adults are often omitted. See, for instance, the *National Strategy for Sexual Health and HIV UK 2001*, and the *Time for a National Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy for Australia, Background Paper 2008*, where older adults as a



population group are noticeably absent. This argument is reinforced by a recent scoping review of current Australian federal policy documents, which found no evidence of 'any policy specific to midlife and older adult sexuality and sexual health' (Kirkman, Kenny & Fox 2013: np).

### **Ageism in sexuality research**

Many social researchers argue that there is an ageist bias in sexuality research (see Minichiello et al. 2005 for an example). For instance, despite the evidence that older adults are sexually active (see Chapter Three), many contemporary studies such as the *Australian Study of Health and Relationships* have specifically excluded respondents over the age of 60 (Minichiello, Plummer & Macklin 2003; Richters & Rissel 2005); as did similar large-scale national studies in the UK (Johnson et al. 2001) and the US (Laumann, Paik & Rosen 1999). Such generalised exclusion is hard to fathom but appears rooted in what amounts to deeply ingrained ageist attitudes and stubbornly persistent societal stereotypes which label older adults as asexual (Gott & Hinchliff 2003) – despite clear evidence which indicates they are not (Burgess 2004: 440). Or, perhaps older adults are seen by some researchers to regard the topic of sexuality as 'taboo and offensive' and therefore they are expected to be 'unwilling or unable to report on their sexuality and their sexual needs' or indeed that 'they have no sexual needs' (Minichiello, Plummer & Seal 1996: 186)? Again, this is in spite of evidence which shows that older adults are willing to disclose their sexual lives (Waite et al. 2009). The lack of research could also be a reflection of researchers' own perceptions and biases, as the study of ageing and sexuality is thought to be methodologically difficult because the topic is considered sensitive (Liamputtong 2007; Pointon 1997). Further, it has been consistently shown that health and allied care professionals have similar or even worse attitudes towards older adults than those of the general public, which begin and are fostered throughout their medical training (see Wilkinson & Ferraro 2004 for discussion).

Victor Minichiello, the renowned gerontologist, health sociologist and sexual and public health researcher, claims it is difficult to challenge 'the myth of the asexual older person'

because, essentially, societies as a whole are predisposed to 'favour youthfulness and to associate sexual attraction with being young' (Minichiello et al. 2005: 78). Others postulate it is because we are uninformed about what actually constitutes the 'normative patterns of aging' and, consequently, we resort to stereotypes as a way to make sense of sexuality amongst older adults (Burgess 2004: 439). Whatever the cause, the fact remains that despite evidence to the contrary, older adults remain, in our collective conscious, as being asexual.

Research which persists in measuring rates of sexual behaviour – in most cases, intercourse – at a discrete point in time, provides a one-dimensional view of older adult sexuality: one which is quantitative and in most cases negative (Croze & Drake 1993). The majority of medical and health studies use such a perspective. What is more, this research tends to ignore the macro-level embeddedness of older adults and the effects that society – and the prevailing culture – have on their behaviour. Studies which provide older adult "lived" accounts of their romantic relationships may provide a more nuanced understanding of older adult sexuality. However, there are relatively few studies which do so.

Four decades since Rubin, the myths and stereotypes regarding older adult sexuality still exist. As detailed so succinctly by Butler (1983):

As long as society takes a negative view of sexuality among the elderly, the overall lot of older people is worsened. The many jokes and stories that ridicule sexuality in the later years accurately reflect our society's hostile, insulting attitudes toward both sex and old age. The stereotyping of older men and women as sexless is the ultimate example of ageism. But, as with other forms of prejudice, this devastating myth about the nature of aging can be laid to rest, once we obtain and disseminate correct information (Butler 1983: *xiii*)

It could be argued, given the previous discussion, that previous research has done little to enlighten – or change – society's attitudes towards older adults. However, new times and new technologies open the way for new approaches to research in this area.

## **Older adults, computers and Internet use**

One area where ageist perceptions of older adults was originally quite marked was in relation to technological advancements, which indicated that older adults were perceived, at the very least, to be 'resistant to adopting new technologies' (Adler 1996: [2]) or, worse, to be technophobic (Philbeck 1997: [1]). Furthermore, computers were once regarded as the exclusive bastion of the young (Imel 1998: [1]; White et al. 1999: 359) with older adults initially seen as being 'left out of the computer revolution' (Furlong 1989: 145). Some early studies supported this view, highlighting the low levels of computer use amongst older adults and their apparent lack of Internet experience (Cooper 2000: 1; Fong, Wellman, Kew & Wilkes 2001: 3). However, other research produced contradictory findings, indicating that the elderly population were responsible for upwards of 40% of all new computer sales in the US (Conover 1997: 8) and highlighting increasing numbers of the elderly surfing the Internet (Riddle 2001: [1]).

More recent data indicates that older adults the world over use the Internet less frequently than their younger counterparts (see Center for the Digital Future 2009). However, whilst they may have been slower in adoption, older adults are making the digital conversion in increasing numbers. For instance, whilst most age groups have experienced small declines or a plateau in computer usage over time (ABS 2005a), the proportion of adults aged 60 years and over using the Internet continues to grow; rising from 29% in 2003 to 54% in 2009 (ABS 2011c). Results from the UK and USA, while not directly comparable (figures are for 65 plus years), indicate that older adults use of the Internet has nearly doubled: from 22% in 2005 to 41% in 2011 in the UK (OfCom 2011) and 22% in 2004 (Fox 2004) to 48% in 2010 in the USA (The World Internet Project (WIP) 2012). These rates of increase are striking when one considers, for example, that only 2% of the American elderly were online in 1996 (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 1996). Other countries have also exhibited this trend, with older adults in New Zealand and Sweden echoing the American figures (52% and 42% respectively; WIP 2012).

Studies show that older adults use the Internet in increasing numbers and perform online tasks similar to those of younger populations. These tasks have been summarised in Box 2.1 below (Adams et al 2003: 407; the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) 2009: [3]; Fox 2004: 10; Goodman, Syme & Eisma 2003: [2]; Kiel 2005: 21; NielsenWire 2009: [1]; Ofcom 2006: 33).

|   |
|---|
| Send or read email                          |
| Access health care                          |
| Medical information                         |
| Shopping                                    |
| Banking                                     |
| Checking online accounts                    |
| Paying bills                                |
| Chat groups                                 |
| Genealogy                                   |
| Stock market                                |
| Social networks                             |
| Viewing / printing maps                     |
| Weather                                     |
| Photographs (viewing, storing, sharing etc) |
| News / current affairs                      |
| Travel                                      |
| Game playing                                |
| Downloading music                           |

**Box 2.1** Internet tasks performed by older adults in the UK, USA and Australia (2003 – 2009)

Thus there is mounting evidence which demonstrates that older adults are not only technologically competent (Fox 2004), they also represent the fastest growing segment of Internet users (ABS 2005a; 2011c; Center for the Digital Future 2009; Ewing et al. 2008). According to a report by Fox, once they make the transition to online technology, '...seniors are just as enthusiastic as younger users' (Fox 2004: 3). None of these reports make mention of older adults' use of dating websites.

## Conclusion

There is much evidence to indicate that older age can be, and often is, a time of enrichment (Sneed & Whitbourne 2005: 375). And, contrary to ingrained societal expectations, many older adults live healthy, happy and fulfilled lives. The above discussion indicates, however, that older adults are regarded as seemingly “sub-optimal” – and even a threat to our economic, societal stability – and it highlights the need for a multi-faceted understanding of the issues confronting this population group in the years ahead: not just health and social/wellbeing concerns, but also their lifestyles, their financial status, their families and their relationship dynamics. As Gott and Hinchliff (2003) have pointed out, the 'stereotype of the "asexual older person" remains pervasive' (page 1617) in spite of very little empirical evidence to support such a view.

As stated in Chapter One, old age and sexuality are regarded as a paradox. The disjunction between the two is so ingrained that descriptive research into the intimate lives of older adults has been limited, and dating, romance and sexuality outside of marriage or cohabiting in late life has subsequently been neglected. Likewise, older adult participation in the recent phenomenon of Internet dating has also been largely ignored by scholarly research. As illustrated by the work of Gott and colleagues with UK general practitioners, qualitative research can highlight the unspoken, implicit views that people hold, and which may not come to light with other, more quantitative, methods. Given this background and with the technological advancements of computers and the Internet, coupled with an increased awareness of older adults as the largest population group in society, it is time for an in-depth, qualitative understanding of contemporary older adult romantic relationships – from how and where they meet, through the stages of dating, commitment and sexuality. The present study attempts to address the lack of research in this area.

The following Chapter (Chapter Three) seeks to explore in some detail the literature surrounding romantic relationships and, more particularly, those that begin in late life.

Chapter Four provides a synthesis of sociological theory in regards to the family and personal life and as it pertains to intimate relationships.

## **Chapter Three: What do we know about late life romantic relationships?**

Love, sex and intimacy are considered vital components of romantic relationships across the life span (Hatfield, Rapson & Martel 2007), but when we talk about such concepts, what in effect do we actually mean? This chapter looks at what we know about love, sex and intimacy and late-life romantic relationships. It then explores how late life romantic relationships develop, commencing with their early beginnings – how and where do older adults meet? – followed by their progression into dating and finally consolidation into intimate, committed partnerships, and what form these partnerships take. The Chapter also takes a critical look at the intersection of sexuality and ageing and asks the fundamental question – how important is sex in older adult romantic relationships? In general, there is very little research on late-life romantic relationship development. With the first of the ‘boomageddon’ (Hamilton 2007) population recently turning 60 and phasing into retiring, this research is both timely and necessary. The aim of this chapter is to present the research which does exist, not only to identify the gaps in both the Australian and international literature but also to provide a foundation for the current research project.

### **What are romantic relationships?**

...passionate love and sexual desire are cultural universals...  
...romantic love is a pan-human characteristic...  
(Hatfield & Rapson 2002: 308)

### **Romantic love**

Romantic love is difficult to define yet it is central to our expectations of intimate relationships. Love is ‘exalted’ in Western cultures and has become an essential criterion for marriage, with its absence seen as a reason for separation and divorce (Regan 1998:

91). Marriage and similarly, cohabitation, are thus seen as the 'antithesis of commoditised or work relationships' based as they are, on love (Lindsay & Dempsey 2009: 85).

In academic literature a distinction is made between lay and scholarly definitions of love (Aron, Fisher & Strong 2006: 596), and a number of studies have confirmed that 'ordinary people' construe love in a 'prototypical' fashion as consisting of three dimensions: intimacy, commitment and passion (see Aron & Westbay 1996: 535). According to Aron et al. (2006):

It appears that people have a common understanding of what love means... [and] this kind of understanding is found almost everywhere, although there are some differences in its content across cultures (Aron et al. 2006: 597)

In contrast, scientific definitions of love distinguish primarily between passionate and companionate love (Aron et al. 2006: 597), with the former described as 'a state of intense longing for union with another' and the latter as 'the affection we feel for those with whom our lives are deeply entwined' (Berscheid & Hatfield cited in Aron et al. 2006: 597). Nonetheless, populist or scholarly definitions do little to express in real-life terms the multiplicity or depth of meanings which love and/or intimacy actually hold for people. For some, the experience of 'falling in love' is about feelings of euphoria or even 'butterflies in the stomach' (Aron et al. 2006: 596); for others, the intensity of 'being in love' can be described as akin to despair (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 12). In terms of gender differences in love experiences, men report being 'in love' more often than women do, whereas women refer to the feeling of being 'more deeply' in love and say love is 'more important' to them than men (Hendrick & Hendrick 1995: 63).

Romantic love is based in passion (Aron et al. 2006: 597). Thus it involves sexual expression and/or emotional and physical attraction, but is also connected with "foreverness", that is, with a promise of commitment (Förster, Özelsel & Epstude 2010: 237). Lust, on the other hand, is to be distinguished from love, in that it is based purely on



physical, sexual expression and is grounded in the “here and now” (that is, as in “one night stand”) and without the complicating factor of attachment (Förster et al. 2010: 237).

As the specific meaning of love has been shown to be socially constructed, love can mean different things for different people. What love means to us is based on our social location in time and space – such as our gender and class – as well as the time in which we currently live and the times we grow up in (Langhamer 2007: 175). So, whilst the concept of love may well be a ‘cultural universal’ (Hatfield & Rapson 2002: 308) it’s meaning and expression is not formulaic: it is at once highly individual and highly contextual. In keeping with this sentiment, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim propose that love is actually ‘a blank that lovers must fill in themselves’ (1995: 5).

Accordingly it is not the intention of this thesis to define unambiguously what the meaning of love is, or even what the exact components of a romantic relationship are, but rather to provide a starting point to enable the interpretation of the older adult stories which are presented herein.

### **Intimacy/sexuality**

We know that intimacy itself takes many forms: intimacy between family members (for example, parent and child); intimacy between friends and companions and, of course, the intimacy that concerns us here – intimacy between lovers. Sociologists Barraket and Henry-Waring delineate intimacy quite simply as ‘emotional/romantic and/or sexual relations between adults’ (2008: 150) – a description which demonstrates both the *feelings* of the term as well as its *physical* elements – and a description which sits well within the scope of this thesis.

Social psychologists suggest that sexuality is one of the dimensions which helps to distinguish romantic love from other kinds of love, such as altruistic love (Regan 1998: 92). Characterising the word *sexuality*, which is often closely aligned with or even seen to mean

*intimacy*, requires further elaboration however. The notion of 'sexuality' is a comparatively modern phenomenon, as the concept itself did not exist before the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Foucault 1984). That is not to say that sexuality itself did not exist, rather that it had not been previously defined. Since that time, despite much academic research and the employment of technological advances, what actually constitutes intimacy or sexuality per se continues to elude us, as it is not something which can be broken down into constituent parts (Gott 2005: 11-12). For some, sexuality can be as benign as 'close companionship' or even just touching, kissing and cuddling, while for others it could mean a range of sexual activities such as masturbation and/or actual vaginal-penile intercourse (Allen cited in Deacon, Minichiello & Plummer 1995: 498), with or without actual orgasm. Defining sexuality is therefore no simple feat, as it can – like love – mean different things to different people.

This difficulty is further compounded because sexuality cannot be viewed as an entity which is separate from that of the whole person, as sexuality encompasses far more than any mere physical act. As Weeks has noted previously, sexuality is not just about physical sensations; it can be 'as much about words, images, ritual and fantasy, as it is about the body' (Weeks 1985: 3). What's more, sexuality, like love, is also characterised by the age we live in and is subject to individual genetic and psychological differences and potential, including peoples 'needs, desires and fantasies' (Weeks 1997: 15).

To summarise then, romantic love and sexual desire may well be cultural universals, however, they are highly contextual, individualised experiences. As they mean different things to different people, there can be no definitive interpretation as such. However, within this thesis, late-life romantic relationships are seen to comprise elements of love and desire, in whatever shape or form they are expressed – be it emotional attachment and/or passionate intimacy for example.

## **Initiating new romantic relationships in later life**

### **Finding new partners**

How does one find a new romantic partner in today's world? Younger people are known to meet each other through friends, neighbours, family members and co-workers, at various social venues such as bars and restaurants, through affiliation with their local church and, increasingly, on the Internet (Rosenfeld & Thomas 2012: 531). Some have also been shown to meet at the supermarket or the gym and even at their local library (M2PressWIRE 2005) – but does this apply to older adults too?

In the 1970s a 'new social phenomenon' saw unattached older singles placing personal advertisements in newspapers, seeking dating or marriage partners (Cameron, Oskamp & Sparks 1977: 27). In the 1990s, alongside the ever-increasing use of personal ads, intermediaries such as matchmakers or introduction services became popular as a means to meet potential partners (Ahuvia & Adelman 1992). A review of the late-life dating and courtship literature – prior to the widespread use of the Internet as a social tool – also identified a number of different ways that older men and women were known to meet (McElhany 1992: [3]). It showed that widows were more likely to meet new dating partners through their friends or in public places rather than through family connections, and those who met dates whom they eventually married usually met through more formalised structures, such as singles clubs and organisations (Lopata cited in McElhany 1992: [3]) and through dating services (Lohar cited in McElhany 1992). The review also noted there was '...a paucity of research on the development of new intimate relationships -- dating, courtship, and re-marriage -- following widowhood or divorce in later life' (McElhany 1992: [1]). A more recent survey of 3,501 single midlife Americans (aged 40 – 69 years of age) found they mostly (41%) met their new dating partners through their friends, family members and neighbours (Montenegro 2003: 67). Of course, with the advent of the Internet and online dating websites, methods of initiating new relationships have now

changed considerably for both young and old alike – and there is now mounting evidence that older adults use the Internet to source new partners.

### **What do we know about late life romance online?**

Whilst many use the Internet to maintain their existing social ties with people they already know, such as family, friends and colleagues (Donn & Sherman 2002: 107; Hogan et al. 2011), it has become increasingly apparent that the Internet has rapidly developed into a medium for facilitating *new* relationship formation (Hardey 2004: 207). With the arrival of Internet sites devoted solely to online dating, *deliberately* looking for a partner online has rapidly become popular and the development of online romance has been the subject of many press reports (Newsweek 2006; New Yorker 2012; The Age.Com.Au 2006; The New York Times 2004; US News & World Report 1999).

Barraket and Henry-Waring define *online dating* 'as a purposeful form of meeting new people through specifically designed internet sites' (2008: 149). Wikipedia captures the popular understanding of online dating as:

[A] dating system which allows individuals, couples and groups to make contact and communicate with each other over the Internet, usually with the objective of developing a personal romantic or sexual relationship (Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online\\_dating](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_dating) downloaded June 25, 2010).

Finding a definition for an online *romantic* relationship is slightly more problematic, as not all romantic relationships that develop online happen through the deliberate act of joining a website dedicated to the purpose. The majority of early online relationship research focused on relationships that happened by chance through using the Internet for other purposes (see for instance McCown et al. 2001). To encompass both these contingencies – deliberate and unexpected relationships – I have defined an online romantic relationship to be: meeting someone in an online environment, then instigating and developing a relationship which becomes romantic, perhaps intimate. Intimacy in this instance is akin to that described by Barraket and Henry-Waring as 'emotional/romantic and/or sexual

relations between adults, ranging from one-off interactions to sustained offline relationships' (2008: 150).

Investigations into romantic Internet relationships have, thus far, been situated predominantly from a psychological perspective (see Whitty 2003; Whitty & Carr 2006 and Underwood & Findlay 2004 for examples). Sociological inquiries into the area of deliberative online dating are slowly increasing and there have been a few more recent studies (Baker 2008, 2005; Dröge & Voirol 2011; Hardey 2004, 2002; Rosenfeld & Thomas 2012) and some within an Australian context (Barraket & Henry-Waring 2008; Couch & Liamputtong 2008, 2007; Henry-Waring & Barraket 2008; Smaill 2004) although none but the current study focus on older adults specifically (Malta 2007; Malta & Farquharson 2010).

Online romance is becoming increasingly prevalent for all adult age groups. Given that dating websites first emerged in 1995, it is staggering to realise that by the year 2000, 12 million people were registered on the then seven largest online dating sites – all based in the United Kingdom, the United States, Israel and Canada (Brym & Lenton 2001: 9). The Canadian report by Brym and Lenton (2001) estimated the potential number of online dating users in that country alone to be between 3.7 and 3.9 million (Brym & Lenton 2001: 12). Five years later, a Pew Research Center report showed that 63 million Americans knew someone who had used an online dating site (Madden & Lenhart 2006: 2) and almost 30 million – one in six American adults – knew someone who had been in a long-term relationship or had married someone they met online (Madden & Lenhart 2006: 13). The Nielsen Global Online Study in 2008 indicated that 25% of Internet users worldwide were looking for love online, that is, one in four (Blackshaw 2008: [1]). And a more recent worldwide study which surveyed 25,200 people (12,600 couples) over 17 countries, found that 34.5% had either tried online or met their past or current partners online (Hogan et al. 2011: 9). In Australia online dating is purported to be the third most popular way to meet new partners, and 48% of single adults are estimated to have tried it (Fairfax Digital 2012).

Despite Australia's small population size, there are 19,554,832 Internet users, comprising nearly 90% of the population (Internet World Stats 2012). What this means in terms of Australians and their online dating habits is difficult to determine, however, as there are relatively few studies measuring the prevalence of online dating. Barraket and Henry-Waring identified '60 major commercial online dating sites' operating within Australia (2008: 150), which suggests that using the Internet to find romantic relationships is a well-accepted practice amongst Australians, as it is for the rest of the world. Figures provided by Nielsen Netratings estimate that in 2004 there were '857,000 unique users of online dating services in Australia' (cited in Barraket & Henry-Waring 2008: 150). One study, a 2006 Australian poll conducted by Global Market Insite (GMI) estimated that, of 1000 people surveyed, 23% used online dating websites (GMI 2006). In terms of prevalence, Hardey (2004) suggests that one of the reasons dating sites have become progressively more important in the instigation and establishment of romantic relationships, is due to the ease with which 'finding, getting to know and meeting others' is achieved (page 216). Others, however, have argued it is because of the nature of the online communication itself.

### ***Intimate communication***

One possible explanation for the seemingly ubiquitous nature of online romance is found in the early work of Walther (1996) who classified computer-mediated communication (CMC) as 'hyperpersonal', describing it as 'more.... socially desirable or intimate than normal' communication (page 34) and claiming that it 'surpassed the level of affection and emotion of parallel f2f [face to face] interaction' (page 17). In a similar fashion, Baker argues that the process of writing online ensures an emotional attachment which facilitates a 'faster trust in the online other' (2005: 104). Wysocki's earlier work (1998) supports this viewpoint, suggesting that relationships formed on the Internet progress far more quickly and intimately than face to face relationships, partly because of the degree of anonymity but also because of the heightened level of self-disclosure the medium provides.

The late Al Cooper and his colleagues suggested that the very nature of computer-mediated relating:

reduces the role that physical attributes play in the development of attraction, and enhances other factors such as propinquity, rapport, similarity and mutual self-disclosure, thus promoting erotic connections that stem from emotional intimacy rather than lustful attraction (Cooper, McLoughlin & Campbell 2000: 522).

This idea fits well with the argument of Lea and Spears (1995), that the actual 'physical isolation' of cyberspace participants augments their 'interaction possibilities' and this, combined with their anonymity, is what provides the '*magic* of on-line relationships' (page 202, emphasis added).

In a study of chat room interactions, Whitty and Gavin (2001) found that the non-existence of conventional visual and verbal cues stimulated and heightened online relationships; despite earlier theorists suggesting that a lack of such cues – facial expressions, tone of voice, body movements and so on – produced relationships online that were somewhat less intimate and more impersonal than face to face ones (see for instance Rice & Love 1987; Sproull & Kiesler 1986). Prior to the advent of online video technologies, text was the *only* way to get to know someone and to become close (Henderson & Gilding 2004: 500). The point to make here is that, when there is a total absence of any other bodily cues – verbal, physical, olfactory and so on – the text itself appears to become imbued with far more meaning than perhaps the spoken word would do. The written words themselves become emotionally-charged, or 'hyperpersonal' (Walther 1996), thereby creating an intimate connection between online correspondents (Henderson & Gilding 2004).

### ***Are older adults finding love online?***

Whilst it is clear that online dating is rapidly becoming the norm for many (see Hogan et al. 2011), the extent of older adults' involvement has still to be established. Most of the early studies of online relationships used younger sample populations (Donn & Sherman 2002; Parks & Floyd 1996; Underwood & Findlay 2004; Whitty & Gavin 2001), making it difficult

to generalise to older adults. In one of the early sociological reports of online romance, the oldest respondent was just 46 years old (Albright & Conran 1998). The few more recent sociological studies on deliberately-initiated online romance (Baker 2008, 2005; Barraket & Henry-Waring 2008; Couch & Liamputtong 2008, 2007; Henry-Waring & Barraket 2008) are similarly lacking in older adult participants. For instance, in the Baker (2005) study of 89 couples, only three individuals were aged 60 and over. In the Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008) investigation, the age range of participants was 25 to 62 years, and no mean or median age was supplied. And, finally, in the study by Couch and Liamputtong, the oldest participant was 44 years. It should be noted, however, that unlike earlier studies where older adults were excluded from the samples (see Daneback et al. 2005 for instance) in all these sociological studies the samples were self-selected, so it could be that older adults simply do not volunteer to participate in such studies. Regardless, it is difficult to ascertain how relevant these results are for older adult populations generally.

In contrast to the lack of academic evidence, many popular press articles indicate that older adults *are* looking for romantic relationships – both online and offline. A News & World Report article from the US in 2001 stated that:

The Web is...serving millions as an electronic matchmaker. A recent AOL study found that nearly 40% of wired seniors had used the Web to find a friend or lover (Kelly 2001)

and a New York Times article described senior romance as such:

In proliferating Internet chat rooms and forums, in medicine cabinets of sex-enhancing drugs and wrinkle creams, in cruises just for them, in dating services and newspaper personal advertisements under "Seniors Seeking Seniors", in shacking up instead of remarrying, romance in old age has come in from the cold (Kilborn 2004: 1.19).

Empirical evidence to support this kind of populist assertion is somewhat harder to find, although the recent proliferation of niche dating sites catering specifically for older adults,



would indicate that the market is responding to growing consumer demand (see Figure 3.1).

Research conducted by Brym and Lenton estimated that older adults aged 60 plus comprised 1.6% of online Canadian daters (2001: 14). In addition, recent statistics supplied by RSVP.com®, an Australian online dating site, indicate that older adults (aged between 50 and 91 years) comprise 22 percent of their membership database (Fairfax Digital 2012), up from 18% in 2010 (Fairfax Digital 2010). These service provider numbers indicate that older adults are increasingly using the Internet and that they are looking for love online.



**Figure 3.1** Examples of senior dating websites, 2013

In summary, past literature suggests that older adults met each other primarily through their friends, in public places and through formalised structures such as social groups, or by the use of intermediaries such as personal ads or matchmakers or online through dating websites. However, there are very few contemporary studies which detail how older adults who are single – widowed, divorced or never married – meet each other without recourse to the Internet. The following section looks at the literature surrounding the next stage of

late-life relationship development: dating and courtship amongst the single older adult population in both the online and offline context.

### **Dating and courtship**

What is dating? A recent review of articles which appeared in the academic journal *Sex Roles* over a 35 year span, defines dating as a 'publicly-expressed practice undertaken by romantically-interested partners for the purpose of getting to know one another better' (Eaton & Rose 2011: 844). While it is generally understood that dating is usually casual and short-term (Owens 2007), the authors argued it is, in effect, a 'prelude to courtship', which itself is seen as a 'prelude' to matrimony (Eaton & Rose 2011: 844). The review highlighted that, despite what appeared to be a lessening of gendered norms within US society and a corresponding increase in 'women's status and power', particularly around working and pay scales for example, little had changed in regards to dating. In effect, dating today is still a non-egalitarian, highly gendered practice, subject to the behavioural norms of female passivity and male agency (Eaton & Rose 2011: 856). As the majority of the dating literature tends to focus on adolescent or university populations (page 847), it remains to be seen whether such gender stereotypes would also apply to older adults' dating behaviour.

### **Prevalence**

How many single older adults date? There is little research on the prevalence of dating amongst older adults 60 years plus (Connidis 2006), perhaps because of the ageist perception that older adults do not date (Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991) or because of the assumption that they are either 'married or celibate' (Connidis 2001: 90). Contrary to these perceptions, a US survey based on a sample of single adults aged 50+, estimated that 7% were 'looking for a partner' (Rainie & Madden 2006: 5). In the survey mentioned earlier of midlife Americans, two out of three were actively dating (Montenegro 2003: 2). Government statistics do not typically ask such questions, focusing instead on remarriage

rates as an indicator of older adults repartnering. As remarriage rates are very low amongst older adults (ABS 2010b), they should not, however, be viewed as an indicator of late-life involvement in new romantic relationships. Furthermore, as dating typically signifies a casual, impermanent connection (Owens 2007) remarriage rates are superfluous in such a context.

### ***Motivations***

What is it that motivates older adults to look for a new partner? In the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Bulcroft and colleagues conducted a small series of studies highlighting the nature and functions of dating in later life, using both qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (survey) methods. When attempting to define older adult dating, Bulcroft and colleagues noted that previous attempts were based on younger, never-married samples or remarried, middle-aged adults and therefore could not be extrapolated to single older adults, many of whom had been previously married (Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991: 245-246; Bulcroft & O'Connor 1986b: 397). In making a case for more research into older adult populations, the researchers found there were important differences between older and younger daters. They suggested that while younger people date for 'mate selection', older people date because they want to establish 'serious' (Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991: 246) and long-term romantic relationships, to alleviate loneliness and for the purposes of sexual fulfillment (Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991: 248).

Gender differences were noted in participants' motivations for dating. Dating provided men with 'an outlet for intimacy need fulfillment and self-disclosure' whilst for women it provided 'an enhanced sense of identity and esteem from peers' as well as 'increased status' (Bulcroft & O'Connor 1986b: 399-400). As highlighted in Chapter Two, the imbalance in partner availability meant that for the men in this study there were many more women available; as one man stated: 'When I was younger I had trouble getting a date. I can always find one now!' (Bulcroft & O'Connor 1986b: 399). For the older women, the dearth of male dating partners created competition for those who were available and

enhanced self-esteem for those women who were 'lucky enough' to have a dating partner (page 399).

The midlife adults in the North American dating survey mentioned earlier, listed their primary motivations for dating as having someone to talk to or do things with or to have fun with (Montenegro 2003: 2). Additionally, a qualitative study from the US which looked at dating amongst older women (15 women aged 62 to 79 years) found they dated for reasons of social activity and affection, including sex (Dickson et al. 2005: 71).

The reasons for using online websites for dating purposes are remarkably similar. People report using them almost entirely for social reasons (Barraket & Henry-Waring 2008: 155) including because they had a lack of other options (Whitty & Carr 2006: 125) and also because the sites provided a welcome alternative 'to the pubs and clubs scene' (Whitty & Carr 2006: 125). In a small qualitative study conducted in Australia, the reasons given varied from 'seeking a soul mate', 'seeking sex', to 'looking for fun, relaxation' and to 'ease boredom' (Couch & Liamputtong 2008: 271).

Some researchers claim that Internet relationships do not always graduate offline and some romantic relationships have indeed been shown to remain exclusively online – especially those which occurred unexpectedly (see Whitty 2004). Whitty, in her study of an Australian Internet dating site, however, has shown that people who used the medium did so with the express purpose of meeting new partners in 'real life' (commonly referred to as face to face) – regardless of whether their intentions were for casual or longer-term relationships (as discussed in Whitty & Carr 2006: 127). Relationships which then transfer from the Internet to real life or face to face, are also referred to as mixed mode relationships (Walther & Parks 2002).

Whilst Baker (2002) argues that online relationships graduate slowly from online to offline, Whitty and Carr found that, in the main, people meet within a week of first online contact

(2006: 127). In their study, the goal of the online daters was 'typically to move [the relationship] offline as quickly as possible', with the objective of finding out whether any '*physical chemistry*' existed between the individuals involved and ultimately to 'not waste time' (pages 127,135; emphasis in the original).

As with studies of older adult relationships which begin face to face, studies which show what these mixed mode relationships are like, how long they last or how soon they become sexual are limited. One study found they ranged in duration from 4.5 weeks to 13 years (n = 83) (Wildermuth 2001) and an Australian telephone survey found that online romantic relationships were 'reasonably long lasting', ranging from weeks (4.5%) and months (27%) to years (18.2%) (n = 22) (Hardie & Buzwell 2006: 10). The American study by McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) provides the most definitive data to date on relationship duration. It showed that, in a sample of mixed mode relationships, 71 percent were still continuing at a two-year follow-up survey (pages 21-22). Of these, over half said their relationships became 'closer and stronger' as time progressed. The authors compared their findings with those for romantic relationships that initially began face to face. They argued that the strength and stability of these online romantic relationships compared favourably with the face to face relationships (page 22). How quickly these relationships progressed offline was not elucidated, however. These deliberate online relationships were often based on shared disclosure and similar interests rather than on superficial features – such as corporeal factors – and this might be what enabled them to be 'more stable and durable' than their face to face counterparts (pages 23-24).

The Baker (2005) study of 89 mixed mode committed partnerships provides no data in terms of relationship longevity. However, as the majority of couples eventually married, cohabited or became engaged it can be presumed these relationships were or would become long-term or sustained. The study indicates that the online relationships moved to 'physical involvements' more quickly than traditional offline relationships but does not specify just how quickly this occurred (page 101). The participants outlined the reasons for

the 'faster pacing' of their relationships as being: 'fewer distractions', 'greater trust' and 'stronger emotional bonding' which developed through their online communication, compared to that experienced in relationships formed initially offline (page 101).

Whilst these results are interesting, they indicate that further research is required to more fully describe the progression of romantic relationships from the online to the offline environment. For instance, are romantic relationships that begin online more or less likely to be casual or long-term compared to those that begin face to face? Are they any less committed than initial face to face relationships?

Beyond dating, historically, relationships moved into what was referred to as the 'courting' phase. This phase was seen as more structured than dating and, in the past, was subjected to cultural norms and behavioural conventions (Whitty 2007) and was seen as a pathway to marriage (Cere 2000: 4; Eaton & Rose 2011: 844). In today's world, courting is usually characterised by a more serious consolidation of the relationship involving a degree of commitment and, in many cases, sexual exclusivity (Owens 2007: 269). The following section looks at the progression of relationships from dating and courtship to their consolidation as partnerships, or otherwise.

### **The progression and consolidation of late-life relationships**

According to Kamp Dush (2009) heterosexual romantic relationships in the 1950s mostly followed a trajectory of dating, engagement and marriage. In the 2000s she claims that whilst many relationships may still follow this pattern, others may progress through stages:

...a period of casual sex in which the relationship may or may not be a formal dating relationship, followed by dating, visiting... [spending the night together but still remaining separate], cohabitation... [living together prior to marriage] and perhaps... engagement and marriage (Kamp Dush 2009: 204)

Whilst this description provides a useful starting point from which to view the way relationships advance, whether older adult late-life romantic partnerships – initiated online or offline – follow the same or a similar pattern is not really clear. The question thus remains, how do older adult late-life relationships evolve over time? Given that the remarriage rates for older adults are so low, it is unlikely that they follow the same trajectory as that outlined by Kamp Dush (2009) namely: ultimately moving into cohabitation or marriage. The following section looks at the literature regarding the development and consolidation of older adult partnerships beyond initial meeting, dating and courtship.

### **Marriage / cohabitation**

The early study by Bulcroft and colleagues found that whilst older adult real life dating relationships developed quickly and rapidly became sexual (Bulcroft & O'Connor 1986a: 68), once relationships were established very few couples provided ongoing instrumental support to each other in the way of housekeeping, health care and finances (Bulcroft & O'Connor 1986b: 400). The authors also found that whilst older adults appeared to be looking for long-term and committed partnerships, very few of their dating/courting relationships progressed to marriage (Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991; Bulcroft & O'Connor 1986a) due to a desire to remain independent and – especially for the women – a desire to avoid the care giving role (Bulcroft & O'Connor 1986a: 69).

The work by Dickson et al. (2005) provided additional support for the findings of Bulcroft and colleagues. Their study looked at 15 previously married women (age range 60 – 79 years) who were currently dating. It showed that although these women wished to sustain committed, intimate relationships they did not want to cohabit or marry their partners (page 77); again due to a strong desire to remain independent, both emotionally and financially, and a fear of being thrust into a nurse/caretaker role (pages 73-74). It appears these older women actively resisted being assigned, what amounted to, customary gender roles which would see them acting as homemakers and care-givers. The authors

suggested this created an atypical dynamic in these later-life relationships in comparison to relationships in younger age groups. They argued that as younger daters were ultimately looking for life partners, they would feel the need to move their relationships towards more fixed, permanent – and I would argue, traditional, entities (page 78); whereas this was not the case for older daters. The authors concluded that: 'Marriage and commitment are prominent patterns in intimate relationships that later-life women seem to reject' (page 78). But what of late-life romantic relationships that begin online? Do they follow the same patterns as late-life relationships which begin in real life?

Given that our most intimate relationships ultimately include components of sharing and caring (Jamieson 1998) the findings indicate that new late-life romantic relationships are qualitatively different from those initiated at earlier life stages, particularly in regards to the avoidance of the care-giving role. Overall, the research suggests there is a strong need/desire amongst single older adults – and most especially women – to retain their independence and maintain separate lives from their romantic and intimate partners. This phenomenon is reflected more fully in the literature describing living apart together (LAT) relationships.

### **Living apart together in late life**

Levin and Trost (1999) originated the term 'living apart together' (LAT) to describe the relationships of couples who maintained close, romantic and intimate connection with their partners whilst living in separate households. Dating or courtship can be distinguished from LAT relationships. Whilst definitions vary, dating involves casual, shorter-term, non-committed interactions, sexual or otherwise (Aleman 2003; Owens 2007), whereas LAT relationships involve longer-term, committed and, for the most part, sexually intimate, exclusive relationships (Levin & Trost 1999). Living apart together relationships appear to have developed over recent years in response to changes in societal conditions and consequent changes in norms, in particular, the move away from married unions and the increasing acceptance of – and ensuing growth – in divorces (Levin 2004: 224).



Subsequently LAT relationships have come to represent a 'new family form' (Levin 2004: 223).

Early studies on LAT relationships originated in Norway and Sweden (Levin & Trost 1999; Borell & Ghazanfaraeon Karlsson 2003; Levin 2004) but more recent interest in the phenomenon has emerged from many different countries around the world, for instance, Canada (Milan & Peters 2003), Japan (Iwasawa 2004), Britain (Haskey 2005; Haskey & Lewis 2006; Ermisch & Siedler 2008; Duncan & Phillips 2010), Spain (Castro-Martin et al. 2008), Germany (Asendorpf 2008), France (Régnier-Loilier, Beaujouan & Villeneuve-Gokalp 2009), the United States (Strohm et al. 2009) and, of late, Australia (Reimondos et al. 2011, 2009).

### ***Prevalence***

A considerable minority of unmarried older individuals appear to be in LAT relationships. One early study in the Netherlands looked at late-life partnership choices amongst a group of 173 older adults (55 years plus) at two different time points – up until 1984 and 1985 or later (de Jong Gierveld 2002). In the first cohort, the majority who re-partnered chose remarriage or cohabitation, but the second cohort predominantly chose living apart together relationships (page 67). It thus appeared that LATs were a 'new, rapidly increasing phenomenon' amongst older adults (page 67). More up to date prevalence rates are estimated to be 11 percent in the UK (aged 55 plus) (Duncan & Phillips 2011: 521) and 13 percent in the US (for all singles) (Strohm et al. 2009: 200). However, there is some speculation that the rates of LAT relationships are considerably under-reported, due to issues with the terminology used to describe them and other factors (Reimondos et al. 2011). There is limited data on older adult relationships or LAT relationships at any age in Australia. Indeed the Australian Bureau of Statistics currently does not collect data on their frequency in any age group. However, a recent quantitative study based on responses to the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey (HILDA; 5<sup>th</sup> Wave) reported that 9 percent of all Australian singles were engaged in LAT relationships (Reimondos et al. 2011: 48). The HILDA data showed that a large number of 18-24 year

olds (44 percent) were in non-cohabiting relationships (page 49), as have other social surveys worldwide (see for instance Duncan & Phillips 2011). The authors argued the prevalence of LATs in this cohort may well be overstated because there was no clear differentiation in the HILDA questions between committed partnerships and those which they called 'casual and fleeting relationships' (Reimondos et al. 2011: 53). Additionally, LAT arrangements amongst this younger group may have arisen as a result of 'practical or financial constraints' rather than by choice (page 53). This contention is reinforced by the finding which showed that 79% intended to live with their partner at some stage (page 52), indicating that the majority of LAT relationships amongst this age group were temporary arrangements. The study also reported that fewer than 10 percent of Australian older adults (over 60 years) were in LAT relationships (Reimondos et al. 2009). However, unlike their younger counterparts, these older adults were more likely to have no intention to live together or marry at any stage, a finding also supported by the European data (see for example, Ermisch & Seidler 2008).

### ***Motivations***

The general consensus of the literature is that reasons for being in LAT relationships vary across the life-course. As found in the Australian study, younger generations cite involuntary reasons such as external circumstances like finances, education and employment constraints as the most common reason for engaging in LAT relationships (Régnier-Loilier et al. 2009; Reimondos et al. 2011), although many intend to marry or cohabit with their partners in the future (Levin 2004; Strohm et al. 2009). Despite their low reported incidence, the European and UK literature indicates the growing popularity of LAT relationships amongst older people (Davidson & Fennell 2005; de Jong Gierveld 2004, 2002), and suggests that older couples may choose such partnerships for a variety of reasons, including an unwillingness to move away from their own homes and belongings and to help maintain relationships with their families (de Jong Gierveld 2004; Levin 2004). In these cases, the formation of LAT relationships is primarily voluntary and, unlike their

younger equivalents, older adult participants mostly report a lack of desire to cohabit or marry their partners in the future (Reimondos et al. 2011). These studies also indicate that widowed older adults were more likely to re-partner in LAT relationships than older adults who were divorced and, further, that those over 70 years of age appeared to prefer LAT arrangements (de Jong Gierveld 2002, 2004).

A study by Borell and Ghazanfareon Karlsson (2007) which looked at the older Swedish population (116 people, aged 60 – 90 years of age) adds further weight to the dating and courting literature discussed earlier. It showed that late-life LAT partnerships were most often favoured by women, while men favoured marriage. Certainly, statistical analyses from the CDC in the US indicate that older men still prefer to marry their new partners (see Clarke 1995 for example). However, this finding is tempered by more current research which indicates that the more social support men have, the less interest in remarriage they express (see Newman & Newman 2009: 552 for discussion).

Living apart together arrangements allow older individuals to remain autonomous in terms of maintaining separate households, finances and possessions – in other words, they allow couples to stay functionally separate – whilst still providing a means for intimacy and commitment (Borell & Ghazanfareon Karlsson 2007). In this manner, such living arrangements offer 'the best of both worlds: intimacy with autonomy [and] companionship with independence' (Davidson & Fennell 2002: 9). These findings are succinctly summed up as follows:

The older person fears the problems involved in a twenty-four-hour personal relationship with a new partner... LAT relationships in general offer better opportunities to continue life as usual... On a part-time basis the new partners share accommodation, providing both of them with companionship, solidarity, and intimacy. For children and other network members this situation is totally transparent: neither finances nor living quarters are legally shared (de Jong Gierveld 2002: 74-75).

In summary, LAT relationships are becoming increasingly recognised as a valid partnership option for young and old alike, although the motivation for engaging in them differs across the life span. Older adults especially, seem to choose these arrangements as a way to protect their existing assets and to maintain their family relationships. Furthermore, one of the qualities involved in partnerships such as LATs is the regular and ongoing involvement in sexual relations (Stevens 2002: 32). Living apart together partnerships are thus characterised by their separateness, commitment and intimacy. The following section explores the topic of sexuality amongst older adults in more detail.

## **Sexuality and ageing research**

Romantic relationships are differentiated from other kinds of intimate human relationships, at their most basic level, by sexual behaviour (Hatfield et al. 2007; Regan 2008). Late-life romantic relationships are no exception (Connidis 2010). However, there is a dichotomy in the literature regarding older adults as sexual beings. On the one hand quantitative, survey-based sexuality studies which take a medical and health perspective illustrate that older adults are sexual, albeit with limited functional capacity. On the other hand, there exists a plethora of work lamenting the continuing depiction of older adults as asexual (see, for instance, Butler 2005; Gott et al. 2004). This dichotomy is difficult to rationalise – shouldn't the evidence stand for itself? However, it appears that ageist assumptions are remarkably difficult to change and thus the labelling of older adults as non-sexual entities continues to persist (Connidis 2010), despite the evidence which shows they are not. Perhaps this is because there is a dearth of research on healthy older adult sexuality from a non-biomedical perspective (DeLamater 2012)? Unfortunately qualitative studies which might elucidate how older adults feel about or experience their sexual lives – and which might add weight to the quantitative literature – are also lacking. These differing literatures will be discussed in the following sections.

### **Health, gender and sexuality – the biomedical focus**

Historically, social research into relationships, including romance, love and sexuality, largely omitted older adults. In the Kinsey studies, for instance, older adults were barely represented (228 people over the age of 60, equivalent to just 2% of the total sample) (1948; 1953). And while the Masters and Johnson's (1966) landmark study was amongst the first to provide an in-depth account of older adult as sexual beings, once again, out of a sample of 694, only 4% were aged 60 years or over.

The Starr-Weiner report (Starr & Weiner 1981) was one of the first studies to focus exclusively on older adults. The researchers surveyed 800 adults aged 60 plus about their sexual activity and interests, and concluded that interest and participation in sex continued throughout the lifespan (Starr & Weiner 1981). Recently there have been a number of medical- and health-focused studies looking at older adults and sexuality, most particularly in the US (Waite et al. 2009) and even one global study which compiled data from 29 different countries (Laumann et al. 2006). This research has tended to focus on the sexual functioning of older adults rather than the meanings they give to their loving relationships (see Gott & Hinchliff, 2003: 1618 for discussion). This may be the case because many researchers attempt to treat sexuality as something that exists as an observable fact or a 'concrete phenomenon' which can be measured, whereas, in reality, its actual *meaning* is rarely ever explicated (Gott 2005: 11, emphasis added).

Whilst most of these medically-based studies have generally found declines in sexual activity with age (see, for instance, Lindau et al. 2007) a few studies have shown it remains stable over time (see Minichiello et al. 1996 for discussion). Much of the research, however, agrees that activity varies with gender. The absence of a viable partner appears to be a major determining factor in whether an older woman will be sexually active or not (Carpenter, Nathanson & Kim 2006; Minichiello et al. 1996; 2005). For example, older men are far more likely than older women to have a sexual partner, to be sexually active, and to rate sexual activity as important (Lindau et al. 2007). These gender differences are

attributed to higher remarriage rates amongst men who are divorced or widowed (men are more likely than women to remarry), an age difference in existing relationships (men tend to marry women younger than themselves) and also to the higher mortality rate amongst men, leading to a dearth of available partners for women, especially at the latter end of life (Carpenter et al. 2006; Waite et al. 2009).

Further studies have found that certain physiological changes related to ageing, such as vaginal dryness in females (as a result of menopause) and erectile dysfunction in males (see Waite et al. 2009), as well as other health conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure and prostate cancer can limit sexual activity (American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) 1999). However, it has also generally been found that both physical illness and psycho-social issues, such as lifestyle choices, can affect sexual functioning at any time of life (see for example, Laumann et al. 1999).

Other studies have found that women tend to have more conservative attitudes towards sex than men, although this is more marked in women born prior to the baby boom (Laumann 1994, 2000), perhaps because of their more conservative upbringing or because of the social mores of the time, when sex outside marriage was not sanctioned. As a result, it is argued that 'unattached' older women are less likely to be sexually active or engage in 'casual' sex than men (Carpenter et al. 2006: 95). However, this finding is moderated by the results of a second and third AARP survey (AARP 2004; 2010), which found that the views of older adults<sup>3</sup> regarding sex between unmarried people had changed over time, with a decrease in opposition from 41% in 1999 (n = 1266) to 34% in 2004 (n = 1604) and down to 22% in 2010 (n = 1670) suggesting that their attitudes were becoming less conservative.

Interest in sexual activity has been purported to wane with age (Waite et al. 2009), although some studies have found ongoing interest even in the very-old (Lindau et al. 2007). There also appears to be a gender difference in declining interest, with un-

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<sup>3</sup> older adults in these surveys are classified as 45 years plus

partnered older females less likely to be interested in sex than their un-partnered male equivalents. Yet this effect seems to be moderated for those older adults who are still partnered, regardless of gender (Waite et al. 2009). Such a finding suggests that whilst a declining interest in sex may well be age-related, it may also be a situational response – one which could possibly be overcome, or at least mitigated, with the presence of an available, and willing, partner.

The majority of these studies use cross-sectional data, which provides a limited snapshot of older adult sexuality at any given point of time. One study however used a cohort approach across several time points to examine sexual activity amongst Swedish 70 year olds (Beckman et al. 2008). The study surveyed four sample populations of older adults each born at different times and found differences from the first cohort to the last.

The research found that older adult participation in and satisfaction with sexual activity increased from 1971 to 2000, as did positive attitudes towards sexuality. There was also a corresponding decrease in sexual dysfunctions (Beckman et al. 2008 [1]). These findings applied to both married and unmarried individuals alike, which was a change from the earlier baseline findings in which single women were unlikely to be sexually active at all. In addition, the researchers found that the proportion of older adults who were divorced, cohabiting or in living apart relationships also increased from the first cohort to the last (page [3]). Like the other studies highlighted earlier, the researchers found that the most reported reason for an absence of sexual activity was the lack of a partner, and this was particularly so for women, (page [4]). They concluded that both the extent and quality of sexual experiences had improved for Swedish 70 year olds over the 30 year period of investigation (page [1]).

Views, and consequently behaviours, of people are not static – they change over time and with differing life stages. What is not acceptable in one era may well become the standard in another and usually reflects changes in societal norms – like that which occurred during

and after the 1960s period of free love. It is therefore likely that today's older adults – the baby boom generation – who experienced their formative years during this period of change would have a different experience of love and sexuality than those growing up in the depression era, in which sex and sexuality were more repressed. The fact that Beckman and colleagues found increases in sexual activity and satisfaction from 1971 to 2001 supports this argument, and indicates that older adult sexuality is not a fixed entity – it changes in response to changing mores in society.

One of the criticisms of quantitative or self-report studies is their concentration on measuring levels of sexuality, that is, counting the number of times sexual activity takes place over any given time period, with sexual activity being – almost always – defined as '(hetero) sexual intercourse' (Gott 2005: 12). Such an approach elevates penile-vaginal penetration to the 'gold-standard' by which sexuality is judged (Gott 2006: 106). Moreover, this androcentric focus preferences men's sexuality over and above women's (Burgess 2004) and it makes no allowance for alternative means of sexual expression or, indeed, differences in how people express themselves sexually across the lifespan (Minichiello et al. 1996). Cross-sectional studies also, invariably, compare the sexual activity of older adults against that of younger age groups (Connidis 2010: 61).

Within these parameters, it is inevitable that such research will find a general waning in sexuality or sexual intercourse in older adults compared to other age groups. Besides, such research is usually conducted within the context of long-term married couples, rather than amongst single, dating older adults (Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991; Knodel & Chayovan 2001) who, arguably, would have different sexual profiles. As the focus of these studies is also primarily on reporting levels of sexual activity, they do little to show how important sex and sexuality actually are in the lives of older adults (Connidis 2010: 61). In addition, the medical – biological – emphasis of these studies, tends to highlight the 'problems' associated with ageing and sexuality, and mirrors the increasing medicalisation of sexual function within society (DeLamater & Sill 2005). This biomedical focus creates a 'one-sided



view' which serves to reinforce the belief that healthy older adults are asexual (DeLamater 2012: 125). Studies which provide older adults' personal perceptions of their romantic and sexual relationships might deliver a more balanced perspective. However there are relatively few studies which do so. The following section reviews a cross-section of the limited qualitative literature on ageing and sexuality.

### **Qualitative studies of ageing and sexuality**

Recent evidence suggests that intimate partnerships can positively impact an individual's mental and physical health, happiness and sexuality (Kamp Dush & Amato 2005), and may also reduce the damaging effects of social isolation and loneliness, which often occur in older age (de Jong Gierveld 2002). Descriptive studies from the US and the UK are limited, however, but include, for example, the dated *Love, Sex and Aging Report* (Brecher 1984), the more recent work by Gott and Hinchliff (Gott & Hinchliff 2003, 2007; Hinchliff & Gott 2004, 2008), the studies by Potts et al. (2003, 2004, 2006) and Hurd Clarke (2006). These studies highlight an increasing awareness amongst the research community that quantitative accounts do little to enlighten the individual nature of late-life romance and older adult sexuality in particular (Minichiello et al. 1996). What follows is a documentation and synthesis of some of these studies, with the goal of highlighting the focus of the current research project.

Whilst the *Love, Sex and Aging Report* (Brecher 1984) is now out-dated, it contained a detailed account of older adult thoughts and feelings on love and sexual relationships. The study surveyed 4,246 people aged 50 years and above and combined both quantitative and open-ended qualitative questions on many different aspects of older adult love and sexuality. Over 2,600 responses were received from those aged 60 years and over, 925 of whom were single. As the author commented in the introduction:

Relatively few of our respondents, it turned out, wanted to write about religion in the later years, or about transportation problems after age 50. What interested

them most – and what they wrote about most eloquently and at greatest length – was, quite simply, love and sexuality (Brecher 1984: 11).

Now nearly 30 years old, the report is notable for its breadth and candour, discussing issues such as love, masturbation, pornography, infidelity, fantasies and homosexual experiences. Whilst the data provided is rich and informative in terms of older adult love and sexuality, nearly 75% of the total responses were from long-term married people who were in relationships for 30 years or more (page 404). Of these, 87 percent of husbands and 75 percent of wives rated sex as moderately or very important (page 84).

Of the 512 unmarried women who answered the survey, 68 percent were sexually active compared to 86 percent of the 413 unmarried men (Brecher 1984: 167). As in the more recent research described earlier (Lindau et al. 2007), the discrepancy in activity levels between the two genders was largely attributed to the dearth of available men in these age groups – the ratio of older women to older men was postulated to be as high as 5 to 1 (page 153). Those who were unmarried were asked whether their sexual relationships would eventually lead to marriage. Of the 337 who responded negatively, 46 percent of females and 44 percent of males said their reasons for not marrying were because they 'preferred things the way they are' and 43 percent of women and 16 percent of men said they could not because their 'partner is married to someone else' (page 207). Other reasons for not marrying their sexual partners were given as mainly: economic (not wishing to be responsible for each other's medical bills or not wishing to lose government benefits) and the desire to remain separate. The findings indicated that, like the LAT relationships reported earlier, older adult romance was not necessarily organised around cohabitation and, further, that extramarital relationships were not uncommon, particularly for these unmarried older women.

Surprisingly the unmarried respondents were not asked how important their sexual relationships were, so their responses cannot be compared to those of the married sample. However, many of the older adults, married and unmarried alike, commented that despite

engaging in less frequent sexual activity compared to their younger years, their experiences were far more meaningful, much less inhibited and more arousing (and orgasmic) than ever before. In addition, although ill health impacted their sexuality, these older adults continued to be sexually involved, engaging in various activities to stimulate arousal and achieve orgasm, such as caressing, mutual or solo masturbation and/or oral sex as well as or instead of sexual intercourse. These descriptions are one of the most important findings of the research as they offer a more comprehensive picture of older adult sexuality. They show, in particular, that for these older adults frequency of intercourse or the act of intercourse itself were not true indicators of sexual enjoyment or satisfaction. Further, the descriptions emphasise the individual nature of sexuality and the importance of asking open-ended questions in sexuality research – across all age groups.

In summary, whilst the study is dated, the information provided in the *Love, Sex and Aging* Report (Brecher 1984) provides an interesting contrast to the biomedical literature. However, it also leaves a number of questions unanswered, such as is late life love any different to earlier love experiences? What do love and intimacy actually mean to older adults in new romantic relationships? And is sex important to them?

### **How important is sex for older adults?**

The studies by Gott and Hinchliff provide some of the few contemporary qualitative accounts of sex and its importance in older adult lives. In a mixed-methods study which combined quality of life measures and face to face interviews with 44 older adult men and women (aged 50–92 years), 32 participants rated sex as either moderately, very or extremely important (Gott & Hinchliff 2003: 1620). Of the remaining 12 who considered sex of little or no importance, eight were un-partnered (usually widowed). It was argued by the researchers that the lack of available sexual partners contributed to this view (page 1626). However this argument is difficult to rationalise as six of the 32 who still considered sex important were also un-partnered. The four who were married but not engaged in regular sexual activity reported that although they might still be *interested* in sexual

involvement, ongoing physical and emotional constraints (of either themselves or their partners) prevented them from doing so, and this had caused them to reprioritise sex in their relationships (page 1622). In contrast, a small number of participants felt that sex was even more pleasurable with age and had subsequently become more important to them than when they were previously married (page 1626). In the context of this study, sex was defined beyond penile intercourse (see also Brecher 1984), and included cuddling and 'touching' as a way to maintain intimacy, but was not explored further (Gott & Hinchliff 2003: 1626).

The vast majority of the participants in this study were married or cohabiting (68%), so it is difficult to compare the results to those of single older adults, who might be actively seeking romantic partners. Furthermore, as the sample included adults under the age of 60, it is difficult to correlate the results to populations aged 60 plus, whose life-stage and lifestyles are likely qualitatively different to younger adults – who might still be partnered and/or parenting and who are unlikely to be retired or semi-retired. However, the qualitative nature of the research provided some interesting insights into older adult feelings about the importance of sex in late life. In particular it showed that ill health or psychological or social factors played a major role in downgrading the importance of sex in older adult lives, rather than age per se. Hinchliff and Gott (2004) argue that overall well-being is positively influenced by involvement in sexual relationships.

In their more recent study about sexuality and stereotypes, Hinchliff and Gott (2008) interviewed 19 women aged 50 – 83 years in the UK. The vast majority regarded sex as important or very important to their health and well-being (page 74), and described sexual activity as more than just intercourse: 'the touching, the feeling, the feeling close to somebody... that's really, really important' (page 72). These women also positioned sex as having benefits for their health and well-being but '*within*' a framework of 'committed relationships' (page 65, emphasis in the original). Further, these women regarded the 'asexual discourse of ageing' as not personally applicable (page 65) and rejected societal

stereotypes by positioning themselves as 'sexually liberated' (page 74). However, in a finding which points to the entrenched nature of ageism even for the aged themselves, these women accepted the asexual stereotype for women who were 'older' than themselves.

Other qualitative studies have also focused on gendered viewpoints to explicate ageing and sexuality. For instance, in a study about the use of Viagra to combat erectile dysfunction, Potts and colleagues interviewed 33 men (aged 33 - 72) (Potts et al. 2006, 2004) who had used the 'sexuopharmaceutical' (Tiefer 2006: 273) – and 27 women (aged 33 – 68) whose partners had used it (Potts et al. 2004, 2003). Whilst some men and women embraced its use (2004: 493), others had used it initially but then either stopped using it or used it sparingly. The authors noted that this latter group of men and women resisted the medicalisation of sex and ageing, with its view of erectile dysfunction as 'abnormality' and its notion of 'sex for life' (defined as sexual intercourse) which is increasingly endorsed by the pharmaceutical and medical professions (2006: 306). These men – and their partners – had adapted to a decrease in or complete loss of erections (and subsequently penetrative sex) which many of them regarded as a 'natural' consequence of ageing (2004: 492). They developed modified means of sexual interaction, such as stroking and rubbing, which they considered as 'normal, healthy, enjoyable and satisfying' (2006: 306) and even in some cases as 'improved' (2006: 323). The men who used Viagra regularly reported enhanced self-esteem and reclaimed masculinity. The so-called 'restoration' of masculinity led some to engage in sexual experimentation with multiple partners outside the marriage (2004: 496).

Like the men, many women whose partners had embraced the use of Viagra were conflicted about its benefits (Potts et al. 2003). Whilst they said it enhanced their partner's self-esteem, the downside was the increased emphasis on penetrative sex, which was not always welcome. Their discourse centred around: unwelcome changes to sexual practice in terms of frequency (repeat episodes of sexual intercourse once a pill was taken), duration

(intercourse taking a long time because erections lasted longer) and mode (the loss of other forms of sexual activity, pleasuring and foreplay) and increased pressure to perform, all which served to create conflict within the relationship (2003: 703). Additionally, these women felt that sex was no longer a site of negotiation (sex became 'inevitable' and no longer spontaneous once a Viagra was taken) together with what the authors termed, a 'real and imagined' fear of infidelity (Potts et al. 2003: 710).

Hurd Clarke (2006) interviewed 24 women (aged 52 – 90) who remarried after the age of 50. The study focused on illuminating differences between earlier and later sexual experiences, paying particular attention to how they had changed for these women over the course of their lives. Most of the women reported strong feelings of sexual attraction as well as emotional and sexual satisfaction in their remarriages in contrast to their first relationships (page 132) – although a few noted they were sexually incompatible with their new partners (page 134). As noted for other studies, health issues over time (of themselves or their partners) gradually impacted on the women's level of sexual activity (defined as intercourse), which subsequently led to a decline in the importance of penetrative sex within their relationships (page 135). However, cuddling, kissing, hugging and companionship became as 'highly valued' as intercourse and were seen as valid expressions of love and sexuality (page 138).

The Bulcroft and O'Connor study also points to a redefinition of intimacy in later life. The majority of relationships were sexually active, although for some 'romance' itself, whilst valued, often became subsumed for 'companionship' and what were termed 'pragmatic concerns' (these were not elaborated on) (1986b: 400). Indeed romance, love and sex were often depicted as 'frosting on the cake', and 'nice but not essential' (page 400). The results suggest that for some of these older adults, love could be defined as *companionate* rather than *passionate* love (Aron et al 2006: 597).

Unlike the quantitative studies which paint a problematic (that is, medical) – or even abnormal – view of older adult sexuality, these qualitative studies point to a redefining of sexuality with age. Whilst intimacy is still important, the need for sexual satisfaction (and orgasm) through intercourse – for both men and women – appears to decline, especially when health issues are taken into account. Viagra, whilst welcome for some, reflects the biomedical imperative for penetrative sex and appears to place undue emphasis on its continuation in older adult lives. For those who resist such an imperative, non-coital forms of love and sexual expression appear to stimulate arousal, create intimacy and become more meaningful than previous (coital) sexual experiences.

### **Older adults, online romantic relationships and sexuality**

There have been a large number of studies looking at various aspects of the Internet and sexuality, in particular, pornography (Attwood 2007; Cavaglion 2008), cybersex (Daneback, Cooper & Månsson 2005), sexual compulsivity (Daneback, Ross & Månsson 2006) and the procurement of offline sexual partners (Couch & Liamputtong 2008). In many cases, older adults are absent (or appear absent) from the sample either due to age cut offs – many studies use college students or clinical samples of sexual compulsives – or because age ranges were not reported or, perhaps, through their lack of participation. A recent review looked at the impact of the Internet on sexuality from 1993 to 2008. It found that studies which looked at the 'sexual interests and needs' of older adults were "exceedingly rare" (Doring 2009: 1098).

One of the few academic articles to seriously report the subject of older adults, the Internet and sexuality, is the (now somewhat dated) literature review by Adams et al (2003), entitled *Sexuality of Older Adults and the Internet: From Sex Education to Cybersex*. In their review the authors suggest that the Internet affords older adults the opportunity for enhanced sexual expression (Adams et al. 2003: 408), but they provide little evidence to illustrate this claim. Chat rooms are seen to provide an opportunity to 'socialise, build friendships, and develop emotionally intimate and potentially sexual and erotic relationships' (page 409)

and data is given which suggests that 8% of Canadian older adults visit chat rooms (Silver cited in Adams et al 2003: 409). The authors do state, however, that very little is known about the extent and scope of older adults' participation in such forums. Personal advertisements posted on various senior dating services offer older adults the opportunity to find romance and companionship, but again, little data is provided as evidence. The review suggests that the Internet may be especially suited to providing sex education for older adults, as feelings of guilt and shame may be lessened for those who seek information anonymously online and, further, that this may encourage older adults to be more open and forthright (page 411).

Lastly, this review looked at erotica, pornography and cyber-sex, and concluded that it is reasonable to assume that older adults were using the Internet to access such material. The authors conclude that:

The Internet allows older adults to socialize despite limitations with mobility and physical impairments. It also allows them to educate themselves about changes they may experience in their sexuality and to explore and experiment with the more intimate aspects of themselves anonymously, affordably, and immediately. This is not only true for seniors living in North America, but globally (Adams et al 2003: 413)

Despite such claims, the authors offer little in the way of empirical evidence in support and, as such, their conclusions must be regarded with caution. Furthermore, they present little in the way of theory to explain older adult involvement in online relationships.

Research into the use of the Internet to facilitate offline casual sex experiences in younger populations, has shown that it may act as an incubator for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) due to the increased number of sexual meetings possible (see Couch & Liamputtong 2008 for discussion). For example, one study of 856 clients of an HIV testing site in the US, found those who sourced their casual sex partners through online means were predominantly male, homosexual and at greater risk of STDs than those who did not use the Internet (McFarlane, Bull & Rietmeijer 2000).



A further study by the same research group of 1276 female respondents to an online *SexQuiz* in the US (McFarlane, Kachur, Bull & Rietmeijer 2004), found that 43 percent reported having offline sex with someone they met online, and also having more sex partners and higher rates of STDs compared to women who did not (McFarlane et al. 2004: 693). The authors argued that these factors, coupled with irregular condom use, as well as a tendency of these women to travel 'significant distances to meet Internet sexual partners', could lead to 'new sexual mixing patterns', thereby potentially 'altering the epidemiology of STDs' (McFarlane et al. 2004: 693). However, a more recent study in Sweden of both men and women involved in Internet-mediated relationships, found no evidence of an increase in frequency of STDs (Ross, Daneback, Månsson et al. 2008: 696).

The health risks for older adults, who are increasingly presenting with symptoms of HIV/AIDS and STDs (Minichiello, Hawkes & Pitts 2011) is currently unknown, but is a cause for concern given the increasing numbers of older adults sourcing their new partners online (see Bateson et al. 2012). In an attempt to increase public awareness of these significant health risks, recent safe sex campaigns for baby boomers have been initiated in the UK (Health Protection Agency 2010) and Australia (Family Planning New South Wales 2012). Aside from the impetus for public health safety, it is necessary that this phenomenon be studied further, to provide more in depth information regarding the interface between online technologies, older adults and social relationships. Furthermore, it is important to ascertain whether online dating websites have any mediating effects on the development and progression of romantic relationships, in both the online and mixed mode context.

## **Conclusion**

There is a lack of recent qualitative research addressing just how older adults who are seeking new romantic relationships meet, or how their relationships progress beyond the initial stages. Past accounts do little to illuminate how modern later-life romances develop. Furthermore, descriptions and analyses of Australian older adults and their romantic

relationships do not seem to exist. The studies referred to in this chapter discuss older adult sexuality, but very few describe the experience of love itself and what it means to and for older adults. This is a significant omission given that the different circumstances facing older adults in intimate relationships have been identified as of consequence for more than a quarter of a century. As evidenced by Allgeier and McCormick:

In a culture exploring sex for its recreational rather than procreational value, couples beyond the menopause have a distinct advantage. What we can learn from them is that a person whose genital functions have declined or become nonexistent is still not sexless unless we continue to equate sexuality with genital performance culminating in a penis in a vagina. As long as we live and despite our infirmities, we remain sensuous beings who must adapt to the often conflicting demands of gender and sexuality (cited in Rice & Kelly 1987: 93).

This chapter provided an illustration of the stages of romantic relationship development, from meeting, dating and courtship, through to intimacy and commitment. However, very few of the highlighted studies used older adult samples which were single or dating, so it is unclear what the trajectory of contemporary relationship formation is within this population. We know little about how late life relationships begin, in either the offline or online context, and how they progress beyond the dating and courtship phase. For instance, how do older adults today find new partners? Do they deliberately look for new relationships, or do they leave it up to fate and wait for them to happen by chance? Once they find someone, do they experience 'falling in love'? Or do they, as suggested by Bulcroft and colleagues (Bulcroft & O'Connor 1986a,b) forego these feelings for a safer, more sedentary, companionate experience? Do older adults eventually marry their dating partners or cohabit or even live-apart-together? The previous evidence indicates that older adults who are partnered are likely to be sexually active. Does this also apply to older adults who are dating or in newly established relationships? If yes, how do older adults actually perceive sex (and intimacy) – what does it mean for them? Is it important? And, finally, is it any different from their earlier experiences?

Given that love, sex and intimacy are highly personal and contextual experiences, their exposition would benefit from individual accounts illustrating individual understandings, but qualitative, subjective descriptions of older adult romantic and sexual relationships are still relatively rare (Carpenter et al. 2006). Such research has relevance beyond mere description:

It is clear that the maintenance of satisfactory relations of intimacy is important for sustaining a positive sense of self, and an authentic emotional life is significant for health and personal development. The development of a better understanding of how older people themselves interpret notions of ageing and intimacy will enhance the relevance and effectiveness of current policy initiatives concentrating as they do on healthy or positive ageing (Riggs & Turner 1997: 232).

As highlighted in Chapter Two, the first of the baby boomers began turning 60 in 2006 (Lawson 2003: 26). With their propensity for pushing the boundaries of whatever decade they are situated in, it is interesting to speculate that there will be superfluity of older adults wired up and looking for romance online:

For decades, as a group, [the Baby Boomers] have challenged and pushed the limits of ...norms; redefining the concepts of family and sexual expression (among many others)... we should anticipate increased changes and challenges in other social norms as this huge cohort moves into later life... Their technological competence and relative affluence will increase the potential of the Internet as a source of personal and social expression of sexuality in later life. Will we keep pace? (Adams et al. 2003: 413).

As outlined earlier, older adults are the fastest growing segment of our Western global population. From a slow start, they are catching up technologically-speaking and engaging in computer-mediated communication on a regular basis. Past research in this area has failed to address older adults' romantic relationship formation online. As the nature of this phenomenon is complex, it would benefit from a thorough, in-depth qualitative exploration of the issues involved. Moreover, comparing older adult relationships that begin online with those that begin in real life will hopefully provide some valuable insight into the differences and similarities between the two. This research project

thus investigates older adult romantic relationships – both offline and online – within the Australian context. It aims to address the gap in the international scholarly literature and to provide a basis from which to inform a more nuanced and realistic public policy debate.

## **Chapter Four: Theorising late life romantic relationships Sociological perspectives of the family and personal life**

Given the structural ageing of populations the world over and the increasing prevalence of divorce, new older adult partnerships are more common than ever before and will no doubt become increasingly so. It stands to reason that these relationships will have an impact on older adults themselves, as well as on their extended family networks. For these reasons alone understanding the phenomenon of late-life partnership development and, indeed, the forms these partnerships take, is merited – however, this research has implications far beyond mere exposition. The impact that these relationships will have on wider social and economic structures, such as health care and end of life needs, social support requirements and so on, needs to be determined. For instance, if increasing numbers of older adults prefer to live apart from their new partners instead of combining households, does this mean the future availability of housing stock will be compromised? Furthermore, if those in LAT relationships provide little in the way of instrumental support to each other, does this mean that older adults who engage in such partnerships will require more health and community care than those who are married? These questions and many others like them can only be answered once the nature and form of contemporary older adult relationships are established.

Almost three decades ago Bulcroft and O'Connor (1986a,b) argued that there had been very little in the way of empirical investigation or theorising of older adult late-life romantic relationships. Little has changed in the intervening years (Moorman, Booth & Fingerman 2006). Australian sociology has been largely 'silent' on the issue of 'one of the most significant social changes facing Australia over the next 30 years' – that of 'population ageing' (Asquith 2009: 255) – or 'boomageddon' as it has been dubbed (Hamilton 2007). With the absence of any specific theory relating to the phenomenon of older adult partnership formation, I draw on the orthodoxy of what was once known as the sociology

of the family and which is now known as the 'sociology of personal life' (Gilding 2010; Smart 2007; Smart & Neale 1999), to provide a framework for understanding romantic relationships which begin in late life. This chapter thus commences with a brief look at the theories of functionalism and feminism to provide an historical overview of the changing views of the family. I then look at postmodern perspectives of personal life, paying particular attention to the rise of reflexivity and individualisation in today's contemporary partnerships, especially the work of Giddens (1992) and Bauman (2003) and their concepts of the 'pure relationship' and 'liquid love' respectively. This chapter also embraces ideas from the micro-level theory of socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen 1992), which has previously been postulated to provide an explanation for older adults' desire to look for and become involved in new relationships.

## **The sociology of the family**

### **Functionalism and the family**

No discussion of the sociology of the family would be complete without a brief look at the macro-level perspective of functionalism (Giddens 2009). Throughout history the extended family unit, or complex household, consisting of parents, children and other kin, was initially considered to be the predominant family structure (Giddens 1997; Gilding 1997). Traditionally the family was seen as a 'social institution that unites individuals into cooperative groups that oversee the bearing and raising of children' (Macionis & Plummer 1997: 475).

The original functionalist view saw the family not as a self-directed, isolated entity, but as an institution deeply embedded within and continually shaped by broader structures operating in society such as the economy, the government and so on. It also considered that the family performed four functions fundamental to society – the regulation of sexual activity, socialisation of its members, provision of economic and emotional security and the transference of social class (Gilding 1997; Popenoe 1993). However, with the onset of

industrialisation and modernisation, and the move away from close working relationships and strong kinship ties, the function of the family became increasingly specialised. So much so, that the role of the postmodern 'nuclear' family was reduced down to two main functions: that of child rearing (socialisation of children) and the provision of companionship and affection (stabilisation of adults) (Gilding 2010; Lindsay & Dempsey 2009; Popenoe 1993).

'Parsonian functionalism' (Gilding 2010: 758) saw the 'conventional' nuclear family unit – of a (male) breadwinner and (female) homemaker – as the most efficient and most effective model to deal with the increasing demands of modern society (Giddens 2009: 370). Over time this standpoint was heavily criticised, particularly by the new wave of feminist scholars in the 1970s and 80s, who saw the family as the site of oppression and conflict (Giddens 2009).

### **Feminist perspectives of the family**

Early feminist scholars rejected the prevailing view that family structures were in any way 'natural, inevitable or necessary' (Gillies 2003: 5) and in so doing they showed that patriarchal principles had helped fashion family life into a locus of unequal power relations – with women's interests being subordinate to men's. With their focus on unpaid care giving, domestic work and, more lately, 'emotion' work they debunked the myth that families were becoming more egalitarian (see Carter 2007 for a detailed discussion). Feminism's early focus on the oppressive and sexist nature of patriarchal society – and the family – was heavily criticised because of its positioning of women as 'passive victims' who were powerless to effect change (Roseneil 1995: 200). This focus, which universalised the experiences of white, young Western women, failed to account for 'differences in gender relationships in different social groups or different cultures and different eras of human history' (Lindsay & Dempsey 2009: 57) – and, furthermore, failed to address issues of ageing (Calasanti 2009).

Later poststructuralist feminist work explored women's growing agency, highlighting the ways in which they actively resist and contest, and also participate in – in many cases willingly – the various (presumed unequal) family structures and systems in which they are embedded (Roseneil 1995). Likewise, the emergence of feminist gerontology in the 1990s which focused on gender relations, showed that the situations of women could not be understood in isolation – the circumstances of both older women and older men needed to be understood together as inter-related and impacting the other (Calasanti 2009: 472-473). This approach also saw the emergence of the new term age relations which highlighted ageist attitudes in society that intersected across both genders. It showed that the experience of ageism is manifested most particularly in the 'loss of authority' that older men and women experience, through a gradual forfeiture of power and 'control over their bodies and personal decisions' (Calasanti 2009: 475) which occurs predominantly through the biomedicalisation of ageing and sexuality (as outlined in Chapter Three).

### **Situating intimate relationships**

Research traditions have long situated intimate relationships within the overarching category of 'the family'. Throughout the world families have traditionally formed around marriage – the legally sanctioned union of two adult individuals for the express purpose of procreation (Giddens 1997). Today, however, marriage is centred on the 'couple and coupledness' rather than children, and the couple are now the 'core' of the family (Giddens 1999: 3). Changes in marital expectations, the prevalence of non-marrieds and single-parent families, declining fertility rates, increasing divorce rates, the unprecedented number of women in the workforce and the increased reliance on childcare, have all contributed to change the structure of the family over the last 40 to 50 years (Giddens 2009). Hence marriage has become a transformed institution (Coontz 2000) – and with the rise in de facto or cohabiting partnerships, marriage can no longer be considered the norm (Coontz 2000).



The family is thus in a state of change and as a social institution it is said to be either in decline (Popenoe 1993) or that it has undergone a process of 'deinstitutionalisation' (Cherlin 2004). Cherlin's definition of deinstitutionalisation sees it as the 'weakening of social norms that define people's behaviour in a social institution such as marriage' (Cherlin 2004: 848): a state which Gilding has likened to 'Durheimian anomie' (Gilding 2010: 761). To conservative scholars, the future for the family is grim:

Families have lost functions, social power, and authority over their members. They have grown smaller in size, less stable, and shorter in life span. People have become less willing to invest time, money and energy in family life, turning instead to investments in themselves (Popenoe 1993: 528).

These same scholars also argue that a family *cannot* be a couple or simply two or more people who inhabit the same space (Popenoe 1993), while other, more critical scholars, argue that a family consists of *anyone* who feels they belong together and who wish to define themselves as such (Macionis & Plummer 1997; Stacey 1993,1996). In keeping with this view, the official Australian government definition of a family is:

two or more persons, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who are usually resident in the same household (ABS 2006b: 1)

This definition is reflected in the heterogeneity of poststructuralist family forms, with families comprising, for example, couples without children, gay couples with children, non-marrieds and single-parent families (Budgeon & Roseneil 2004; Giddens 2009) as well as distance (commuter) couples (Holmes 2004). However, this definition does not account for non-cohabitating family forms such as those who live apart together by choice (Levin 2004); which means that LAT relationships would not be classed as a family in Australia. Carol Smart's contention that the term 'family' is too proscriptive would apply here, because it anchors relationships to 'biological relatedness combined with degrees of co-residence' (2007: 7). Consequently she argues for a reconfiguring of the sociology of the family into the sociology of personal life – a reconfiguration which would account for

relationships with no genetic or legal ties, but would also account for non-cohabitating family forms, such as LAT partnerships.

### **The sociology of 'personal life'**

Where decisions on whom to marry were once the domain of families and firmly based on economic and power factors (by uniting different family groups), they are now the domain of individuals themselves. Selecting a partner is usually based on homogamy, that is, it is strongly influenced by cultural similarities between individuals (Blackwell & Lichter 2004). For instance, partners are usually from comparable backgrounds in terms of race, education, religion and so on and they commonly meet through their friends or family. Once people connect there is normally a period of dating and courtship, followed by commitment and consolidation of the relationship into marriage or cohabitation (Kamp Dush 2009). Unlike historical notions of marriage as an economic contract, contemporary relationships are now marked by their emphasis on intimacy and equality (Riggs & Turner 1999) and personal understandings of intimate relationships now hold sway over structural and functionalist perspectives of family life (Gabb 2006: 11). This shift to marriage as a partnership between equals has been much researched and debated (Smart 2007), although older adult relationships have been largely overlooked in the family/relationship literature. Perhaps the most influential explanation for the shift has been the individualisation thesis, of which Giddens' 'pure relationship' is an example.

### **Giddens and the 'pure relationship'**

Social changes of the modern and post-modern periods have facilitated in 'detaching people from traditional roles and obligations' (Lindsay & Dempsey 2009: 62). Because society is no longer clearly structured by social institutions such as religion, gender and class, decisions about appropriate ways to live are now made at the individual level (see Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995 for discussion) and, what's more, they have become a point of negotiation. This is undoubtedly the case for romantic love.

Today's romantic relationships encompass both emotional and physical elements, providing intimacy, love and sexual pleasure for those involved. Historically though, romantic relationships were not governed by any notion of romance, or love, but were structured by economic or strategic necessity (Giddens 1999: [2]). Marriage was seen to come 'first and then love and sex [were seen to] follow' (Jamieson 1998: 23). Early modern relationships were based on inequality, dependence and the segregation of gender roles (Chambers 2001: 21).

The introduction of oral contraception in the middle of the twentieth century brought major changes to society. This meant, for the first time ever, that contraception became entirely independent of the actual act of coitus (unlike condoms and IUDs) and sexuality was no longer tied to reproduction. Essentially, people were now free to express their sexuality without fear of conception. This subsequently led to a rise in personal autonomy (especially for women) and resulted in what Giddens has described as the democratisation of sexuality (1992: 182) – in other words, sexual expression became more of a partnership between people and their relationships now presumed a sexual and emotional equality that had been missing before.

With these changes, love and sexuality were no longer tied to marriage, which Giddens argues brought about a complete restructuring of intimate relationships (1992: 58). In the past, marriages were 'never... based upon intimacy [or] emotional communication', and it is this intimate communication of shared values and ideals which Giddens argues provides the 'foundation' for the new 'couple' relationships (1999: [4]). Giddens termed these resultant relationships as 'pure' relationships, based as they are on what he calls 'confluent' love (1992: 61): a love which is ultimately conditional.

For Giddens, confluent love is the opposite of romantic love, which was idealised and seen to last 'for-ever' and was the 'one-and-only' love (1992: 61). Instead, today's pure relationship is based on a love that is contingent. Contingency suggests ongoing revision

and rethinking – continuing renegotiation, in fact – of what the relationship is and what it stands for. This notion of change, of adjustment in contemporary relationships, is reflected in Giddens premise that confluent love is ‘not necessarily monogamous’ and therefore sexuality becomes yet another factor to be negotiated in the relationship (1992: 63). In such relationships, love is ‘liquid’ (Bauman 2003) and sexuality itself becomes ‘plastic’ – meaning it is both changeable and also subject to negotiation (Jamieson 1999); with the connotation being that it can be moulded, in effect, to shape democratised individual and coupled desires.

This renegotiation involves personal growth, communication and change for the partners (individuals) involved – and for the societies in which they are embedded – and means the relationship is inherently unstable: unstable to such an extent that if it ‘doesn’t suit’ or if it doesn’t provide satisfaction, it can be terminated (Giddens 1992: 58). Romantic partners couple when ‘...each gains sufficient benefit from the relation to make its continuance worthwhile’ (Giddens 1992: 63) and subsequently decouple when this is no longer the case. Giddens cites the high rates of divorce and the corresponding increasing level of cohabitation as evidence for this view (1999: [3-4]). A US study adds empirical support to Giddens arguments. It indicates that while less secure than so-called ‘romantic love relationships’, pure relationships are, nevertheless, happier, more autonomous and egalitarian (Gross & Simmons 2002: 547-548).

One may be forgiven for thinking that, in Giddens eyes, the outcome for contemporary relationships is bleak. On the contrary, Giddens remains surprisingly optimistic and sees them as a cause for celebration. Pure relationships – with their emphasis on intimate communication, negotiation and change – are, after all, implicitly democratic. The transformation of intimacy is subsequently not only producing profound personal changes but, as Giddens sees it, welcome changes to society in general.

Giddens' view of contemporary relationships has been criticised as being unrealistic (Jamieson 1999). What is missing from his account is an awareness of the reality of how little relationships have effectively changed – partly because of the ongoing prevalence of what is seen as 'gendered responsibilities' between couples (Jamieson 1998: 140). Indeed, time-use and qualitative studies of domestic household labour indicate that gender inequality in relationships is remarkably persistent (Carter 2007). Furthermore, the work by Ghazanfaraeeon Karlsson and Borell (2002) indicates that, in older adult LAT relationships, the traditional labour division is still the norm despite the maintenance of separate households.

These studies highlight that the democratisation/equalisation of intimate relationships which Giddens champions, exists in theory but not necessarily in fact. As Jamieson contends, Giddens' narrative fails to make a distinction between how lives are *actually* lived from his view of 'how they *should* be lived' (Jamieson 1999: 480, emphasis added). That said, Giddens does acknowledge that the principles he espouses are, essentially, ideals and that 'most ordinary relationships don't come even close' (1999: [5]). Very few studies have tested Giddens theory empirically however (Hughes 2005) and older adults have largely been overlooked in the family/relationship literature – except in their role as carers (Murray et al. 1999). While today's long-term marriages, given the eras they began in (a time of highly gendered roles) are, intuitively not democratic, it is difficult to determine whether new late-life partnerships reflect this new (pure) democratic relationship form. Perhaps divorced or widowed older adults have different expectations for their new relationships? Certainly as has been highlighted in earlier chapters, the social mores of society have changed rapidly since the 1960s cultural and sexual revolution and today's baby boomers might have differing expectations of their new love relationships.

Giddens' (1992) pure relationship theory may have some bearing on older adult relationships which begin on the Internet. Those who seek love online need to think carefully about what they value in a new partner, and may well look for like-minded others

with common interests and shared ideals – reflecting Giddens' (1992) notion of reflexive, egalitarian love relationships. Yet Henry-Waring and Barraket have recently argued, that despite some changes, online dating reinforces heteronormative roles and responsibilities because of its reliance on what they call 'highly gendered' activities (2008: 26). For instance, men are required to be the 'initiators', making the first move by sending a 'kiss' or a 'wink' and women the passive recipients of their attention (Henry-Waring & Barraket 2008: 26). This finding suggests that relationships initiated online will hold little resemblance to the egalitarian and democratic nature of pure relationships that Giddens espouses. Although this finding does not account for how relationships develop once they proceed to offline environments and, further, it masks the growing level of women's agency. As yet no empirical tests of Giddens' theory in relation to older adult relationships have been conducted, so this is yet to be determined.

Giddens' ideal of contemporary relationships may never be achievable but the model provides a lens through which we may view romance in general and late-life romance in particular. Indeed, Connidis has previously suggested that Giddens 'pure' relationship could serve as a potential basis for older adult intimate ties (Connidis 2006; 2010). Furthermore, late-life LAT relationships themselves appear to resemble pure relationships, based as they are on intimacy and mutual satisfaction, and the reciprocity of emotional support, rather than any 'structural bonds' (Borell & Ghazanfaraeeon Karlsson 2003: 59; Connidis 2006: 138). Accordingly, one of the questions asked throughout this thesis is, are late life romantic relationships so-called 'pure' relationships?

### **Bauman and 'liquid love'**

Like Giddens, Bauman (2003), argues that romantic love has changed. In contrast to Giddens, however, Bauman's view of contemporary romantic relationships is far more dystopic. Bauman, also an individualisation theorist, contends that 'liquid modern life' (Bauman 2005: 2) encourages a different form of togetherness: that of virtual relationships which are 'loose and eminently revocable' (2003: 90) – in other words, romantic

relationships which are easy to enter but just as easy to exit. There is a lack of meaningful love; and love is 'liquid' and relegated to an experience of brief affection (Bauman 2003). The paradox, for Bauman, is that whilst people are 'wary of the state of "being related" and particularly of being related "for good", not to mention forever', they are, in fact, 'desperate to relate' (2003: page viii).

According to Bauman, today's society values being connected by belonging to networks rather than to individuals. This connection by, and as, networks encourages people to create ties and links that are very easily formed but just as easily broken, because they are based in many cases on associations which are – at least initially – insubstantial (Granovetter 1973). Consequently, we are no longer developing the skills that are necessary to foster and sustain long-term bonds. We are caught up in what Jacobs describes as a 'commitment to transience', which has 'replaced the value of durability' (2004: 127).

Bauman further argues that, as a society, we are habituated to consumerism. As *homo consumens* we have been conditioned to accumulate and dispose of goods in a rapid manner (2003: 49-50). This way of being has corrupted the way we experience desire and love (2003: 9) and, by default, our relationships. In Bauman's view, individuals still want romantic relationships but do not want the responsibilities being in them demands – they want relationships that can be easily disposed of (2003: 49) when something better and brighter comes along. This argument is very similar to the 'until further notice' aspect of Giddens' pure relationships (1992: 63), in which relationships last only as long as they provide benefit for those involved.

Under Bauman's consumerist scenario, love and sex become, in effect, just other objects that lend themselves to quick usage and equally quick disposal: that is, 'liquid love' (Bauman 2003). Or, as put so succinctly by Blum in her critique of Bauman's treatise, 'in consumer culture, fucking and shopping are pretty much the same thing' (Blum 2005: 339-

340). Likewise, Illouz (2007: 110) argues that emotions are now tied to and shaped by market forces. And Internet dating, in particular, provides a prime example of the market at work and how people shape themselves to produce (and look for) an ideal product (partner) based on 'categories and cognitions' not 'senses' (Illouz 2007: 104). While the Internet effectively provides unparalleled access to others, Illouz claims it removes the 'emotional and bodily resources' essential to conducting personal love relationships (2007: 111). Bauman claims this is borne out by our use of modern communication technology – such as mobile phones, instant messaging, email, social networking sites and so on – all forms of what he terms 'virtual proximity' (2003: 61); and thereby creating what Jacobs has called 'social disengagement' – where our relationships are defined more by the quantity of our interactions rather than by the depth of our connections (Jacobs 2004: 128).

In this respect, Bauman asserts that our connections with others are not only 'more frequent and more shallow' but also 'more intense and more brief' (2003: 62). This argument may well describe the hyperpersonal nature of online communication, but it does little to describe older adult online dating and the offline relationships that can develop from such virtual interaction. Dating websites are essentially profit-making ventures – it costs money to "connect" to like-minded individuals – reflecting a commodification of relationships, perhaps in line with Bauman's (2003) notion of love and relationships as something that you shop for, consume and dispose of. Certainly there is an element of choice in online dating, and this may well echo the liquid love aspect of Bauman's argument. It suggests the availability (and consequent disposability) of many possible partners – with the subsequent dominance of '(superficial) desire' over '(deep) intimacy' (Barraket & Henry-Waring 2008: 160). These claims may have merit, but they effectively dismiss the mixed mode nature of Internet dating and the fact that most people are looking for long-term partners rather than casual flings.

The disparity between the theories of Giddens and Bauman echo the early utopian/dystopian debate over the benefits/disadvantages of the Internet. Such disparity



may, at a macro level, be a manifestation of the time periods these theorists were reflecting. Giddens' thesis was written in 1992, shortly before the commercialisation of GSM<sup>4</sup> which allowed for the rapid widespread uptake of public mobile telephony (Ling & Donner 2009: 2) and well before the advent of social networking sites, circa 1997 (Boyd & Ellison 2007: [4]). These two events have had an enormous impact on society – and personal relationships in particular – and may have connotations for Giddens' theory, which he has yet to consider. In contrast, Bauman's treatise was written after these events (2003) and his arguments focus primarily on the negative impacts these technologies have on individuals and relationships. Other researchers, however, have highlighted the positive effects which such technologies can have on relationships by providing 'a wide range of sociability and support' (Quan-Haase et al. 2002: 27), facilitating 'communication' and 'self-disclosure' (Henderson & Gilding 2004: 504) and providing an avenue for the growth of 'authenticity' and 'negotiation' (Hardey 2004: 220).

Subsequently, while Giddens finds much to be optimistic in regards to pure relationships, for Bauman, like Illouz, the shift towards commodified love as facilitated by the Internet is inherently bad for society (see Barraket & Henry-Waring 2008 for discussion). Like Giddens, Bauman has also been critiqued, in particular, for not offering empirical support for his theory (Smart 2007). Bauman does raise questions for late life relationships, however, which are of particular relevance to this research project: are older adults experiencing their new romances as disposable, with low entry and exit costs? Or are they looking for something more durable? And what impact do communication technologies – specifically online dating websites – have on these relationships?

### **Reflexivity over and above convention?**

Smart and Neale (1999) repudiate Giddens' individualisation thesis and Cherlin's idea of the deinstitutionalisation of marriage; stressing instead both the continuing persistence of

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<sup>4</sup> GSM = Global System for Mobile Communication which was commercialised circa 1994

'connectedness' (page 75) *as well as* the mutability of postmodern intimate relationships and family arrangements (page 22). Recently, Gilding also argued that the individualisation thesis presents a view which preferences the 'open-endedness' of close relationships 'at the expense of the family as an institution'; in his words 'reflexivity' is now valued 'over and above convention' (2010: 757). Further, he argues that sociologists who ascribe to this view are in danger of relinquishing 'understandings of families to frameworks grounded in biologicistic and economic understandings of human behaviour' (page 758); and that such views overlook how important the family continues to remain as an 'institutional regime' within society (page 773). In support of his argument he highlights research from such diverse arenas as paternity uncertainty rates, ongoing patterns of inheritance behaviour and family business practices, and by doing so he shows, like Smart and Neale, how enduring (and embedded) the notion of 'family' actually is in society:

...the biological paternity of about 97-9 per cent of children in advanced capitalist countries is accurately identified at birth; about 80-95 per cent of decedents leave their estates to their children in roughly equal measure; and about 70-90 per cent of enterprises are family businesses, mostly involving spouses, siblings and/or children (Gilding 2010: 772).

So whilst conservative scholars and individualisation theorists would have us believe that marriage and the family have become defunct or deinstitutionalised (Cherlin 2004), Gilding shows that the family – despite its many varied forms and despite the increasingly reflexive, egalitarian and autonomous nature of intimate relationships – continues to endure. Individual subjectivities as postulated by Giddens and others therefore *do not* 'trump the norms' which govern 'behaviour around relationships and having children' (Gilding 2010: 761).

But how do views such as those of Smart and Neale (1999), Gilding (2010) and individualisation theorists account for new late life relationships? Smart and Neale's thesis concerns, in the main, post-divorce parents who are dealing with custody and co-parenting arrangements, whilst Gilding's argument encompasses 'the family' in one broad sweep.

However, Gilding's finding that post-mortem bequests favour children in 80-95 per cent of cases suggests that even individuals who have re-partnered value their earlier families over and above their new late-life relationships. While neither of these explanations deals specifically with how post-divorce or bereaved older individuals, or the previously single, negotiate and establish new relationships per se – and what these new couplings mean in terms of family and personal life – they do provide a solid starting point to unpack them. Equally, whether new late life partnerships reflect egalitarian or reflexive principles has also yet to be established but these concepts likewise provide useful tools with which to apply a sociological lens to this area of study. One other theory which may also have relevance has been previously postulated to provide an explanation for late life relationship formation – and LAT relationships in particular (de Jong Gierveld 2004). This perspective, although micro-level, is therefore worthy of discussion here.

### **Socio-emotional selectivity theory**

Socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen 1992) focuses on older adult interactions over the life-span and has been empirically tested in long-term marriage (Carstensen 1995; see also Carstensen, Fung & Charles 2003; Carstensen, Gottman & Levenson 1995). Socio-emotional selectivity theory posits that faced with a finite future (an awareness of limited time), older adults preference interactions with *familiar* social partners (Carstensen 1995: 154). The theory states:

Age is associated with increasing motivation to derive emotional meaning from life and decreasing motivation to expand one's horizons (Carstensen et al. 2003: 103).

On the one hand this suggests that older adults would be less likely than their younger counterparts to seek *new* romantic relationships. On the other, however, it could be seen that this emotional goal-seeking might provide the impetus for older adults to actively pursue new, emotionally satisfying relationships. Whilst there is very little research which has applied socio-emotional selectivity theory to investigate new late life couple formation, one study previously suggested that it provides an explanation for older adult involvement

in LAT relationships (de Jong Gierveld 2004). For instance, while LAT partnerships allow those involved access to intimacy, their autonomous nature – in terms of the maintenance of separate households and finances – helps preserve ‘existing, familiar, close relationships’ with their family and friends (de Jong Gierveld 2004: 242). This is a finding which indicates the ongoing primacy of family relationships and one which enhances Gildings claims.

Clearly socio-emotional selectivity theory needs to be investigated more fully although researchers have lately argued (Stephure et al. 2009) that it could perhaps provide a theoretical basis for understanding older adult participation in online dating. The study of 175 survey respondents (aged 18 to 64 years), showed that the older the participant, the greater their involvement in Internet dating (page 671). In line with the theory of socio-emotional selectivity, Stephure and colleagues proposed that increasing age could well be associated with what they termed ‘intensified desires’ to find a romantic partner, not only because of the perception of limited time left, but also *because of* older adults’ need for emotionally-satisfying relationships (page 660). The researchers argued that the Internet provides a quick and viable means for older adults to achieve their goals via the online selection process, which allows quick access to potential partners based on certain criteria (page 661). Unfortunately the authors failed to differentiate what they meant by ‘older adults’, but it seems likely that as 83% of their sample were 44 years of age and younger (page 679), the results are pertinent to only a very small subset of participants. Nevertheless, the study provides some interesting data for further research.

## **Conclusion**

There are many older adults potentially looking for and engaging in new romantic relationships and the number of older adults who are doing so is likely to increase given the anticipated growth in the older population (United Nations Population Division 2003: 15). Furthermore, some studies have shown that increasing numbers of older adults are turning to the Internet to find new partnerships (Brym & Lenton 2001; Fairfax Digital 2012). It seems timely therefore to investigate such partnerships and how we, as sociologists,

position them. Since remarriage and cohabitation rates are low amongst older adults, it might appear that they are opting out of new relationship formations altogether, preferring instead to retain the status quo of their pre-existing family structures. However, as has been previously shown, new family forms such as LAT arrangements are becoming increasingly popular amongst older adults across a number of countries. And whilst marriages in the past have been marked by their gendered inequality (Chambers 2001), LATs are favoured today precisely because they allow for greater autonomy on the part of those involved (Davidson & Fennell 2002).

While neither of the portrayals of postmodern romantic relationships by Giddens (1992) or Bauman (2003) deal specifically with older adults, they do provide a lens through which to view such new partnerships. Likewise, Smart and Neale (1999) and Gilding (2010) offer a basis for considering why older adults may favour LAT relationships. Whereas postmodern relationships may well reflect the individualisation thesis by being reflexive, democratic and autonomous, research from arenas as diverse as paternity, inheritance and business, indicate the continuing primacy of the family over and above individualised desires. Whether this is the case for the older adult relationships in the current study is yet to be determined.

There are many gaps in the research literature surrounding late life romance and sexuality. The current study aims to contribute to filling the gaps by investigating the initiation and progression of new late-life relationships amongst Australian older adults. Accordingly, the research questions asked in this thesis are: What are late-life romantic relationships like today; and what are the differences, if any, between those that are initiated via the Internet and those that happen face to face? Further, what does love and intimacy mean to these older adults? And how central is sexuality within the new romantic partnerships of older adults?

The next chapter outlines in detail the methods used in the current research project. It includes a description of the sampling method, the different interviewing techniques used and the way the data analysis was conducted.

## Chapter Five: Doing the research

This chapter outlines the research methods used in this study. My motivations for doing this project are presented at the beginning followed by the rationale for choosing 60 years plus as the age criteria for inclusion in this project. The chapter then details how the project was conducted in two stages, focused on two different target groups and used four different interviewing techniques, both offline and online. A reflection on the limitations of the sample is given and procedural and ethical considerations are also discussed.

### **Why study late-life romantic relationships?**

When asked 'why do the research? or 'why are older adult relationships important to you?' my response usually begins with some personal anecdotes. I knew someone who had been married four times, had two live-in lovers, various boyfriends and at 70 years of age was in the midst of an affair with a man who was 20 years her junior. This older woman challenged society's conception of what it meant to be elderly, in love, and sexually active. Inadvertently she also laid the foundation for my interest in this area.

Additionally, in my capacity as the Managing Editor of an online journal, an article came across my desk outlining the findings of an annual Australian telephone survey on new technologies and society. This particular survey, conducted in 2005, included a set of questions about Internet use, internet friendships and online romantic relationships. Although the number of older adults involved in the study was very small, the results indicated that they were finding romance online (Hardie & Buzwell 2006: 10). This article piqued my interest and I then attempted to find further studies highlighting older adult online relationships.

Whilst a plethora of anecdotal evidence at the time (predominantly newspaper accounts) suggested that older adults were indeed involved in looking for online romantic

relationships, academic evidence was in relatively short supply. As detailed earlier, most of the literature was centred on younger sample populations (see for instance Parks & Floyd 1996; Donn & Sherman 2002; Whitty & Gavin 2001; Underwood & Findlay 2004). Given the recognised greying of the population throughout the Western world and the anticipated detrimental impacts on public policies (see Chapter Two), the importance of this issue to the quality of life of older members of the community became apparent. Contributing to the debate – or lack of debate – in this area therefore presented itself as a good basis for a research project.

I had previously been involved in a community development project focused on older adults and social isolation and connection (see Malta 2005). I knew from these associations that many older people were able to use computers and were adept at using the Internet. I was also privileged to know that several of these seniors – and their friends – were still sexually active and/or looking for romantic partners. Furthermore, my own parents, in their 70s, still maintained a loving, physical, relationship – something I considered quite the norm. What this effectively meant is that I started out this research project with some preconceived notions about older adults. I thus began this project with the expectation that the people I would come to investigate might well be *au fait* with computers/the Internet and I already knew some of them to be fully functioning, sexually active beings.

As a result of these past associations, I was not looking to *prove* that older adults engaged in late-life romantic relationships or, indeed that they used the Internet to find these relationships, but more to describe how late-life relationships happened and how they developed, both online and offline. I was interested in the role the Internet played as a facilitator in this process, why some older adults used it and others did not, what impact meeting online had on their relationships, if any, and whether there were any differences between relationships initiated online and those that began through face to face means. As a result, my research was more an exploration of late-life relationships, both on- and off-line.



In keeping with these sentiments and before proceeding with discussion regarding the methodology employed in carrying out this study, it is important to provide an insight into my own position within this research project.

### **A word about self**

The lack of qualitative data regarding late-life relationship development, either in Australia or overseas, provided an opportunity for breaking new research ground. Thus this research project was based, initially, on my recognition of it as a 'scholarly opportunity' (Dempsey 2005: 88) and, secondly, on my personal involvement with older adults in love. Thirdly, as a 'mature-aged' person in her mid-50s, I was aware that in the next decade of my life or so, I might well be stereotyped as technologically incompetent and, worse, sexless – matters which made me uncomfortable and which I felt needed addressing. These factors coalesced to provide the impetus for this study.

Locating oneself within a research project is always interesting, complex and problematic, because of the basic need for researchers to maintain a, seemingly, objective stance. Personal biases need to be explored, questioned and explained and predicting outcomes needs to be approached with caution – and avoided where possible (see Ezzy 2002). As a researcher I am neither inert nor rigid – and I cannot claim to be totally unbiased. However, I try always to be aware of my own bias and not to jump to foregone conclusions. I interact with and thereby influence – and, in turn, am influenced by – my environment and my research participants. As I already held a particular, sympathetic, view of older adults, this provided me with the basis to establish an informal and warm interview relationship with many of my participants. This sympathetic outlook may, arguably, have had an influence on the data collection – both procedurally and analytically – but whether this influence was significant or not, is difficult to tell. I concur with Bauman's argument, however, that social research can be neither completely impartial nor completely disengaged:

There is no choice between an 'engaged' and 'neutral' way of doing sociology. 'A non-committal sociology is an impossibility (Bauman 2000: 89).

### **Why select 60-year plus participants?**

It would certainly have been simpler, easier – and probably quicker – to generate a sample of people including those who were in their 50s. After all, many researchers have justified the use of participants aged 50-plus as a legitimate reflection of the older adult population. I was not comfortable with this justification for the following reasons. Firstly because as highlighted earlier, in Australia at least, the average age of retirement has stayed reasonably constant at approximately 60 years for men and 58 years for women (ABS 2005b: [4]). Secondly, as detailed In Chapter Two, structural ageing of the population coupled with an increase in life expectancy, means that people now spend almost a third of their lives post-retirement. Thirdly, the life-stage of individuals in their 60s and retired or contemplating retirement is far different from those in their 50s and still working. Those who have retired have more free time to pursue leisure activities such as travel and so on, as well as time for self-reflection and a redefinition of self which is not always possible at earlier life stages (Schau, Gilly & Wolfinbarger 2009). Lastly, with the increasing trend to delayed parenthood (Duckworth & Akbar 2002), many in their 50s are still involved in child rearing, earning a living, paying a mortgage, putting children through school and so on, whereas 60 and beyond is traditionally seen as the age where the colloquial term 'empty nesters' is applied freely. Indeed, one recent study classified 70% of those aged 60 and over who have had children as 'empty nesters' (JWT Boom and C&R Research Services 2007: 26). 'Empty nesters' implies many things: more time, more money, and the freedom to pursue and maintain romantic relationships if desired.

For these reasons it seemed more appropriate to emulate retirement norms in Australia with the age of the individuals being studied. Consequently, my sample was designed to reflect older adults at the life-stage (and age) of retirement and consisted of individuals aged 60 years and over.

## Qualitative enquiry

The current study concerned itself with the following research questions:

1. What are late-life romantic relationships like today; and
2. What are the differences, if any, between those that are initiated via the Internet and those that happen face to face?
3. What does love and intimacy mean to these older adults; and
4. How central is sexuality within their new romantic partnerships?

Research methods using a qualitative approach are both 'flexible and fluid' (Liamputtong 2007: 7). As such, they provide a highly appropriate technique for 'understanding the meanings, interpretations and subjective experiences' of, in this case, older adults engaged in late-life romance (Liamputtong 2007: 7). A qualitative approach was thus employed to answer these research questions in the form of semi-structured interviews. Neuman argues that such an approach produces data that is both rich and descriptive (1997: 328-335; 420). In this way the experiences of particular social groups, such as older adults, can be documented and extrapolated in such a manner as to provide insight and understanding (Neuman 1997: 328). Kvale points out that qualitative research interviews allow people to convey their perspectives on their own particular situations – in other words, *their* subjective interpretation of what is going on around them and how *they* interpret what is happening (Kvale 1996: 1; 5-7; 31-32). He also asserts that collecting data from a number of different interview subjects provides a 'multitude' of interpretations on particular themes, thus depicting the views of 'a manifold and controversial human world' – an outcome which should be regarded not as a shortcoming of the method, as argued by quantitative researchers, but as a strength (Kvale 2003: 7).

As online romantic relationships – especially amongst older adults – are a fairly new phenomenon, it was important to address how the Internet shaped the initiation and development of these relationships. To do this it was imperative that older adult relationships that began through face to face means were investigated as well. Without

the inclusion of this component it would be impossible to tell whether relationships that began online were any different from those that began in a more traditional manner. Plus the scarcity of research in the area of late-life romance – either online or offline – meant that an investigation would provide much-needed background material and a starting point for future research endeavours. Hence it was decided to conduct interviews with two different groups of older adults who were currently in or who had recently been involved in a romantic relationship: those that: (i) began online or (ii) had begun through face to face interactions.

Semi-structured interview schedules were designed to address the knowledge gap by asking *how* older adults met their new partners and how their late-life relationships developed: did they happen deliberately or consequentially? Were they slow to develop or did they happen quickly? How did these older adults describe their new late-life relationships? Were their relationships based on intimate communication, shared ideals and equality, reflecting 'pure relationships' (Giddens 1992) as suggested by Connidis (2006)? Did these older adults experience their relationships as having low entry and exit costs ('liquid love') as per Bauman (2003)? What types of relationships were the older adults in this study engaged in? Were these relationships casual and transitory or long-lasting leading to something more committed (marriage, cohabitation or LAT)? Would these older adults describe their experiences as vivid falling in love or something else? If relationships were sexual, how long did it take before they became so? Was there a difference between intimacy and sex? And just how important was love and sexuality to these late-life romances? Differences and similarities between the two relationship groups were also examined. Finally, the research looked at whether the mode of relationship formation (online or offline) had any effect on the relationships themselves. Questions were also asked which provided an overview of older adults' Internet use (how many years, how many hours per day, what it was used for, involvement in online groups, use of online dating sites) and so on.

This research study might be viewed as 'sensitive' (Liamputtong 2007; Pointon 1997), in that it might elicit admission of behaviours or outlooks which would, under normal circumstances, 'be kept private and personal' and 'which might cause the respondent discomfort to express' (Wellings, Branigan & Mitchell 2000: 256). Liamputtong (2007) suggests that research which highlights sexual conduct would, indeed, be regarded as 'socially sensitive research' (page 5) as would research which includes 'older people', whom she regards as a 'vulnerable' or 'difficult-to-access' or 'hidden' population (page 4). Liamputtong recommends that, under such circumstances, it is vitally important that the research methods employed take account of the sensitive nature of the topic and the vulnerability of the sample (page 7).

In terms of conducting research online, previous studies have shown that the online environment can be of particular benefit when sampling (and interviewing) hidden, vulnerable or marginalised populations, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) persons (Matthews & Cramer 2008) and those with disabilities (Bowker & Tuffin 2002, 2004). Engaging online allows disabled people, for instance, to overcome their everyday communication and mobility impairments, enabling them to interact 'outside the realm of [their] disability' (2002: 330) which also allows them to be judged on the basis of their 'merits' rather than their disabilities (2002: 330) – and thus to construct themselves as 'normal' online (2002: 337). Furthermore, using the Internet to connect with (and to collect data from) socially marginalised respondents, allows respondents to remain at home in a safe, anonymous and non-threatening environment. Bowker and Tuffin have argued this not only furthers their ability to interact, but may well contribute to enhanced respondent disclosure and, as a consequence, the 'richness of the data gathered' (2004: 230).

It is clear that online interviewing techniques are steadily increasing in acceptance as valid methods of conducting qualitative research (see for instance, Fielding, Lee & Blank 2008; Hine 2005; Liamputtong 2007), and there is no evidence to suggest that older adults cannot engage in online interviews in much the same manner as other age groups who use

the Internet. However, with very limited exceptions (see for example Xie 2005), researchers in ageing have generally not considered online interviewing techniques – such as instant messaging or email – as suitable or even effective means for interviewing older adults. This is surprising given the mounting evidence which shows that not only are older adults technologically competent (Fox 2004), but they also represent the fastest growing segment of Internet users (ABS 2005; Ewing et al. 2008; Center for the Digital Future 2009).

Clearly not all older people are vulnerable or would see themselves as such and, indeed, those who have an online presence are far less likely to be so. Nonetheless, using the Internet to interview older adults is a realistic option, especially given their increasing online access and use of the technology. Additionally, discussing sensitive topics such as sex and sexuality via the Internet seems highly appropriate for this population group for all of the above reasons and, in particular, for maintaining anonymity (Liamputtong 2007). As already noted, there is very little qualitative research concerning older adults and online dating (see for an exception Baker 2005) or offline dating for that matter (Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991; Bulcroft & O'Connor 1986a,b; Dickson et al. 2005). And with the exclusion of the study by Xie (2005) there is no research regarding how to conduct online interviews with older adults.

My goal for this project was simply to describe and analyse what was happening. My approach to my data was therefore interpretive. I aimed to distinguish what people meant from what they said, to understand what was going on and to be able to interpret each individual's social realities (Esterberg 2002: 26). As one researcher argues in his work on trust: 'the starting point is the subjective reality' (Möllering 2001: 416) – but whose reality are we talking about: mine or my research subjects? Clearly, the shortcomings of the interpretive approach are that I could only subjectively interpret what I was being subjectively told. I saw it as imperative that, as Schutz says, I worked to safeguard the participants' personal viewpoint, so that the 'world of social reality will not be replaced by a fictional non-existing world constructed by the scientific observer' (1970: 271).

Nevertheless, as Esterberg maintains, what is *real* or the *truth* in research is often a matter of negotiation: the meaning of what is being researched is, in effect, 'negotiated between and among researchers and research subjects' (2002: 16).

## **The research project: two stages**

This research project was conducted in two stages: a pilot project followed by qualitative interviews (in the online environment and face to face). The following is a reflection of my research experience. Each section takes a step-by-step approach to describe how the participants were recruited, the interviews conducted, and the data analysed.

### **First stage: online pilot project**

As this was a new area of research for me, I decided to begin conservatively. In keeping with observations made by Neuman (2003) and Kvale (1996), conducting pilot studies enables the testing and refinement of questions and techniques. Accordingly, in February/March 2007 I conducted an initial pilot study with participants found via SeniorNet®, a website for older adults, located in and frequented predominantly by Americans, although membership to this organisation is open to people all over the world. I chose this site because of its reputation as a senior-specific site and also because of the administrators' willingness to accommodate research projects, as evidenced by the number of research requests posted on SeniorNet®.

In the beginning it was difficult to recruit participants for the pilot study. This was likely due to the wording of the online notice calling for participants. The original notice asked for older adults who were interested in talking about their 'intimate' relationships (see Appendix 1). Not one response was received. The notice was subsequently reviewed, and the word 'intimate' was replaced with 'romantic'. A number of participants then came forward. The minor semantic difference in the original study notice suggested that the use of the word 'intimate' had been taken to be synonymous with the word 'sex' which, in turn,

appeared to create a hesitancy to participate amongst this online community of elderly citizens.

A dilemma thus presented itself. Would this word sensitivity in respondents ('intimate' versus 'romantic') affect the scope and quality of the data collected? For instance, would this hesitancy be reflected in the details that older adults would be willing to disclose about their relationships? Were older adults reluctant to talk about matters concerning sexuality, as some researchers have suggested (Gledhill, Abbey & Schweitzer 2008) and would this reluctance thus render the project unfeasible? These fears proved to be unfounded. Once older adults agreed to participate they were more than happy to talk about all aspects of their romantic relationships – sexual or otherwise.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted via synchronous computer-mediated-communication (private chat/instant messaging<sup>5</sup>). The pilot group consisted of five older American adults (aged 61 – 85 years). The pilot interviews revealed that the participants were long-term Internet users and also spent a large part of each day engaged in online activities. In particular, they had all used the Internet to meet potential romantic partners. For four of the five this occurred as a consequence of their involvement in online social and discussion groups, and only one deliberately accessed online dating websites to do so. For the most part, the relationships described were meaningful, intimate and long-lasting. Far from being asexual, the majority were involved in ongoing sexual activity with their partners.

The aim of this pilot project was to gain experience in conducting online interviews but it also provided the means to refine my interview questions. The interview schedule initially contained a series of questions about non-romantic friendship which the pilot interviews revealed to be unnecessary. These questions not only made the interview too lengthy but also confused participants as to the focus of the research. The questions were therefore

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<sup>5</sup> To avoid confusion, instant messaging will hereafter be referred to as 'IM'



omitted from the final schedule. Hence, refinements were made to both the online notice and the interview schedule, which then allowed the following stage to proceed smoothly. The second stage of the project and the subsequent data analysis did not include the results from the pilot study – except where they are referred to briefly at times throughout the thesis.

## **Second stage: late-life romance – online and offline**

### ***Recruitment, sampling and limitations***

For the second stage of the project, I chose to focus the research within Australia, simply as there were very few studies within such a context. The sample was gathered through a number of methods. Participants were initially recruited via an online ‘Call for Participants’ (CFP) notice, at RSVP.com®, Australia’s largest dating website (see Appendix 2) and a senior-specific dating website [foreveryoungclub.com.au](http://foreveryoungclub.com.au)® - although Match.com® or other similar sites such as [50YearsPlus.com](http://50YearsPlus.com)®, [Primesingles.net](http://Primesingles.net)® would have been just as suitable. The notice appeared for one week in early March 2007. During the remainder of 2007 the research was also publicised in local and interstate news media and on radio, which yielded further participants. In some cases, participants were referred to the researcher by friends, or by friends of other participants; in effect, creating a snowball sample. In January 2008, RSVP.com® sent out an online notice to all its registered users aged 60 years or more informing them of the research project; again, leading to the recruitment of more research participants.

Of all the recruitment techniques I used, online websites were the most successful source of older adult participants. There were many more seniors-focused websites that, in hindsight, I could have used, rather than relying on participants from only one or two sites. One online study, for instance, which interviewed health information seekers of all ages, placed advertisements on 20 different websites related to the study topic (healthy eating,

fitness and general health; Kivits 2005). However, as I ended up with more than enough respondents, casting the net too wide might have made my study unwieldy.

Interested respondents contacted me via my University email account or my mobile phone. I received more requests (76 in total) than anticipated (I expected about 40 - 50). However, many participants dropped out of their own accord (they either stopped communicating (19) or decided to withdraw (4) from the study) or had to be excluded because they did not meet the study criteria (8) (they were less than 60 years old or they were not currently or recently involved in a new late-life relationship, in other words, they were still looking).

The final sample was comprised of 45 people, 40 of whom were computer literate. These factors alone served to provide additional justification for the study in that they confirmed: (1) that many older adults had access to and used the Internet on a regular basis and (2) that many older adults were involved in or interested in late-life romance – and used the Internet to access dating websites. The sample was subsequently divided into two groups according to the method of relationship initiation: (i) the Face to Face Romance group (n = 13) and (ii) the Online Romance group (n = 32). This procedure allowed for important contrasts and comparisons to be made between the groups.

One of the limitations of this kind of research is the sampling method. Both the online and offline samples were ones of convenience and self-selected and therefore only reflect the views of the participants involved. Advertising for participants online at dating websites is likely to have skewed the sample in favour of participants who were actively still looking for relationships, as opposed to those who had found partners and may not have been visiting the websites anymore. This was not always the case, however, as many online participants who were involved in ongoing relationships (both long-term or otherwise), still maintained regular contact with dating websites and so still received notices from the agencies they were signed up with.

Furthermore, the individuals who participated in the study were those who were currently in or had recently been involved in a late-life romance and *wanted* to talk about their experiences. This means, essentially, that the views of older adults engaged in long-term relationships or not involved in, or uninterested in the subject of late-life romance are unrepresented. The results, therefore, cannot be considered generalisable to the general population of older adults. Nonetheless, Neuman has argued that non-random sampling is an acceptable method for exploratory research, as it allows researchers to 'identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation' (2003: 213), based on their 'relevance to the research topic rather than their representativeness' per se (Neuman 2003: 211).

Further limitations apply to the Online Romance Group in particular, in that each participant was, of necessity, using a computer and the Internet, which translated to a high level of usage amongst this group. This limitation may appear to inflate technology usage patterns amongst older adults and the results should, therefore, be treated cautiously. There were, however, a range of experiences in terms of exposure to these technologies: some participants had never used a computer or the Internet before and only became familiar with them as a means to pursue relationships online, whilst others had been using computers and the Internet for many years in both their working and personal lives.

Other limitations concern the deliberate nature of relationship initiation and the high number of divorced participants. Thirty-two of the older adults in this study had deliberately sought new relationships, and the vast majority of them (30/32) used online dating websites. This means that online relationships are more heavily represented than those that began face to face. This is taken into consideration at all times and great care is taken to ensure that the voices of both relationship groups are heard. Furthermore, there were a higher number of divorced or separated participants (30/45) compared to those who were widowed (14/45). Consequently these participants are quite likely different from the broader population of Australian older adults, the majority of whom are married, but not necessarily different from the single/available older adult population. While the

representativeness of the sample is questionable, this type of research is useful, as it can provide insight into older adults' experiences of their new late-life romantic relationships.

### ***Characteristics***

The sample thus consisted of 45 heterosexual, community-dwelling older adults aged 60 years plus (range 60 – 92 years), consisting of 24 women and 21 men, who were currently engaged in or had recently been involved in a late-life romantic relationship that (a) began face to face or (b) began online. Due to gender differences in population ageing (ABS 2008), there are usually far more female participants in studies utilising older adult populations. In the current project this was not so, as there was only a slight difference in gender breakdown. This may be a reflection of the larger number of men versus women online generally, although this gap is steadily narrowing (see for example Zamaria & Fletcher 2008), or it may just be an artefact of the study itself. Further Internet-based studies are needed to assess this propensity. All participants were either born in Australia or residing here. A breakdown of pertinent demographic details and Internet usage statistics has been included in Table 5.1.

### ***Comparisons between the two groups***

The age range for the Online Romance group was younger than the Face to Face Romance group (60 – 76 years versus 63 – 92 years). Although members of both groups used the Internet, there was a difference between the groups in terms of the number of years online (1 – 20 years for the Online group compared to 8 – 17 years for the face to face group), although the *average* number of years online for both groups was surprisingly similar (10.6 (Offline group) versus 10.5 (Online group)). Only eight of the 13 Face to Face Romance group, however, had computers at home, compared to all 32 of the Online Romance group. This may be due to the difference in ages between the two groups and/or a reflection of the fact that many of the older group may have retired before the Internet (and email) became embedded in daily working lives. It may also simply be an artefact of

the sample, given that all members of the Online Romance group were, of necessity, connected to the Internet so that they could access online dating websites. This may also explain the difference between the two groups in the number of hours per day spent online, with the Online Romance group spending an average of 3.6 hours/day and the Face to Face Romance group who had access to the Internet an average of 1.6 hours/day (n = 8).

**Table 5.1** Sample characteristics and Internet usage statistics for the Online Romance versus the Face to Face Romance group

| Description            | Total sample (n = 45)         |                                     |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
|                        | Online Romance group (n = 32) | Face to Face Romance group (n = 13) |
| Gender (Women : Men)   | 16 : 16                       | 8 : 5                               |
| Age Range (Years)      | 60 – 76                       | 63 – 92                             |
| • Mean (Median)        | 65.5 (65)                     | 71.5 (69)                           |
| Years Online Range     | 1 – 20                        | 8 – 17*                             |
| • Mean (Median)        | 10.5 (10)                     | 10.6 (10)*                          |
| Hours Online/Day Range | 0.2 – 10                      | 0.43 – 4*                           |
| • Mean (Median)        | 3.6 (3)                       | 1.6 (1.25)*                         |

\*(n = 8)

In terms of new late-life relationships, 23 people were currently involved and 22 had previously been involved although their relationships were no longer ongoing. All relationships were initiated in later life (after age 55) and within the last 10 years. Table 5.2 provides a summary of prior relationship status.

In this thesis, to clearly distinguish participants who had been involved in multiple marriages/cohabitating relationships (widowed, remarried, then subsequent divorce for instance), the definition of 'widowed' was taken as meaning that there was only one marriage/cohabitation (ending in the death of the partner) prior to involvement in new late-life relationships.

**Table 5.2** Previous relationship status by relationship initiation group  
(Online Romance versus the Face to Face Romance group)

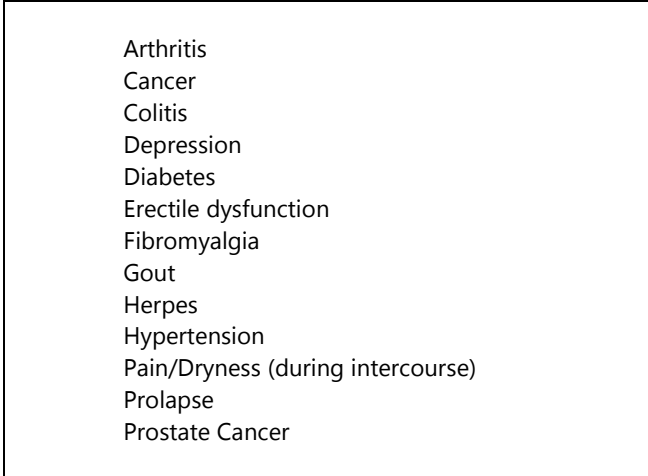
| <b>Previous relationship status</b> | <b>Online Romance group<br/>n (%)</b> | <b>Face to Face Romance group<br/>n (%)</b> | <b>Totals<br/>N (%)</b> |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| Divorced/Separated*                 | 22 (69%)                              | 8 (62%)                                     | 30 (67%)                |
| Widowed                             | 10 (31%)                              | 4 (31%)                                     | 14 (31%)                |
| Never Married                       |                                       | 1 ( 8%)                                     | 1 ( 2%)                 |
| <b>Totals</b>                       | <b>32 (100%)</b>                      | <b>13 (100%)</b>                            | <b>45 (100%)</b>        |

Note: Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding

\*three divorced twice; one divorced, remarried and then separated; two divorced, remarried and then widowed; one divorced, widowed, cohabited and then re-widowed

The vast majority of participants (32/45) were involved in at least one, but up to as many as six social/activity clubs, indicating a high level of sociability amongst these older adults. However, there was a difference between the two groups. Whereas the majority of the Face to Face Romance group (13/15) belonged to social groups, only 19 of the 32 participants in the Online Romance group took part in any real-life social or activity clubs. One explanation for this lower level of real-life community involvement could be directly related to the amount of time these older adults spend on the Internet. As this was quite extensive compared to the Face to Face Romance group, conceivably there would not be as much time left for face to face socialising/interacting. However, given that some of the highest Internet users were also the most actively involved in offline social or activity clubs, no direct link between computer use and a lack of social involvement could be made. The more likely explanation could be that, because over half of the Online Romance group were currently unattached they were spending a large amount of time each day on dating websites looking for new partners.

Given that sexuality and health are legitimate concerns for older adults (see Chapter Three), all participants were asked whether they had any health issues which affected their love lives in any way. The range of health issues experienced by the older adults in this study is listed in Box 5.1 (see over).



Arthritis  
Cancer  
Colitis  
Depression  
Diabetes  
Erectile dysfunction  
Fibromyalgia  
Gout  
Herpes  
Hypertension  
Pain/Dryness (during intercourse)  
Prolapse  
Prostate Cancer

**Box 5.1** Reported health issues

Overall, fewer people said they had health problems (21) than not (24). More people in the Face to Face Romance group (7/13) said they had ongoing health related issues than in the Online Romance group (14/32), which may simply be a reflection of the differences in ages between the groups (the Face to Face Romance group were older). Overall, however, health issues varied considerably and some participants reported more than one; in these cases, the conditions were often inter-related, such as erectile dysfunction and depression.

## **The research project: four types of interview methods**

### **Offering a range of interview choices**

Allowing participants to decide the interview medium they prefer has been purported to increase both retention rates and rapport between the researcher and researched (Kazmer & Xie 2008: 273). There was no reason to believe that older adults would behave any differently and accordingly they were given a choice of four different methods: (i) face to face; (ii) telephone; and online by means of (iii) synchronous computer-mediated-communication (variously known as instant messaging, IM or private 'chat'); and (iv) by asynchronous electronic mail (email) correspondence (see Malta 2012). As a result, the interview mode which each one chose did not always reflect which relationship group they

belonged to. Table 5.3 shows a breakdown of the interview modes and how they corresponded to the two different relationship initiation groups.

**Table 5.3** Interview modes by relationship initiation group  
(Online Romance versus the Face to Face Romance group)

| <b>Interview method</b> | <b>Online Romance group</b> | <b>Face to Face Romance group</b> | <b>Totals N (%)</b> |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Face to Face            | 1                           | 9                                 | 10 (22%)            |
| Telephone               | 5                           |                                   | 5 (11%)             |
| Online : IM             | 23                          | 3                                 | 26 (58%)            |
| Online : Email          | 3                           | 1                                 | 4 ( 9%)             |
| <b>Totals</b>           | <b>32</b>                   | <b>13</b>                         | <b>45 (100%)</b>    |

Overall, 30 older adults (from a total of 45) chose to be interviewed online, either by IM or email, again, indicating a high level of familiarity and trust in computers and technology. I used very similar semi-structured interview templates for each of the interview modes (see Appendix 3: Offline and Appendix 4: Online), except for the email interviews, which included detailed prompts (Appendix 5: Email). All interviews lasted between one and two hours, with the exception of the four email interviews. Surprisingly there was very little time difference in the length of the face to face, telephone and IM interviews, although some researchers have noted that online interviews can take longer than face to face ones due to the time it takes to type in questions (see for instance, Kazmer & Xie 2008: 265). The telephone and face to face interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. Interviewing by IM furnishes instantaneous transcripts. These transcripts were copied at the conclusion of the interviews and pasted into Word documents. All interviews, both online and offline, were subjected to thematic analysis by means of analytic grids. A more detailed discussion of this process is found further on in this chapter.



## **Face to Face interviews**

Ten face to face interviews were conducted. Nine of the respondents were from the Face to Face Romance group and one was from the Online Romance group. Five of the interviews were conducted in a private meeting room on campus at Swinburne University and five were conducted in participants' homes. All participants were given "Information and Informed Consent" forms (see Appendix 6) to read and sign before the interviews commenced. The interview approach taken was characteristic of the recursive interviewing model described by Minichiello et al. (1995: 80-81; 88-92), which allows for interviews to follow a conversational format. This method was chosen because of its informal nature, which was seen to be the best way to help put older adults 'at ease'. Despite some initial nervousness, all respondents quickly became comfortable and said they welcomed the opportunity to speak about late-life romance.

It is not usual when interviewing to discuss details such as age and gender at the commencement of the interview. Indeed, in survey work in particular, de Vaus (1995) has commented that beginning with such questions tends to put people off, or in some cases, offend them. In the face to face interviews however these questions were effectively used as ice-breakers and to build rapport – an issue which has been previously emphasised for researchers engaged in qualitative research (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). Interviewees were asked: "My study is of older adults, therefore I need to keep track of participants' ages. Can you please tell me how old you are?" This would often be followed by a general conversation about age, and about how fit or well people looked and felt. The next question often elicited instances of humour: "Can you please state for my records whether you are male or female?" As an example, one respondent (Evie 92 years) leant forward, touched her breasts and said, "I think I'm a male!" and then laughed uproariously. In all cases the interviews were then able to proceed in a relaxed, comfortable and non-threatening manner.

## Telephone interviews

In qualitative research, telephone interviews have historically been seen as an inappropriate technique for semi-structured and in-depth interviews (for discussion see Sturges & Hanrahan 2004: 108). The literature comparing face to face and telephone interviewing showed differing results in the quality of data obtained from these two modes, suggesting that telephone interviews were less than ideal (Sturges & Hanrahan 2004: 110). Other studies, however, have concluded that there are no significant differences in responses between the two different techniques, with Miller concluding that telephone interviews could not be classed as either 'better or worse' than face to face interviews (1995: 37). Furthermore, some researchers argue that telephone interviews have important advantages over face to face interviews, in particular, allowing access to participants who may be geographically distant, being able to cover sensitive topics with more perceived anonymity, cost savings in terms of time and travel and interviewer safety (Stephens 2007: 209; Sturges & Hanrahan 2004: 109).

Accordingly, telephone interviews were offered to all participants. A total of five interviews were conducted in this manner. The respondents who chose this method were, surprisingly, all from the Online Romance group and they all contacted me initially via email. Subsequently I sent "Disclosure and Informed Consent" forms via the same process. If they then proceeded to schedule a time for an interview, consent was deemed to have thus been given. All interviews were recorded via a telephone recording device that saved the interviews as voice files on the digital recorder.

I found it was relatively easy to talk about love, sex and intimacy to these participants on the telephone. The absence of facial and bodily cues did not seem to create any difficulties or hesitations for myself or the participants and, as discussed earlier, the quality of the data did not appear to be compromised compared to the other interview methods.

## Online interviews – instant messaging

Twenty-three of the Online Romance group and three of the Face to Face Romance group elected to be interviewed by instant messaging (IM) (26 interviews in total). I used the computer operating system Windows XP and conducted the IM interviews using standard, open-source (free), proprietary software, such as Windows Live Messenger<sup>®</sup>, Yahoo<sup>®</sup> or Hotmail<sup>®</sup> Instant Messaging programs. Of the older adults who chose this method to be interviewed, a relatively small number (four) were unfamiliar with the technology and asked for some guidance in setting it up. I sent them an email with a simple, one-page list of instructions (accessed from the Internet, see Appendix 7), and which showed how to download the necessary software<sup>6</sup>. In most cases this proved unproblematic. These participants were pleased to have learnt a new skill and three of the four commented that they would now be able to chat online with their grandchildren. This outcome provides an excellent example of reciprocity arising from the research relationship (Harrison, MacGibbon & Morton 2001). All 26 participants were also sent "Disclosure and Consent" forms. As with the telephone interviews, scheduling a time for interview was taken to mean consent.

When conducting the IM interviews, I needed to take account of different time zones – as there can be as much as a three hour time difference between regions of Australia (Melbourne to Perth, for example). This meant that for some locations there was potentially a small window of opportunity to schedule and conduct interviews. However, I found it relatively easy to negotiate an interview time which was acceptable to myself and my participants, as did Hinchcliffe and Gavin (2009), although Markham (1998) reported scheduling difficulties (Markham 1998).

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<sup>6</sup> It should be kept in mind that this exploratory study was conducted in 2007 and 2008. Since that time technology has changed considerably. It is now possible to IM easily within most standard, publicly available email programs, such as Yahoo<sup>®</sup> or Gmail<sup>®</sup>, without having to bother with downloading additional software or without setting up a new account or username.

Two striking reasons for using IM for interviews are geographical flexibility and the production of instant transcripts. In the first instance, researchers and respondents can be located anywhere in the world, subject only to time differences between countries and regions (Bowker & Tuffin 2004; Opdenakker 2006). This was certainly true for my project as I was able to conduct my pilot study interviews with participants who were located in the USA with much the same ease as those who were located within Australia, and with little expenditure, apart from the usual Internet connection charges. In the second instance, the generation of instant transcriptions means significant time and cost savings for the researcher (Bowker & Tuffin 2004). As 30 of the 45 interviews in my study were conducted by IM or email – and subsequently created their own transcripts – this amounted to a considerable difference in transcription time. The automatically generated transcripts also enabled access to the data at a much earlier stage than with the face to face and telephone interviews. This early contact with the fully realised data is an additional and, until now, largely unacclaimed benefit of using online interviews. It allows the researcher to have immediate and continuing access to and engagement with the data, thereby facilitating immersion and consolidating knowledge at a much earlier stage than with methods relying on transcription.

Other reasons for using IM for interviewing concern issues of participant comfort, familiarity and disclosure. For instance, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 150) argued that interviewing people within their own familiar surroundings is 'the best strategy' because it enables participants to be more comfortable and relaxed than they would be in unfamiliar locations. Although these researchers were talking more specifically about face to face interviewing, I found these comments held true for conducting IM interviews and they also fit with the online work of Bowker and Tuffin (2002; 2004) reported earlier. Couch and Liamputtong (2008, 2013) have specifically recommended interviewing online daters by IM, because it is in common usage amongst online daters and, therefore, it offers a 'mode of communication [which is both] relevant and appropriate' (2008: 270). In an early example of an online study, Hamman (1997: 6) suggested that the use of online interviews allows participants to be 'more candid' than they would be in face to face interviews when

discussing such issues as sexuality. All these factors were pertinent to my study. In addition to exploring an under-researched method of investigation, I was motivated by curiosity to see whether interviewing by IM was, in fact, a feasible method to employ with older adults.

There is one major problem associated with conducting online interviews, which concerns categorising the demographics of the sample, as it is possible that respondents lie about this information. This is an issue relevant to all methods, but particularly to non-face to face ones. I found that, if alert, I could easily check for discrepancies whilst the interview was in progress, or later via follow-up emails. In countering this issue, Stieger and Goritz (2006) conducted a unique online study which used three different methods to cross-check information (a web-based survey, self-reports and IM interviews) and found that the possibility of receiving bogus data in IM interviews is actually relatively minor. In my project, there was only one such occasion where the responses I received did not seem to reflect what was ostensibly an older adult male perspective. I was surprised by his responses, which were written in a shorthand form akin to mobile phone text messaging. This in itself was not enough to indicate proof of an age disparity, but as he was the only one from whom I received such responses, it put me on the alert. This participant then proceeded to take a very active role in the interview in that he asked more questions than he answered, which increased my suspicion. Consequently, I asked him what year he was born. It took him some time to answer this question, although he claimed to be 65 years old. This confirmed my suspicions and I politely terminated the interview shortly thereafter.

Online interviewing is not without its detractors. Indeed, some researchers question whether, as a method, online interviews should be a part of social research at all. To date, there are two major problems associated with conducting online interviews. Firstly, it is often difficult to categorize the demographics of the sample, as it is possible that respondents lie about this information. However, this is an issue relevant to all non-face to face questionnaires or surveys, whether they are online or by pen and paper. Secondly,

questions (and, for that matter, answers) can be open to misinterpretation and, therefore, misunderstanding, due to the absence of face to face cues. According to Herbert, "body language and visually/verbally expressed nuance of face to face interaction associated with conventional qualitative research is lost online" (2001: 3). However, Suler argues that, in reality, people do not misconstrue one another online all that often, despite the lack of visual and auditory cues (1997: 4). It was found in the current research project that those who regularly communicated online appreciated that this might happen and were always willing to reiterate and reinterpret what was said in an effort to facilitate understanding. This applied to both the researcher and participants.

Voida, Mynatt, Erickson and Kellogg (2004: 1345) have said that the instantaneous nature of this form of communication (IM) facilitates 'rapid, fluid exchanges' which are constrained only by a person's typing and reading speed. I found this to be true, and further, that the IM interviews resembled face to face or phone interviews, in that they were one-on-one between me and the participant, they occurred in real-time, and they mimicked the normal processes of a face to face back-and-forth conversation.

### ***The Online Interview Relationship***

I made initial arrangements regarding scheduling interviews via the telephone or email prior to establishing the IM connection (Kivits 2005). This preliminary contact allowed my participants (and myself) time to air any questions/concerns. I found this early contact required careful treatment, as it functioned in the same manner as 'first impressions' given off in initial face to face contact, and facilitated the beginning of what was, in effect, an 'interpersonal' relationship between my research participants and me (Kivits 2005: 37). I also found that, with the absence of face to face cues, the written word could sometimes cause me to appear as a no-nonsense and abrupt personality, rather than an approachable interviewer. I think it is important that researchers using online methods be aware of this, as striking the right balance between professionalism and approachability under such

circumstances, can sometimes be difficult. This initial contact should not be underestimated, particularly when working with unfamiliar samples.

As in the study by Kivits (2005), the research relationship that was established between myself and the participants in this text-only environment, was generally warm and friendly although, as noted, in a minority of interviews it could be described as mostly professional. As in face to face and telephone interviews, rapport was established by using instances of self-disclosure and the use of humorous asides. Certainly when I disclosed my mature-aged status (I was 51 at the time of the interviews), this helped put participants at ease. However, many of the older adults 'talked' to me as if I was a peer well before this personal disclosure.

Online interviews have been postulated to be less affected by social desirability factors (Couch & Liamputtong 2008; Tatano Beck 2005), as well as an absence of interviewer/interviewee effects, such as the power dynamics inherent in traditional research methods, which may allow the researched to be on a more equal footing with the researcher (Fox, Morris & Rumsey 2007; Meho 2006). This seemed pertinent to my study, as I felt less as though I was conducting an interview, and more as though I was having a conversation, a feeling which developed more strongly as the interviews progressed. I would liken this to a feeling of equality developing between myself and the participants, seemingly brought about by what others have called a 'democratisation of exchange' (Selwyn & Robson 1998 [2]) which appears to occur with online communication (Liamputtong 2007), and which, given my experience with IM interviews, I would certainly endorse.

As Liamputtong (2007) has argued, 'online interaction permits the elicitation of viewpoints on sensitive topics and issues' (page 159). In terms of broaching such sensitive subjects as love, sex and intimacy, I found the IM interviewing mode was relatively stress-free and less awkward for both the participants and myself, compared to the face to face and telephone

interviewing modes. Perhaps this was due to participants feeling less self-conscious in the relative anonymity of the online environment which some researchers have said facilitates lower inhibition and can lead to greater disclosure (Bowker & Tuffin 2004; Mesch & Beker 2010) – although others have found the opposite (Davis et al. 2004). My study would appear to support this contention, as many of my older adult participants were extremely frank in their discussions of love, sex and intimacy. They also commented on the ease with which the interviews were conducted, and said they felt very comfortable being interviewed anonymously in the location of their choice (in most cases this was their own homes, although a small number were located at private business premises).

### **Online interviews – email**

Four interviews were conducted by email: three for the Online Romance group and one for the Face to Face Romance group. In all cases the participants were given the choice to use IM but were unfamiliar with it and were not willing to try it. Moreover, they either did not wish to be interviewed by face to face or by telephone, or were prevented from doing so because they were either ill or lacked the time (due to work constraints) to commit to an interactive interview, and preferred the flexibility that email afforded them, that is, they could answer the questions in their own time. All four participants were sent “Disclosure and Consent” forms, together with a special “Email Interview Schedule” which contained more detailed prompts than for the other interview modes (see Appendix 5). Return of the completed interview schedule was taken as consent to participate.

I found that conducting interviews by email affords many of the same advantages as using IM, not least of which is that it is easy to use, and produces a record of the interview. In contrast to IM, interviewing by email is achieved asynchronously, thus, it is not subjected to the vagaries of scheduling that can sometimes accompany IM and other methods (Meho 2006).



***Embedded or attached?***

There are two methods of using email for interviewing: embedded and attached. The first involves embedding each interview question (or a small number of questions) within each email message. This results in a number of emails being exchanged over a period of time. Due to the time delay between sending emails and receiving replies, some researchers have noted unusually long time frames for their research projects. For instance, McCoyd and Schwaber Kerson (2006) reported that their email interviews typically required 8 to 14 interactions between themselves and their participants. Others have reported email interview periods that ranged from weeks or months (Bowker & Tuffin 2004) to even as long as one year (Kivits 2005). As I was constrained by time factors, I opted to use email attachments to conduct the interviews.

I also chose the attached email method because I preferred to receive a fully realised interview transcript, rather than to negotiate the back and forth of multiple emails. Furthermore, this approach broadly mirrored the other interview methods I used in that the interviews were conducted in a discrete time frame, with participants staying focused on the topic. As Kazmer and Xie (2008) have noted, when sending questions embedded in many different emails, it is necessary to keep track of all the email responses, and then at some stage to compile them all into one document. Under these circumstances, it is always possible for data to be labelled inappropriately or for it to become mislaid. Consequently, after initial contact was established, I sent an email to my participants with both the informed consent and the full interview schedule attached as Word documents. Participants typed their responses directly into the interview schedule at their own leisure and then emailed their responses back to me. I usually received the completed transcripts within a day or two, and the longest response time was only five days.

Questions which are attached to emails have previously been shown to result in lower response rates than those which are embedded within emails (Dommeyer & Moriarty 2000). Meho (2006) suggested this is because attachments present too many obstacles for

study participants. For instance, people lose interest when they have to take extra steps to download and save a document especially, or if they do not possess a 'strong interest' in responding they may drop out (Meho 2006: 1290). I did lose one participant after sending the email with its attachments and it may well have been for this reason, but as the respondent did not reply to follow up emails it is difficult to say with any certainty.

I asked all participants – both offline and online, and regardless of interview mode – if they were willing to be contacted if clarification was needed on any point. All agreed, so where responses in the email interviews were a bit thin, or if a question was missed, I was able to revisit certain points, check any ambiguities and seek elaboration where needed. In doing so, the points identified earlier by Kazmer and Xie (2008), regarding the organisational rigour required in collecting data from various online methods, came into their own.

### **Dynamics of IM versus email interviews**

Answers received during the IM interviews tended to be in-depth and rich in qualifications, whereas primary responses to the email interviews were much shorter and succinct. This initial difference appeared to be due more to the interactive nature of IM communication, which mirrored a real-life telephone or face to face conversation, albeit in text, whereas with the asynchronous nature of attached email interviews the conversational ebb and flow was lost. Meho (2006) has argued that this is not necessarily a negative outcome. He contends that email interviews actually afford participants the time to be more reflective of their replies, as well as providing them with the opportunity for editing of responses, making for more focused answers. As a result, although email interviews may be shorter than their IM counterparts, and may appear to contain less data, the data obtained can be just as rich and valuable as IM interviews. My study certainly reinforced this finding, as the level of disclosure in the email interviews was similar to that found in the IM mode. Additionally, in response to a question which stated "Is there anything I haven't asked you that I should have?" three of the four participants who chose the email method included

extra comments at the end of their interview schedules, whereas this occurred with only one of the IM interviews.

It was clear from my study that interviewing by email using attached questions could, potentially, be less rewarding an exercise for the researcher, as I felt it was sometimes difficult to establish the same connection/relationship as was evidenced in the face to face, phone and IM interviews. This point has been reinforced by the work of other researchers, who previously used the embedded email method and reported well-established interview relationships (Bowker & Tuffin 2004, 2002; Kivits 2005; McCoyd & Schwaber Kerson 2006). However, as my older adults who chose this method appeared to find the experience rewarding, this is really a moot point.

## **Data Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed into documents using Microsoft Word. All interview data, both online and offline, was de-identified and then a hard copy printed out. The data was then subjected to thematic analysis as described recently by Braun and Clarke, who characterised it as discovering 'patterns of meaning and issues of potential interest in the data' (2006: 86). To elaborate further, each transcript was read and re-read and relevant examples and quotes highlighted. These highlighted passages were then copied and pasted into Word documents set up as analytic grids, as described by Hurworth (2008) and based on previous research by Miles and Huberman (1994: 127-132).

Data analysis involved identifying themes based on the research questions, such as whether relationships began deliberately or consequentially, the criteria for beginning a relationship, the meaning of intimacy, the importance of sex, and so on. Further themes were identified as the process of analysing and re-analysing the transcripts continued. Once completed, each theme was transferred to its own grid and a further process of identifying sub-themes was undertaken. These analytic grids were printed out and re-checked for anomalies, exceptional examples and so on. Summaries were then made of each theme and these were compared and contrasted against each other, in an ongoing

effort to make sense of the data and as an aid to find the best way to disseminate the information gathered.

Demographic data such as age, internet usage statistics, duration of relationship, time to onset of intimacy, education, employment and health status and so on, was also entered into grids and then transferred into Excel spreadsheets. This enabled the later construction of summary statistics, which were then constructed into tables (see earlier sections this chapter).

## **Ethical Issues**

All interviews and procedures were subject to and conducted in accordance with Swinburne University Human Research Ethics guidelines. Approval was received for this project in November 2006 [SUHREC Project 0607/081] (see Appendix 8).

In any study involving human participants, the researcher's main objective is to do no harm (Neuman 2003). In this respect, informed and voluntary consent is vital. For online interviews (both IM and email), an informed consent notice and a plain language statement (which gave a précis of the project: see Appendix 9) were emailed to all who agreed to participate. Those who nominated to be interviewed by phone initially contacted me by email and notices were also sent via this medium. If a time for an interview was then scheduled, consent was deemed to have been given. For face to face interviews, notices were taken to the interview (see Appendix 6). Participants were given the opportunity to read them and sign the consent form before the interviews began. In one case the notices were mailed out to the participant.

As the researcher, it was my ethical duty to ensure that participant identity was protected at all times and to maintain the confidentiality and privacy of all involved. This was particularly pertinent for the IM interviews. I achieved this by ensuring that I conducted these interviews in a secure, private location, where it was not possible for the computer

screen to be overlooked by anyone in the vicinity, or even the casual passer-by. In a study like this which concerned such delicate matters as love, sex and intimacy, these issues seemed to me to be even more paramount. It was important that I was able to reassure my respondents that they were able to 'speak' freely and safely, without being compromised.

All participants were informed that they would not be able to be personally identified in any report of this work. To ensure this, all real names (including place names) have been changed or omitted. In some instances this has necessitated the judicious editing of quotes and has resulted in the addition of extra words to maintain comprehensibility. These words appear in square brackets. For the purposes of this thesis, all participants will be referred to by their pseudonyms, followed by their age in brackets, as such: Mary (72). Whilst some participants are referred to quite extensively, others are referred to only briefly as warranted by the extent to which themes were replicated in the data. All transcripts and associated computer records are kept in a locked office cabinet and will be destroyed after the required statutory period.

It was possible that the subject matter – relationships, love, sex and intimacy – may have caused some discomfort to those being interviewed. There was only one occasion when this occurred. An older adult male who was being interviewed by IM was initially uncomfortable with disclosing items of a personal nature, but was comforted when he found out I was a mature-aged student (51 years old at the time) – because, as he said, "I don't think anyone of a much younger age would understand what I have to say". After this, his answers became unusually frank and more in-depth, especially in regards to his health status and the effect this had had on his sexual functioning and mental health state. At the end of the interview he said it was a relief to be so open. This, generally, was the response from other participants. On many occasions, they expressed their thanks for being given the opportunity to talk about themselves and their particular concerns. As a

precaution, however, all participants were informed of the availability of counselling services in case the issues raised caused distress. No-one requested access to them.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter described the research methods employed in my study. I outlined my motivations for researching older adults, the way the sample was sourced and the techniques for data collection and analysis. It should be borne in mind throughout this thesis that the findings of the study participants cannot necessarily be extrapolated to the older adult population in general. They do, however, provide an excellent illustration of a range of observations from a particular group of older adults willing to talk about their feelings and experiences. All participants said they were especially interested in having their views relayed to a wider audience, in an effort to “educate society” as they put it, to help dispel the ongoing myths and misconceptions about older adults.

Given that part of this project was centred on investigating new late-life relationships initiated through Internet dating websites, online research methods provided an appropriate means to explore the phenomenon. Furthermore, two-thirds of the older adults in the study chose to be interviewed by IM or email in preference to other more traditional modes of interviewing, and enjoyed the process. This adds weight to my argument that online interviewing is both a viable and practical option for conducting qualitative research with older adult populations, and that it also generates rich data.

This chapter has also illustrated the many benefits of using the Internet and online interviewing for researching older adults. IM and email provide an effective means to access older adult populations who might normally be difficult to reach, they are easily achievable, are both time- and cost-effective, and also allow for the discussion of topics which at times may be embarrassing or confrontational in face to face and telephone interviews. The availability of instant transcripts allows time-pressured researchers easy and full access to the data, facilitating immersion and consolidating knowledge at an

earlier stage than more traditional interview methods can. Online interviews thus provide an important tool for researchers, particularly those studying potentially sensitive topics such as romance and sexuality.

Face to face interviews have traditionally been seen as 'the quintessence of qualitative research' (Seymour 2001: 155), and face to face communication has long been regarded as the 'gold standard against which' online interaction is often judged (Hine 2005: 4). Nevertheless, studies using online interviewing techniques are increasing rapidly, in line with the increasing numbers of people who have access to and use the Internet. As older adults have been shown to be the fastest growing population in this respect, it is time that researchers championed the use of such technology for their own research agendas.

The following four chapters outline the findings of my study, beginning with a detailed analysis of older adult relationships formed through face to face contact.

## **Chapter Six: Late-life romance, face to face: Unexpected but welcome**

This chapter describes the development of the relationships that began face to face, from their early beginnings to their consolidation, or otherwise, as partnerships. Throughout the chapter – and, indeed, this thesis – a distinction is made between relationships that happened by accident, where the participants were not expecting a relationship to happen (unexpected relationships), and those relationships which occurred as a result of premeditated behaviours or strategies on the part of the participants (deliberate relationships). This distinction is necessary, as one of my key findings is that deliberate relationships are fundamentally different from those which occur by chance. The following is a brief synopsis of the older adults portrayed in this chapter.

### **The Face to Face Romance group**

There were eight women and five men in the Face to Face Romance group, aged from 63 to 92 years of age (average age 71.5 years). All were retired or semi-retired from work. In terms of previous relationships, four were widowed, eight were divorced or separated and one had never been married (see Chapter Five). Nine of the 13 were currently in relationships. The vast majority were highly sociable individuals, with 11 of the 13 involved in at least one, but up to as many as six social or activity groups. In the main these older adults were healthy, but seven reported ongoing health issues which had some impact on their sex lives.

There is very little research about new partnership longevity for older adults after widowhood or divorce. Bearing in mind Bauman's (2003) contention regarding liquid love – that relationships are disposable – I felt it was important to know whether subsequent late-life partnerships were short or long lasting. Consequently, those which lasted more than twelve months I considered to be sustained relationships and those that ended within



less than twelve months I considered transitory. The vast majority of the new relationships in the Face to Face Romance group were sustained or long term, with 11 of the 13 lasting between one and a half to ten years (the average length was four years). Nine of these relationships were ongoing at the conclusion of the project, with the remaining two ending involuntarily upon death of the partner. Of the two shorter term relationships, one ended at two months and the other was still ongoing at seven months, so it was too early to comment on its longevity.

The chapter is divided into three sections, all of which portray elements essential to the development of older adult romances: **the beginning**: how and where older adults meet; **early dating**: first dates and getting to know each other; and **progression and consolidation of the relationships**: especially sexual intimacy and partnering.

### **The beginning: how and where older adults meet**

The older adults in the Face to Face Romance group met each other in two different ways: (1) unexpectedly – by surprise – through the course of their involvement in formalised structures such as social/activity clubs (McElhany 1992) and like younger people, through their close personal networks (Rosenfeld & Thomas 2012), or (2) deliberately through intermediaries such as personal ads (Cameron et al. 1977). Unlike younger people, however, none of the older adults met prospective dates through bars and restaurants or even their local churches (Rosenfeld & Thomas 2012).

### **Unexpected relationships**

Eleven of the 13 older adults met their new dating partners by chance as a result of involvement in various groups, such as seniors clubs, special interest groups and dance nights, through introductions from family members or friends, or because they were neighbours or, in one case, through a long-term friendship which evolved into a romance after the respective spouses died:

We have known each other for 36 years, as we were friends when our spouses were alive. We always enjoyed being together, but there was no romance. It happened very quickly once we met again. Susan (76)

When asked how they felt after meeting a new partner, most of the older adults said they were "surprised". The following anecdotes best describe this idea. Evie, the oldest participant, had been in a relationship with a man seven years her junior, and recounted her astonishment at finding herself, at the age of 82, engaged in a late-life romance:

Oh god it was the last thing... I'd been 23 years a widow... the last thing I thought of was another man... you know, I had a very active life but ah no I didn't look for anyone... it just happened! Evie (92)

Lucy, 15 years younger than Evie, was equally amazed at finding herself with a new partner:

[He] came to my daughter's farm [on business] and I was there visiting... he asked for my phone number so he could catch up again. I had been a widow for over 18 months and didn't think I would meet anyone... I didn't think anyone would find me desirable. It is good for the self-esteem, especially as he is four years younger. Lucy (67)

Likewise, Abbie, who had been divorced for five years, found herself in a relationship with a neighbour who lived close by and who asked her to go on a camping trip with him. She relayed just how astonished she was to find herself in a new romance:

He sought me out... And that was the beginning of it. It just happened... I wrote [in my diary] in quite some detail at how surprised I was. Abbie (65)

These women were surprised, but visibly pleased, to find themselves engaged in a new relationship as older adults. Evie's words express this feeling eloquently: "I didn't look for anyone... it just happened!" The reasons for this surprise are not altogether clear. Whilst the literature clearly shows the persistence of ageist perceptions which deny or dismiss the possibility of late-life romance (see for instance Butler 2005), the disbelief of these participants at finding themselves engaged in such relationships might illustrate that at least some older adults also think that romance does not happen past a certain age. Older

adults internalise many of the ageist generalisations about themselves (Levy 2009) and it could be these internal assumptions which are reflected in their feelings of 'surprise'. Alternatively, it might be that these participants simply thought it unlikely that they would ever meet someone new. Regardless of the source, their surprise and disbelief also extends to their involvement in sexual intimacy, a topic which is discussed later in this thesis.

This surprised reaction is not gender specific. For example, Edwin, the oldest male in the sample, also noted how surprised he was to find himself in a relationship in his early 80s. Edwin, who described himself as "shy", plucked up the courage to go to the local dance to meet new people because he was feeling lonely and depressed after the unexpected death of his wife. He did not intentionally seek a new partner, he just went out to try to be "more social" and, like Evie, it just happened. He said this of his new relationship:

I stood outside the place... for about five minutes making up my mind, will I go in or won't I? And thought, well, I've come this far so I'll go in. So I did. I'm surprised, my children are surprised too. They say 'Dad at the age of 80 you sold your... house... you bought yourself a new unit instead of going into a nursing home or a retirement village and then you develop a new relationship with this girl'. I'm surprised at myself... I really am. I thought I was past it. Edwin (81)

Edwin believed he was "past it", although his behaviour clearly shows that he was not. Whether Edwin intended to or not, he met someone new and eventually developed a new relationship.

### **Deliberate relationships**

The other two participants in the Face to Face Romance group met their new partners as a result of deliberate strategies or behaviours on their parts. Ivan (69) joined a singles club and Randall (63) responded to an advertisement placed in the classified ads of his local newspaper. For Randall and Ivan, however, who fully intended to meet new people, the element of surprise in their new relationships appeared to be missing. Intuitively this

makes sense, as it could be argued that the deliberate nature of their actions – actively pursuing romantic partners – would account for this lack.

For instance, Randall, who responded to an ad placed by his potential partner, was very pragmatic about the process of meeting someone:

I knew it wouldn't be easy and I didn't sort of set up an ideal sort of template that people had to conform to. I was reasonably open-minded because you know some people click and some people don't, whether they have common interests or not. I probably would have had, oh I don't know, six or eight contacts... before I met this one... What I would say is that if you think... you're going to light upon your soul mate in two weeks, you won't! Randall (63)

The process of actively looking for a partner – and repeating the process if the relationship does not work out – appeared to influence the way Randall viewed his new partnership. By the time he and his new partner got together, he had met a number of women. As he said: “you know, you have lots of cups of coffee...” Randall estimated he had “oh I don't know six or eight contacts... before the one that's stuck...” The contrast between Randall's experience and that of the older adults who unexpectedly found themselves in late life partnerships is quite marked. Given the process of repetitive dating, of contacting new people, meeting them in real life and then rejecting them or being rejected by them, it stands to reason that, for Randall, the element of surprise would be lost.

Although Randall deliberately sought a new partner, he did not have any undue expectations about the kind of person he was looking for – and neither did his new partner. As he said, “some people click and some people don't”. In the beginning of his new relationship, he said:

I don't think either of us had a sort of picture of what we wanted, but we found we felt our way... and most of it was okay... We had a great time but certainly not too much contemplation or, you know, sitting back and analysing. Randall (63)

Ivan was also fairly practical when it came to looking for a new partner. He joined the local singles club, because it meant he was able to meet a few different people and he could talk to them first before asking them out. He said that his partner's appearance and their mutual interests were what prompted him to take things further. Even though Ivan and his partner had been together for eight years, he was very philosophical about the relationship and said he would go back to the singles club if it ended.

This deliberate behaviour shows that Randall and Ivan's views on late-life romance – and perhaps sexuality – are different from those whose relationships happened by chance and who were "surprised" to find themselves involved. Pursuing potential partners and repeating the process as many times as necessary until – paraphrasing Randall – one 'sticks' – appeared to change the way that these two older adult men experienced their new relationships – at least in the early stages. It also shows that Randall and Ivan did not buy into the notion that older adults are beyond late-life romance. Given the deliberate nature of online dating – actively going online to search for a partner – it is possible that the participants in the Online Romance group (see Chapter Seven) may also feel the same way. Consequently they also display a lack of surprise at finding themselves in new relationships. This is investigated in the following chapter.

In summary, for the majority of older adults in the Face to Face Romance group initial meetings with their new partners occurred unexpectedly. Moving relationships beyond this chance meeting stage, however, involved more conscious behaviour, primarily concerned with assessing a partner's characteristics and finding some common ground for the relationship to move forward.

### **Early dating: first dates and getting to know each other**

As there is an absence of research describing the stages of late life romance, I was interested to know how quickly these older adult relationships developed and what trajectory they followed. In particular, I wanted to know whether these burgeoning

partnerships reflected the historical stages of dating/courting, followed by engagement and marriage, or whether they mirrored the postmodern course of casual sex, followed by dating, visiting (spending the night together), and possibly cohabitation or marriage (Kamp Dush 2009). Accordingly, one of the first questions I asked was “Did the relationship happen quickly? Or did it take a long time to develop?” and “What stages did your relationship go through before you thought of yourselves as ‘a couple’?” From the very first meeting to getting to know one another, the members of the Face to Face Romance group described the development of their relationships according to a number of themes: instant attraction versus initial ambivalence and shared ideals versus physical and sexual attractiveness. This early dating behaviour is characterised by who initiates first contact, which in most cases is the older adult men. Follow-up contact appears to contain some exceptions however, and this is highlighted in the third theme: gendered norms versus female agency.

### **Instant attraction versus initial ambivalence**

For 10 of the 13 participants the first date occurred, on average, slightly less than three weeks after they first met. For the others, the first date occurred much later. For some there was an almost instant attraction, for others romance was slow to develop. Ursula was one who was immediately attracted to her new partner. She described meeting him for the first time in the following terms:

And we met and I knew... I knew in an hour... because he was so spiritual. And we were so crazy and dancing like stupid and he was so generous and things. And, and everybody said ‘do you like that man?’ and I said ‘I don’t know, but he has something’. [There] was something there, there really was something... Ursula (69)

Ursula felt an instantaneous connection between herself and the man she met, Ziggy, whom she subsequently married. She related their first meeting with much emphasis and emotion and described Ziggy as being “so special” and “one in a million” and, she said, not only was he very gentle with all kinds of people, he was also so full of life. She said this inspired her to follow up with further contact:

Well we... exchanged telephone and the addresses and when I come home, it was 1.30 in the morning. I have my shower... I ring him to say thank you very much was a nice night we had together. Ursula (69)

Similar to Ursula, Betty's decision to date her partner was based purely on her emotional reaction to him:

I met him there [at a social venue]. He was a good dancer and very attentive and I was flattered... I allowed myself to be swept off my feet. Betty (69)

These two women felt an immediate closeness to the men they met, which "allowed" them, as so expressively put by Betty, to be "swept off" their feet. In contrast to Ursula and Betty, Katharine's first experience was one of ambivalence:

After coffee on that first day I invited him to my place to see where I live... I had not identified any 'click'... whilst he was pleasant and chatty, I had not thought 'he's gorgeous', but as he left he kissed me... that sparked my interest. Katharine (65)

Katharine felt quite undecided about her first date with Alex and it wasn't until he actually kissed her that he "sparked her interest". Despite her early uncertainty towards him, Alex became very important to her, as she described her feelings for him as "a real, caring love":

He came to visit a short time later to stay over for a day or two... he was very romantic and I responded to that side of him. Katharine (65)

Stewart's description of his first meeting with Una was also quite bland, and like Katharine he appears initially equivocal about meeting her:

I met her through a friend and she was in fact dating this friend. She lives in [Perth]. And he, ah, asked would I pick her up from the airport and, sort of, look after her for four hours until he knocked off work, which I did. And subsequently their relationship sort of floundered a bit and she obviously quite enjoyed my company. And, ah, after they'd broken up, a few months later, she rang from [Perth] and said she was coming down and she'd like...you know, could we catch up and have lunch... it just went on from there... I quite liked her and she liked me. Stewart (63)

Stewart's quote indicates that his relationship was initiated and followed-through by Una: he undertook a rather passive approach in comparison to her active initiation of further contact. Apart from his "like" of Una, he mentions no other features of her looks or personality that signify he was interested in her or that he had any strong feelings with which to form the basis of the relationship.

The difference between Katharine and Stewart's initial response to their new partners and that of Ursula and Betty is quite marked. Whereas Ursula and Betty felt an immediate close connection and were instantly invested in their new relationships, Katharine and Stewart appeared immediately uncertain. In general though for the older adults in this group, early dating was determined by exploring commonalities or, at a more rudimentary level, on whether physical or sexual attraction existed.

### **Shared ideals versus physical and sexual attractiveness**

For the Face to Face Romance group as a whole, maintaining relationships beyond the first phases of meeting and attraction involved sharing common interests, and finding elements of compatibility. For some, relationships developed based on shared values and interests, while for others, sexual attraction was at the core. Edwin fell into the shared values category:

And ah we discussed children and other things... all that sort of thing. And we discovered that we had rather identical ideals. She loved music... well her views on music were very similar to mine and ah for instance we both discovered we like opera... she has a certain amount of political interests and ah it just went on from there. Basically from her response, she was so friendly, such a touching person. She wanted to hold my hand or my arm or whatever and ah cuddles and all that sort of thing. I *do* so love a hug [emphasis in the original]. Edwin (81)

It is clear that shared principles combined with mutual affection allowed Edwin's relationship to flourish. For Lucy, sharing interests was the difference between her new relationship and her past one that made the connection so special:



We just seemed to hit it off right from the start... conversation, similar interests. I have only ever had one other romance besides [this one]. That was my husband who I met when I was [very young] and was married to for [a very long time]. This was different because we were just on the same wavelength right from the start. Lucy (67)

Like Edwin, Lucy clearly valued being able to talk with her new partner and she felt a mutuality in the relationship that she hinted at was missing in her long term marriage. In Nigel's case, like Edwin, it was very clear that he and his partner needed to share the same beliefs and attitudes:

There were a number of things. One of the very important things was that we were philosophically aligned – that is politically and so on... because it's important, I think, for people to feel, um, mentally attuned. Nigel (79)

Nigel explained that his first partner had been submissive and his second partner dominant, and he had found both extremes excessive. His current partner was very cooperative, "very easy to get on with in terms of decision making..." and there was, he said, "more of an appreciation and an empathy [sic]" on his part, than in previous relationships.

These relationships are marked by their emphasis on intimate communication, negotiation and shared values (Giddens 1992). Nigel's new partnership especially appears to be explicitly egalitarian compared to his earlier relationships which were based on inequality, that is, one partner was either submissive or dominant. For others, attraction was the basis for the relationship.

In contrast to Nigel's insistence on shared values and ideals, the following women discussed their attraction to their new partners more in terms of basic physical characteristics which they considered important:

(A) He was a challenge, (B) he was the type of man I've always liked and (C) he was very good in bed and fourthly he seemed to be very accommodating. Abbie (65)

Well, I love to dance and so did he. He was interesting to talk to and had a great fund of knowledge. Of course, I was also physically attracted – not by looks, but more like chemistry... we seemed to have a lot in common and I enjoyed his company. He was also great in bed! Betty (69)

He was very attractive and, um, well built and just as I like them, because I do prefer European men you know. It was one of those just sexual attractions you know. Jacqueline (72)

All three of these older women were attracted to their partners because of a combination of qualities which centred on physical and sexual attractiveness. For Abbie this was expressed by her use of the words “he was the type of man I’ve always liked”, which she later clarified as being “tall, thin and intellectual”. For Betty, it was a physical, chemical, attraction and for Jacqueline, it was because he was “just as I like them, because I do prefer European men”. For these women, sexual appeal appeared to be an essential characteristic of this attraction, as highlighted by references to their partners’ prowess in bed. In contrast to the early work of Bulcroft and O’Connor who found that sex amongst older adult daters was “nice but not essential” (1986b: 400), the findings of this study are that sex and sexuality are essential characteristics of attraction amongst this group of older adults. These findings are discussed in more detail in Chapter Eight.

This early dating behaviour is characterised by who makes first contact, which in the Face to Face Romance group is invariably the older adult men. Follow-up contact appears to contain some exceptions however.

### **Gendered norms versus female agency**

Dating behaviour in general over the last 35 years has been shown to be a highly gendered, non-egalitarian practice (Eaton & Rose 2011). In the general order of things, this would translate to the older adult men in the current study actively pursuing older adult women and initiating further relationship development. In the Face to Face Romance group, the majority of relationships appeared to be governed by such norms, at least in the very beginning of the relationships. This is borne out by the experiences of Lucy, Abbie

and Betty, who were all approached by their new partners, and further by Edwin who also approached his partner when he went to a local dance.

In this respect these late-life dating relationships reflect what has previously been found in younger, college aged samples (Eaton & Rose 2011). There were exceptions to this general pattern however. Ursula and Katharine both initiated further contact with the men they had just met: Ursula by ringing Ziggy after the dance at 1.30 am in the morning and Katharine by inviting Alex over for coffee after their first meeting. Another exception was that of Stewart (63) who was ambivalent about his first meeting with Una, who was initially dating a friend of his. When her relationship broke up, Una contacted Stewart and suggested they go out. As illustrated earlier, the relationship was initiated and followed-through by Una and, in this instance, Stewart was the passive player.

What is so interesting – even surprising – about this finding is that it highlights the agency of these older adult women (Roseneil 1995). It indicates that they were not prepared to be inactive and wait for the men they were interested in to make the ‘next move’, as is usually the case with women brought up in a time of gendered relationship norms (Hawkes & Scott 2005). It will be interesting to see whether this agency is reflected in the online relationships (see Chapter Seven), as it is possible that different behavioural norms and expectations may exist in the online environment.

In contrast to Stewart's experience, Edwin's occurred at a local dance venue. He approached the lady first:

I went and asked one Lass for a dance and after that I looked around and selected another one and asked her for a dance. I wasn't refused. And I danced with her and I thought, 'gee she's nice to dance with'. And I had two or three dances that night. The following [week] I thought about it and I thought, 'well I did like going there so I'll go again'. So I went again. I was welcomed. I asked this girl for about five or six dances that evening and we seemed to get on all right and she was friendly and spoke up well... I just decided to take her out. So I asked her would she go to a picture show and she agreed so I thought, 'that's nice'. Edwin (81)

Edwin was clearly the instigator of his new relationship. He initiated it and took it beyond the environment of the local dance. Edwin's next comment illustrates that he was surprised when his partner's behaviour deviated, albeit slightly, from the normal behavioural conventions that he was accustomed to when they went out together for the first time:

Walked into the theatre and she took my arm and I thought, 'that's unusual but never mind' Edwin (81)

This anecdote indicates that, for Edwin, romantic relationships were governed by gendered ways of behaving, in which men are active and women are passive (Hawkes 1996). He was surprised by his partner's actions, even to the point of stating that it was "unusual". For him it was not the norm for a woman to make first physical contact with a man. Again, this behaviour highlights the agency of some of these older adult women – a factor which will be explored later.

Despite their heteronormative beginnings, as all these late-life relationships developed they appeared to be based on shared ideals and democratic terms, as well as sexual attractiveness and compatibility – all elements of Giddens' notion of pure relationships. This is especially borne out by the example of Nigel, whose previous marriages had been governed by extremes of submission and dominance and who did not like either. The cooperative and democratic nature of his new partnership combined with appreciation, empathy and an emphasis on mutual values, denote important fundamental qualities present in pure relationships.

For all these older adults, once initial dates were over, sustaining budding romances beyond the initial phases of meeting and attraction involved sharing common interests and finding elements of compatibility. Moving relationships to the "next level" involved decisions regarding sexual intimacy and choices based around partnering.

## **Progression and consolidation: sexual intimacy and partnerships**

The following section describes the progression of these late-life romances. Some participants talked on the telephone after an introduction from friends or family, followed by an exchange of photos and then arranged to meet. Others met unexpectedly, went for coffee and went to bed, all within a short space of time. Still others waited twelve months before they knew each other well enough to consider they had a relationship. One couple never considered they were partners despite having been together for nine years. Consolidating relationships involved decisions regarding intimacy and partnering, marriage/cohabitation or living apart together and monogamy/non-monogamy.

### **Intimacy and partnering**

As previously mentioned, 10 of the 13 relationships reported in this chapter developed extremely quickly, with first dates occurring within three weeks of initial meeting. And despite entrenched ageist perceptions to the contrary, in all these cases the relationships quickly progressed to sexual intimacy, on average just over a month after meeting. For Nigel, this was certainly the case. He met his new partner by chance at a social activity arranged through friends, where he asked for her phone number, then rang and asked her out, all within one week. As he said: "We went to coffee, then we went to dinner, then we went to bed [laugh]!" Nigel (79). Despite such a rapid commencement, Nigel's relationship is now two years strong and has developed into what he termed a "partnership".

The following passage by Ursula expresses the outlook behind the fast onset of so many of the relationships reported here. In this study many participants expressed a feeling of limited time available (Carstensen 1995) and an approach of "no time to waste" in their stories – an attitude which may also provide an explanation for why the relationships became sexually intimate so quickly. Ursula's courtship and subsequent marriage to Ziggy happened like a whirlwind. Like Betty, she went along to a social venue with some

neighbours where Ziggy was present, they exchanged phone numbers and she later rang to thank him. Events then escalated rapidly:

Listen... with age, I know this thing... you know 'yes' or 'no', you don't have to wait... because the first night I saw, in the first hour... and he said, 'I'm ready, if you're ready'. Ursula (69)

Betty also met her romantic partner at a social venue where she was a frequent visitor. Like Nigel, her relationship happened quickly as it became intimate within two weeks of meeting, but unlike the longer term nature of Nigel's relationship, Betty's was over within two months:

The problem was that we never really became a couple. That was why I ended it. It was a wild courtship on his part for two weeks and once we had been to bed together, he became more casual. What I said to him when I broke it off was that where I wanted a relationship, he only wanted an affair! Betty (69)

It seems clear that, although the relationship followed a similar initiation to that described by Nigel, in this particular instance each person had different ideas about what kind of relationship they were after. Betty said her partner would never agree to get together with her family or friends and that they only ever went out when "he decided we should". For Betty the experience was disappointing because it did not meet her expectations. She said she quickly realised that the relationship was "one-sided (my side)". Betty's desire for a relationship, not just an affair, indicates her expectation that a relationship should be ongoing and committed – not just casual sex. She was looking for a long-term and democratic commitment based on shared interests, communication and sexual attraction – in other words, a pure-type relationship. Although she was willing to try a new relationship out, providing some support for the idea that contemporary relationships have low entry and exit costs (Bauman 2003), what she really wanted was a steadfast relationship, which once achieved, would not be something she would want to leave.

Other relationships developed more gradually. In direct contrast to Ursula, Betty and Nigel's experiences, Evie's relationship commenced very slowly and over a twelve month period. She was introduced to Len by a mutual friend at the local dance; phone calls followed and, over time, they would meet at the bowls club, or at more dances, and then finally in her home where they enjoyed "mutual companionship" over televised sports events. Finally her "friend" Len said he thought they were very compatible and added "why don't we just get together?"

The progression of Evie's relationship was different to that of Ursula's, Nigel's and Betty's: her relationship advanced over a prolonged period of courtship where she and Len initially exchanged a series of telephone calls and only met in public places, usually with friends, before progressing to companionable evenings at home before they decided to live together. Sexual intimacy occurred at the very early stages of the relationships for the others, whereas for Evie it occurred only after a period of twelve months had elapsed. Evie said it was something that she and Len "drifted" into:

I think when you're very, very fond of anyone you do drift into it... oh I was happy to be intimate with Len when we got to that stage. I was quite happy... I didn't feel ashamed of anything... and I didn't feel like I was an old fool or anything. Evie (92)

Evie's quote illustrates that, prior to embarking on a sexual relationship with Len she considered that, as an older adult, such behaviour might be foolish or something to be ashamed of – which again serves to illustrate that some older adults internalise ageist sensitivities about themselves (Levy 2009). Although the slow and steady development of Evie and Len's relationship is at odds with the rapid progression which other participants experienced, nevertheless, it highlights relationship aspects which reflect shared interests, friendship, equality and sexuality and even, I would argue, reflexivity, as in Len's assertion that he and Evie were "very compatible".

## **Marriage, cohabitation or LATs**

Of the eleven sustained or longer term partnerships in the Face to Face Romance group, only two involved marriage (Ursula and Ziggy) or cohabitation (Evie and Len). In a classic illustration of the living apart together (LAT) concept (Levin & Trost 1999), it appears that Ursula would have been content to remain functionally separate albeit emotionally committed. However, for Ursula's partner, Ziggy, marriage was clearly necessary to distinguish their relationship from a friendship and so they married quickly:

And since then... well he had the intention to marry me but I said... 'buy some house close to my house and we can see each other every day'. He said, 'no I don't want a, a friend, I want a wife' and we marry in 75 days... Ursula (69)

For Evie and Len when it came time to consolidate their relationship further, they initially lived in her house, until they bought a unit where they lived as co-owners: "he paid half and I paid half ...equal share". Evie explained why she and Len had not married:

He wanted to marry me eventually... and I said, no, I wouldn't be bothered now, you know. No that's a bit silly now, bothering at my age, bothering at his age. So I just said, no Len, we'll stay the way we are. Evie (92)

Evie clearly indicated that she was not interested in marriage, even though Len may have been. Unlike her and Ursula, however, none of the remaining participants in the Face to Face Romance group were interested in living with or marrying their partners. This finding is supported by the literature which shows that older adults favour LAT arrangements in their late life partnerships (Borell & Ghazanfaraeeon Karlsson 2003). When participants were asked why they did not live with their partner, three themes emerged: (1) a desire for separateness, (2) a strong need for independence and (3) maintenance of existing familial relationships, chiefly, a wish to appease the concerns of children, especially surrounding issues of inheritance. Some of these themes overlapped.



### ***Separateness***

Nigel's relationship progressed extremely quickly from initial meeting, initial date and initial intimacy to a partnership, albeit one that did not involve cohabiting or even exclusiveness. Nigel had been married twice before and was involved in four concurrent relationships at the time he met his new partner Mary. Nigel's relationship with his partner was functionally separate. When he and Mary first met he said one of the first issues they discussed was living arrangements:

We live about one kilometre apart... it's very much by choice. That was a very specific issue tackled in the beginning and one kilometre is just nice [laughs] very comfortable. We stay overnight, mostly at my place, about four nights a week I suppose. Nigel (79)

He said that although they were both looking for a "steady" relationship, Mary initially wanted an "exclusive one" and he had a problem with that. He said:

...today [people] have their relationships and sow their wild oats... and have all sorts of experiences before they're married. Most people in my vintage... that didn't happen.... Once I was free... I decided it was time that I started... to catch up [laughs] and I certainly did [laughs]. Nigel (79)

When asked whether he and Mary would ever marry, he replied: "I said from the very beginning and she agreed that marriage wasn't on the agenda". However, he went on to clarify this by saying that Mary would probably be more comfortable with the "love and marriage concept", but he wanted the "excitement all the time". After his two marriages, Nigel was determined not to become involved in the same way again. Although he was very happy in his "steady" relationship, he relished his freedom and his separateness and being able to maintain contact with his other relationships. He said he was "still attracted to other women" and that although he and Mary would "make a joke of it", at times it could be painful for her.

Despite having multiple partners, Nigel was interested in maintaining long-term, ongoing, stable connections. His story indicates that he was not interested in disposable relationships that are easy to enter and easy to exit as Bauman's (2003) proposal would expect. Furthermore, the non-monogamous nature of Nigel's partnership reflects Giddens' premise that sexuality in pure relationships is 'plastic' and negotiable between couples and therefore 'not necessarily monogamous' (1992: 63).

Like Nigel's relationship, Randall's also developed very quickly. There were a number of letters, an exchange of photos, phone calls, the initial coffee meeting and a dinner date, then a movie, a walk and intimacy – all within a month of Randall's initial response to her classified ad. Eventually he and his partner also discussed living together and decided they preferred living separately:

No we don't [live together]. We've kind of discussed it and all that sort of thing and decided... we both like our own space. Randall (63)

Even though they maintained separate residences, Randall and his partner visited each other regularly, were absorbed into each other's family life and friendship networks and travelled together quite extensively. Their first trip was taken within six weeks of meeting, a trip which he described as "real honeymoon stuff". Randall said the relationship entailed "a very strong attraction", "common interests, values and attitudes" and "communication", which for him was especially "important" as he said he "loved to talk".

Both Nigel and Randall – and their respective partners – considered their partnerships as important, meaningful, loving and sexual, and characterised by commitment and commonalities of values, despite living functionally separate.

### ***Independence***

For some older adults freedom was of vital importance. Abbie always strongly guarded her independence from her much older lover and continued to live in her own home, despite

the relationship lasting for nine years. She and her lover had never lived together and never intended to. She said they had never classed themselves as a “couple” even though they were heavily involved in each other’s lives. She also said:

We even now feel surprised that sometimes, say on medical forms, you have to put in who the person to contact is and what’s their link and he says ‘I put down partner’. [Pause] But ah it’s never been like that. Abbie (65)

Although Abbie felt connected to her partner, the relationship was not the kind that involved instrumental support. Findings such as these are reinforced by previous research which showed that older women resisted partnerships where they would have to provide care-giving (Borell & Ghazanfareon Karlsson 2003; Bulcroft & O’Connor 1986a; Dickson et al. 2005). Stewart’s story provides another illustration of the strong need for independence – for both him and for his partners.

For Stewart, in the situation of having two partners at the one time – one for 18 years and the other for 22 months – the possibility of marriage or cohabitation with either of them was an option that he would never have considered, even as a young man:

I had a feeling, a gut feeling, when I was very young you know... that this marriage bit wasn’t for me; and this living together bit wasn’t for me at all. So it’s been something that’s been with me for a very long time... For me to have got into that sort of relationship would have been a square peg in a round hole. It just wouldn’t have worked... I know that... [And] it suits Meg to have that level of independence and you know she loves her own house... And Una... is similar... she’s very independent, very career orientated. It actually suits her to have this sort of relationship... there’s no expectation, there’s no false expectation. In fact, by being clear on that point is what makes these relationships work. Stewart (63)

Stewart’s point about his partners valuing their “independence” is echoed throughout this thesis, particularly by female participants, who say they value the freedom of not having to care for and look after a male partner, sometimes for the first time in their lives. As in previous research which showed that older female widows were reluctant to remarry because of a fear of being ‘locked into traditional marriage roles’ (Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991:

246; Bulcroft & O'Connor 1986a; see also Brecher 1984), these participants were careful not to put themselves in a position where they might have to relinquish their autonomy. One key strategy was to live separately. This finding is supported by other research which shows that older women reject marriage and commitment out of a strong desire to remain both emotionally and financially independent, and because of a dread of being propelled into a nurse/caretaker role (Dickson et al. 2005). This study also echoes the earlier study by Brecher (1984) which showed that 60% of late-life romantics were not prepared to marry their partners because of various economic reasons and almost 40% expressed a desire to remain functionally separate.

Over the years, Stewart had long-term relationships with several women, sometimes consecutively, but had never lived with any of them. Like Nigel, he valued long-term, stable connections, not short, disposable relationships. He said he was open with both Meg and Una about the presence of the other, and they in turn were open with him about having other lovers. He said that: "the understanding has been that we're independent and we don't ask or we don't deny what else we're doing". In terms of sexual intimacy, he said:

I believe the relationships are enhanced by the distance between the times you meet because you actually really look forward to it and it works quite well. And it's particularly good, I think from a sexual point of view... There's something anticipatory about it. Stewart (63)

Like Nigel, Stewart and Stewart's partners, their romantic relationships were clearly non-monogamous and appeared to be consensual, as both Meg and Una knew of each other, although it appears they had never met. The relationships were loving and committed, but at no time had Stewart – or his partners – considered that they should live together.

### ***Maintenance of existing familial relationships***

The presence of adult children was important for many participants in their decisions about living together. Edwin had this to say about the attitude of some of his children to his partner of two years:

... [The children] are hostile... they won't talk, they won't have anything to do with her. They think she's just out to get what I've got... what's left. So, no, we've decided we just go on with our separate lives... Edwin (81)

For Edwin, it was tremendously important that he and his partner appeased his children's concerns and also preserved their separateness by retaining separate households and separate financial arrangements. Despite this they spoke on the phone every day, stayed over at each other's houses at least three nights during the week and every weekend. In this manner they felt they were allaying any fears the children might have about losing any legacy that might come to them upon Edwin's death. For Edwin, being involved in an LAT arrangement rather than a marriage or cohabitation, helped him to preserve his family relationships (see Levin 2004; Gilding 2010).

Nigel and Mary had been married five times between them, and although Nigel did not have any children of his own, maintaining good connections with Mary's family network was vitally important to both of them:

...tonight we're taking her grandson... out to dinner. He's nine. And we just sort of, just share it with him. I'll share her family, and that's a very important thing... she's got a fairly big [family] network – kids plus all their wives plus a lot of grandkids... So [pause] we share... Nigel (79)

Whilst the presence of children did not directly influence Nigel and Mary's decision not to live together, their presence was a factor which they were both aware of and took pains to accommodate. Although there was no hostility towards Nigel as such, both he and Mary were keenly aware of the necessity of preserving a good relationship with Mary's extended family and consequently went out of their way to regularly "share" their time with them.

Randall and his partner were equally aware of the complex nature of family dynamics and it took at least six months before they became involved with each other's family life:

They knew what we were doing, but we didn't meet them. We didn't meet each other's families probably... I would say it probably took between six months and a year [before] we kind of got a bit absorbed in each other's family circle... but anyway that's what happens... it was a bit sensitive. Randall (63)

The impact of their new romances on their extended families was clearly of concern for these older adults. The fact that they went out of their way to accommodate their children, to "share" their time with them and, for Edwin, to placate his children by not living with his partner, is testament to the importance and embeddedness of the family in these Australian's lives (Gilding 2010; Smart & Neale 1999). Despite what conservative scholars and individualisation theorists see as the decline of the family, the results illustrate that these older adults prioritised the needs of their earlier families over and above their newer family units.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This chapter portrays the development and progression of late-life romantic relationships which were initiated face to face. Individual anecdotes highlight the fact that relationships progressed through stages of initial meetings, further dating, getting to know one another, sexual intimacy and partnering. For most of the older adults in this chapter, new relationships occurred unexpectedly. Moving beyond this initial phase, however, involved more conscious behaviours largely centred on establishing common ground and expectations, which the majority appeared to do successfully, judging by the longevity of the relationships. For one participant, Betty, her hopes for the relationship were at odds with those of her lover and so the relationship ended.

The older adult men in the Face to Face Romance group were more likely to be instrumental in initiating first contact in the early stages of their new relationships.

However, the older adult women appeared just as likely to initiate follow-up contact. In this manner they demonstrated control over their budding romances in a way which goes against gendered behavioural norms (Hawkes 1996; Hawkes & Scott 2005). This apparent agency may well have had an impact on the nature of these new late life romantic relationships, by serving to foster a democratic foundation for the relationships going forward. It certainly appears that the late-life relationships described in this chapter bear the hallmarks of Giddens' (1992) pure relationships, based as they are on shared values and beliefs as well as mutual communication.

For the most part, consolidating relationships involved decisions regarding intimacy and partnering and marriage/cohabitation or living apart together. All the relationships – both deliberate and those which happened by chance – became sexually intimate. In most cases relationships became sexually intimate very quickly – a finding which was associated with a feeling of “no time to lose” (Carstensen 1995). Sexual intimacy appeared to be, for many, an essential part of their identity, as evidenced by 79-year old Nigel and his reference to sowing his “wild oats” and the fact that he had four concurrent relationships outside of his primary relationship.

Many of the older adults who met their new partners unexpectedly expressed “surprise” at finding themselves engaged in late-life romance and intimacy. This finding highlights the pernicious nature of ageism and stereotyping (Angus & Reeve 2006), which consistently portray older adults as incapable, asexual beings (Butler 2005) – representations that some older adults believe themselves (Levy 2009). Evie's reference to not feeling “ashamed” or like an “old fool” indicates that, for her at least, the stereotype of older adults as asexual was something she believed prior to her relationship with Len. In contrast, the two older adults, Randall and Ivan, whose relationships were deliberately initiated, expressed no such surprise and subsequently their views on late-life romance and intimacy appear to be different. Going through a process of actively pursuing potential new partners appears to

influence the way these older adults view their new relationships, at least in the early stages. These results warrant further investigation.

Giddens' proposition that modern relationships are essentially unstable is backed up by his contention that divorce rates are high and cohabitation rates are increasing. Conversely, the majority of relationships in the Face to Face Romance cohort appeared to be stable and sustained, despite the fact that many involve neither marriage nor cohabiting. In some ways, the older adults in this study echo the views expressed by Bauman (2003), that as *homo consumens* they still want romantic relationships but they do not want the responsibilities that being in them demands – hence the desire to remain detached in terms of households and finances, essentially living apart together relationships. Indeed, this finding is repeated throughout this thesis as many of the older adult women and men valued their independence and sought to preserve it. Bauman highlights this notion as one of the defining features of his *liquid love* concept, with the implication being that, like consumer goods, modern relationships are easily disposed of. The results from the Face to Face Romance group do not appear to support this argument, however, as despite remaining separate, the majority of the older adult partnerships portrayed in this chapter are sustained and committed. Bauman's theory, therefore, may not be entirely relevant to late-life romance, particularly for relationships which begin face to face.

The majority of the longer term relationships in the Face to Face Romance group appear to be living apart together partnerships (Levin and Trost 1999). This finding provides the first qualitative description of such relationships amongst the older adult population in an Australian context. Only two of the relationships described involved marriage or cohabitation – the rest remained committed, stable, ongoing, as well as sexually and emotionally intimate, and based on mutual reciprocity – albeit functionally separate. As argued by Connidis (2006), Giddens' pure relationship theory may account for these relationship characteristics.



As described in Chapter Four, the socio-emotional theory (Carstensen 1992) posits that older adults, with their awareness of a finite future, possess a decreased motivation to try new things coupled with an increased drive for emotionally salient interactions (Carstensen et al. 2003). The relationships described in this chapter support these contentions. Firstly, the majority of relationships in the Face to Face Romance group were of an unexpected nature. The older adults did not go looking for new relationships, they occurred by happenstance – and many of those interviewed expressed their surprise at finding themselves so involved. However, these relationships quickly became committed and of a long-term nature (the average length was four years), which supports the argument that, ultimately, older adults prefer familiar social partners. Furthermore, the relationships were personally meaningful indicating that these older adults found them emotionally significant. How the two deliberately-initiated relationships fit with this theory is difficult to determine, as consciously seeking a new partner would appear to fly in the face of the premise that older adults are less likely to be motivated to try new experiences (Carstensen et al. 2003). The findings from the Online Romance group may provide a more nuanced debate on the subject.

For the most part, the relationships in the Face to Face Romance group are sustained, committed and sexually exclusive. Nigel and Stewart's non-monogamous partnerships appear to be the exception. That said, Abbie said she thought it was "unrealistic" for one person to be "permanently bonded" to another, as she said that "different needs and different relationships can provide different pleasures or services" (Abbie, 65), reflecting a non-monogamous viewpoint of relationships. Despite this difference, the majority of relationships reported in this chapter – either monogamous or non-monogamous – are long lasting and stable, reflecting commitment on the part of those involved. The relationships also appear to be based on shared ideals and intimate communication. Furthermore, the very fact of their organisation as LATs suggests that these partnerships are inherently more autonomous and egalitarian compared to other arrangements (see Connidis 2006 and Gross & Simmons 2002).

Whilst it is clear from the findings that for the majority of the older adults' in this chapter, marriage (or even cohabitation) had, indeed, become defunct, the relationships reported here serve to highlight both the continuing importance of connectedness (Smart & Neale 1999) and the primacy of family needs over and above those of the individuals themselves (Gilding 2010). This is evidenced by Edwin choosing not to live with his partner to appease his children's inheritance concerns and by Randall and Nigel's desire to preserve good relationships with their own and their partner's extended family networks.

The next chapter presents the findings of older adult romantic relationships which are mediated by technology – that is, via the Internet. The main purpose for presenting the findings from the Face to Face Romance group and the Online Romance group separately is to see whether there are any differences – or similarities – in the way that the relationships progress and in the form they ultimately take.

## **Chapter Seven: Late life romance, online From the virtual to the real**

Chapter Six described the development of older adult face to face romantic relationships, and portrayed these romances from their early beginnings to their consolidation, or otherwise, as partnerships. This chapter is similarly organised and charts the progression of the older adult romantic relationships which began online, according to the themes that arose from the data. It commences by describing older adults' reasons and motivations for going online to look for romantic partners; it then looks at the way online romances began and how the online environment structured their development, followed by experiences of early dating and how people connected online. Finally, it describes the consolidation of these relationships in real life.

Apart from the different modes of relationship initiation, there is a difference between the relationships reported here and in Chapter Six. In the Face-to-Face Romance group the majority of the relationships occurred accidentally and unexpectedly, whereas in the Online Romance group the majority of the relationships were deliberately pursued. It might therefore be expected that there could be some fundamental differences between the two relationship types. This issue will be explored throughout this chapter.

### **The Online Romance group**

There were 16 women and 16 men in the Online Romance group and their age range was younger than the Face to Face Romance group (60 to 76 years compared to 63 – 92 years) and the average age was also younger (65.5 compared to 71.5 years respectively). All were retired or semi-retired from work. In terms of previous relationships, 10 were widowed and 22 were divorced or separated (see Chapter Five). Fourteen of the 32 were currently in relationships. Eight of the 32 were involved in online social, special interest or support groups (beyond their membership of online dating sites) and 19 of the 32 were involved in

face to face social or activity clubs. Like their offline counterparts, the vast majority were healthy, although 14 reported ongoing health issues which had some impact on their sex lives.

Thirty of the 32 participants met their new partners through dating websites. They belonged to or had recently belonged to the dating website RSVP.com® and many had concurrent memberships with other online dating services such as Match.com®, PlentyofFish® and Yahoo Personals®. The other two participants were engaged in online relationships which began by chance, as a consequence of their online work involvement. These participants did not purposely look for online romance, and their relationships appear to have some different characteristics compared to those which were initiated deliberately. These differences are highlighted throughout the chapter as applicable, although their general demographic data is included here.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, there is very little research which investigates new relationship longevity amongst older adults; therefore it is a topic of interest in the current study. Moreover, comparing and contrasting the two different relationship types – online-initiated versus face to face-initiated – helps provide a more nuanced picture of late life relationship formation and aids in identifying any differences between the groups. In terms of overall relationship longevity, just over half of the new partnerships in the Online Romance group were short-term, ranging in length between five weeks to ten months. Less than half of the new relationships were sustained or long-term, lasting from one year to seven years, which is in contrast to the Face to Face Romance group, where nearly all the partnerships were long term. As discussed in reference to the offline relationships, whether these online-initiated relationships are seen as disposable (Bauman 2003) needs to be considered. This factor is addressed as warranted throughout the chapter. Interestingly the two longest relationships were those which had occurred incidentally (five years and seven years respectively, although one had since ended). Of the 14 relationships

which were ongoing at the conclusion of the study, only eight were sustained longer than twelve months.

All the online relationships in this study transitioned to offline, so they are, in effect, mixed-mode relationships (Walther & Parks 2002), rather than strictly online or offline ones. Although many of the participants continued to communicate with their partners via the Internet once the relationships were established, none of the relationships remained exclusively online. The point to be made here is that, for the older adults in the Online Romance group, the Internet acted merely as a means – a tool, in fact – to develop offline relationship formation – a finding which has previously been reported (Whitty & Carr 2006).

The chapter is divided into five sections, all of which portray elements essential to the development of older adult romances online. The first section asks **why go online?** It explores the reasons and motivations older adults give for using dating websites. Section two looks at **early dating** and the **structuring of online romances**: it highlights the importance of personal profiles and online self-presentation in this process, how older adults develop criteria for whom they will date and how online romances appear to follow a series of stages predetermined by the dating website. In particular it examines the role of gendered norms and female agency in the online dating environment. Section three investigates **online attraction**: how people “click” or connect with each other in an online environment, given the absence of normal audio-visual cues. Section four looks at **meeting face to face**: the speed with which this occurs and whether online attraction translates offline. The final section traces **offline relationship formation**: how online relationships develop in the real world, their progression to intimacy and partnering and what form these partnerships take.

## Why go online?

One of the first questions addressed in Chapter Five, was how and where older adults meet. In this chapter that question is already answered – they meet online. This first section therefore explores older adults' reasons and motivations for going online to deliberately find romance rather than relying on face to face encounters. The older adults described their reasons for using dating websites according to a number of themes: **negative possibilities versus positive opportunities; the role of trusted others;** and two themes which relate to the online process itself – **the lack of ambivalence** and **the role of pragmatism.**

### Negative possibilities versus positive opportunities

For older adults who are deliberately searching for a new partner, there appear to be very limited places and opportunities to find each other offline. Many participants, both men and women, commented on the lack of available "possibilities" in their everyday lives. As Lorraine (65) remarked: "none of the places I frequent seem to have single males in my age group". Yvonne and Amy, both reiterated Lorraine's comments:

I have found it difficult to meet available men in my age group... [And] I don't have many single female friends of my age to go out with. Yvonne (66)

I have belonged to many groups, including work, including work, where there are men, and a relationship has never developed that way. Amy (64)

Owen said his existing friendships were strained by his presence as a single male and, like Amy, he had also experienced difficulties finding available dating partners when he joined social groups in an effort to meet someone new:

I tried to join clubs, but at my age it seemed that when you went to a meeting most of the partnerships had [already] been made up and the other men looked at you as a potential rival, as you, of course, were. Similarly in the friendships that endured after my wife's death, all those were couples and again the men were looking back to see if you were hitting on their wives. Owen (66)

The general perception amongst the older adults in the Online Romance group was that the only places to meet new partners were pubs, bars or clubs and the majority of respondents were uncomfortable in such environments. Yvonne (66) endorsed these sentiments when she stated: "I don't care for the clubs and bar scene". As Christopher remarked, when you are an older adult it is difficult to hang around in pubs waiting for someone special to come along:

I'm not into bars and clubs and pubs and when you're 60 you don't really, you know, you don't sort of hit the bar and wait for Miss Right to come along... the opportunities have been pretty slim. I'm just amazed at the number of intelligent, articulate and attractive women who are on [RSVP]. Christopher (61)

Lawrence echoed Christopher's sentiments, but also added that "ladies" who frequented pubs or clubs would somehow be unsuitable as potential partners:

What other methods are there? I don't visit pubs or clubs. Anyway the ladies you would meet at a pub or club are less likely to be suitable and it is difficult to find the right one. Lawrence (69)

For these older adults, their situations and social networks presented limited prospects and the pub and club scene provided – what appeared to them – to be negative possibilities for meeting someone new. In contrast, the Internet offered positive opportunities that the pub scene lacked:

RSVP is by far the best place to review, check out and then start a new contact – with a considerably better chance than bars, clubs or groups. Neil (71)

You've got a wider scope online than you have offline... and you can choose. Amanda (60)

I felt that the pool would be much wider. Max (69)

It can be interesting and fun. Edna (68)

Dennis (60) said there was a shortage of available people in rural locations and that the Internet provided the means to circumvent this. In addition, he felt that social conventions

could make meeting new people difficult in real life and that meeting via the Internet was not only positive, it helped avoid this situation:

Offline meetings are governed by all sorts of conventions and hang-ups for one, but mainly, especially if you are in a rural setting as I am now, there is a distinct shortage of persons that are available in your area, and online that restriction is removed. Dennis (60)

This sentiment was endorsed by Lachlan (63) who said that he was “42 kms from the nearest town” and going online was “probably the only realistic way in a small district” to be able to meet someone.

Not all people experienced these difficulties, however. Harry said he did not have any trouble finding and meeting new people in real life, he just preferred the process available through dating websites:

It is very easy for me to meet people offline – I have a good personality and can attract people – however online is nicer – After seeing a picture and reading a profile you have a good idea what to expect. Harry (71)

For the older adults who were not comfortable going to pubs, bars and clubs, the Internet not only provided a welcome substitute it also provided positive possibilities. This fits with prior research which found that people use dating websites as an alternative ‘to the pubs and clubs scene’ and because they have a lack of other options (Whitty & Carr 2006: 12).

### **The role of trusted others**

For some older adults going online was something that had been recommended to them by people they knew, for instance, their children – usually daughters – or friends. As Veronica (60) said: “I didn’t know of any single men, and [my] daughter told me to go online”. Amanda’s experience was very similar:

Because my daughter suggested it might be a good idea [laughs]. My daughter said that it would be quite safe, you know, doing it this way... you’ve got a wider



scope online than you have offline and I don't go to clubs and pubs, I don't like that... and [online] you can choose. Amanda (60)

Stephanie's friend had used the Internet, successfully, to find a partner and had advised Stephanie to do the same:

A girlfriend said she was going online (incidentally she got married two weeks ago!!) and suggested I should do the same. Stephanie (64)

For some participants, using dating websites was recommended by trusted others, usually professionals such as counsellors or therapists, for instance. Max, in the throes of widowhood, was encouraged by his counsellor, who suggested that going online could be a good place for him to meet new people:

At that stage, it was suggested to me by a counsellor whom I was seeing, following the death of my wife. She convinced me. She said look, well, you've got nothing to lose... see what happens. So that's the way I started. I was experiencing difficulty [finding a romantic partner] and she's a very good counsellor, her clients had benefited by being on RSVP, and I have a lot of time and faith in her, and this was quite convincing Max (69)

A few older adults heard experts, either on television or on the radio, talking about using online means as a way to meet new people. For Nicholas, divorced and having difficulty finding a new partner, hearing the Internet discussed on TV gave it credibility and gave him the confidence to try it out:

SBS programme *Insight* had Bettina Arndt and Pru Goward, amongst others, talking about modern day relationships, and both endorsed the 'net as an appropriate source of contacts. It seemed like a good idea. Nicholas (63)

These findings provide evidence to indicate that using the Internet and dating websites to find potential romantic partners – particularly for older adults – is now becoming an accepted practice in contemporary Australian society, so much so, that some therapists and counsellors recommend its use to their clients.

### **The lack of ambivalence**

For some older adults the most difficult aspect of looking for a potential partner in their offline life, was not being sure whether someone was available and/or interested in dating. For instance, Amy had tried other avenues for meeting new people, but found it a difficult process, either because of a lack of potential partners or because of the inability to know whether someone was really interested in establishing a relationship or not:

I thought that online may be more fruitful, in that the guys might be *actually wanting* [sic] a relationship. Amy (64)

Neil expressed a similar sentiment to Amy. He said that by being online there was no ambivalence about the reason for being there – it was clear that people joined a dating website *because* they were interested in starting a relationship:

At least every woman there is in some way interested in romance and if they are not interested in me they say so – so we don't waste time. Neil (71)

Lachlan's views echo those of Neil's. He felt that if you were on a dating website, then it was clear you were there for dating:

...it is a different way of doing things and is capable of revealing things that the old ways don't. Especially the fact that [by being online]... you really indicate that you are in the market. Does that make sense? Lachlan (63)

For these older adults, the lack of ambiguity on dating websites created an ease in their quest for a new partner that was missing in their daily lives. For other older adults it was the sheer practicality of using the Internet that attracted them to dating websites.

### **The role of pragmatism**

Contrary to the stereotype of technophobic seniors, the older adults in this study had no trouble negotiating the intricacies of the Internet or online dating. This was especially true for Ester, who at 71, found there "just wasn't anyone around" she could be interested in,

and so she turned to the Internet, because she said: "the Net seemed to be the "in" thing these days". For Neil, the Internet provided a practical solution to a difficult problem:

I recognised the net as the most practical way to connect with like-minded people of a similar age, plus the ability to match for common interests/locality and see a photo. Where else can you do that? It works and it works well for me. Neil (71)

Similarly for Nicholas, using the Internet not only proved to be both fast and effective, but provided him with quick and easy access to a large number of possible dating partners that he could choose from:

I was just moving through a divorce after 35+ years of marriage and determined I was not cut out to be single. I registered on RSVP after researching various sites. I was inundated with a dozen or so emails from a range of ladies before I could get my own emails out. After a series of emails over 2 - 3 days I was fortunate enough to have dinner with my present partner and effectively withdrew from RSVP the following day. Nicholas (63)

Likewise for Harry, the Internet made it easy to find others with similar interests and he was confident that those who were registered on dating websites were also looking for a romantic partner, thus he found no need to pursue other methods:

I found it was a nice place to view women who are interested in finding a partner, and I could read a profile of that person so that I could find out if we have similar interests [and] frankly, I never really tried [other methods]. Harry (71)

Others also commented on the ease of use that dating websites provided as well as the structured approach that could be applied to a, typically, unstructured process:

RSVP is so easy... it's dead easy. Liam (61)

I'm a bit shy, [I] like the technology and liked the structure of RSVP that encouraged you to be honest about yourself. Bob (63)

In summary, although 19 of the 32 participants in the Online Romance group were actively engaged in real life social and activity clubs, like the rest of the group who were not

engaged in such clubs, many still experienced difficulty finding and meeting suitable dating partners in their offline social networks. For the older adults in this cohort the Internet therefore provided an easy, practical way to find potential new partners – and, in effect, it offered them more choice than in their offline lives (Illouz 2007). Furthermore, as expressed by Amy, Neil and Harry, those who used dating websites were clearly looking for a relationship, so there was never any ambiguity about their intentions, whereas in real life it was sometimes difficult to know if this was the case. Consequently, for these older adults the Internet can be seen as a useful tool to facilitate relationship formation.

Recent figures indicate that 450,000 people visit the dating website RSVP.com® every month (Nielsen Online Ratings 2011) and in 2010, the site boasted a figure of approximately 1.6 million registered members as at August 5, 2010 (Fairfax Media 2010). It is difficult to judge the accuracy of this claim, but it serves to highlight that online dating websites offer myriad choices to contact. The next section examines how older adults decide whom to contact from the numerous alternatives available on dating websites.

### **Early dating: the structuring of online romance**

Those who seek love online need to think carefully about what they value in a new partner, and may well look for like-minded others with common interests and shared ideals. This section looks at what older adults look for in an online partner and the role personal profiles play in this choice. These profiles act not only as a screening tool, but they can also function as a self-improvement device.

Finding a partner through online dating sites follows a fairly orderly pattern: searching the personal profiles and photographs on display, initiating contact through the website, following up with email correspondence, proceeding to phone calls and, in due course, meeting in real life. The following section illustrates the way this happens and how, for many older adults, knowing how the system works makes the whole process relatively simple to negotiate and stress free. The section is arranged according to the way online

dating is structured: setting up **personal profiles, using criteria** and **following protocol**, and ends with a discussion surrounding **gendered norms and female agency**.

### **Personal profiles and their importance in online dating**

When first registering on a dating website such as RSVP.com®, participants are requested to fill in a “personal profile”. The profile consists of a series of check boxes detailing demographic and physical details and a section where members use their own words to describe themselves and what they like to do. This profile, which can be likened to a self-portrait in words, is then displayed on the database for other members to look at (for a more detailed discussion on profiles and their use, see Baker 2005: 32-34). RSVP.com® publishes advice to new members on how to set up a personal profile (see below).

#### **Advice on How to Write a Personal Profile**

What you say about yourself speaks volumes. First of all, don't panic! It's a profile, not a life story. And it is meant to reflect something about you, so unless you are a prize winning author, people won't be expecting a literary masterpiece. Keep it light and friendly, and avoid adding anything negative. Never include your last name, email address, home address, phone number, place of work or any other identifying information in your member profile.

Everyone wants to meet an honest person. It is extremely important that you portray yourself in an honest light from the very outset - starting with your profile. While discretion is recommended, lying is not, so be honest when you post your profile and photos. The 'real' people, the ones you want to meet, don't expect perfection. In fact, if someone seems too good to be true, they probably are. So be honest, be yourself and start off on the right foot. What might begin as an online flirtation could turn into the real thing unless you've built yourself an image you can't live up to.

The more people know about you, the more comfortable they will feel in contacting you, or initiating conversation with you. So if you want to get a greater response to your profile, and begin meeting more people today then make sure you write a detailed profile.

Just remember the more detail you add to your profile, the more likely you are to find your ideal match; we also recommend adding a photo to your profile to increase your chances of success. (Fairfax Media 2010)

Members are also encouraged to fill in an “Ideal Partner Profile” to reflect the kind of person they are looking for (see below).

#### **Ideal Partner Profile**

The Ideal Partner Profile enables you narrow the search for the type of person you're looking for – ranging from age, gender, location, background, to their interests, whether they should/shouldn't have children and much more. It's a great idea to complete this section as it's displayed on your profile, so other members can see what kind of person you are looking for. (Fairfax Media 2010)

Going through the process of writing a *Personal Profile* and setting up an *Ideal Partner Profile*, means that the users of online dating websites are required to think very carefully about how they wish to portray themselves and what they are looking for in a new partner. The websites provide checklists, detailing long lists of characteristics – such as height, weight, lifestyle, political affiliation, religion, even hair colour – which members can “tick” according to their preferences. In this manner members develop very strong criteria about the sort of people they will date. This was certainly true for the majority of the participants in the Online Romance group.

#### **Using “criteria”**

In the Face to Face Romance group, compatibility was determined over a gradual period of time; in the Online Romance group, finding common interests and identifying elements of compatibility appears to happen at a much earlier stage in relationship formation – essentially before people meet face to face. In some ways this is not surprising, given the initial importance placed on personal profiles and how they are used as a tool to identify like-minded individuals. Many participants relied on photographs, which members attach to their personal profiles, as an initial screening tool to see if they found a person attractive or not. Russell (70) said he would only respond to “people who have photos” and Neville (76) said he thought photos were very important in helping to choose a partner. If Russell

and Neville did not like the look of a particular photograph, they would not contact the person further. Amy (64) endorsed this practice, as she always had a photo displayed on her profile and if someone she was interested in did not, she would ask to see one before making additional contact.

For Harry, although the photograph was the first thing he looked at, reading profiles looking for characteristics which fit his own particular criteria was a very important part of the process of finding a new dating partner:

Well, firstly I go on appearance [the photo] – then I read the profile – some are interesting – some are just plain boring. I then look at the height and build – education – interests including sport, movies etc. Harry (71)

Others were more interested in how well people expressed themselves in their profiles. Written expression – grammar, spelling and so on – was obviously very important and was often used as a standard with which to judge personal profiles and, indeed, the person themselves:

His profile told me a lot about what was important to him. Some people give very little info... Choice of words are meaningful to me, bad spelling is a real turn-off! LOL. Larissa (73)

If they can't spell that sort of [pause]... well, it says something about the intelligence of the person... Liam (61)

I draw a lot from the way people write or express themselves in their profiles. I mean, you get more pedantic profiles of course, you know "I love picnics" and so on, and then you get the repeat stuff. It took me about three months to start to pick up on [that] and say well, that's not for me. But someone who's made a bit of an effort says something to me. Somebody who can spell reasonably well... You can sort the wheat from the chaff by the way people express themselves. Christopher (61)

Norah, however, had the opposite view. For her, spelling and education were unimportant. She preferred to focus on the person themselves:

Spelling doesn't come into it. No, or education. I try to have a very open mind and don't judge a book by its cover. I try to get to know the person irregardless [sic] of past. Norah (60)

For Veronica, like Norah, the written word was relatively unimportant. In fact, she did not have much faith in what people wrote in the online context and valued it only as a tool to initiate contact. Instead, she preferred hearing someone's voice over the telephone and used this as a guide to judge how someone really was, followed by their behaviour when they met face to face:

Just emails doesn't help at all. They can write anything. Usually judge by sound of voice on phone first. The way they look at me or not, interest in what I am saying, readiness [sic] to answer my questions, but mainly if the time is dragging and I can't wait to go, or boy, has 3 hrs passed! Veronica (60)

In terms of characteristics, some older adults adhered to very strict criteria when browsing the personal profiles and were unabashed about what it was they looked for in a new partner. For instance, Russell made no apologies for what he called his "weeding process", which he painstakingly followed before deciding to make contact with someone:

One is visual because of the photo... for those women online who do not have a picture, if they contact me the first thing I ask is for them to provide a picture so that way we're on equal footing because I have my image on my profile. Then I read through the profile and look at their personal and cultural activities and beliefs... if I find a person doesn't enjoy the type of cultural activities that I do, then I put them on the bottom of the list. I'm a non-smoker, so I generally delete smokers. I also look immediately at the age range of people that they're interested in being in contact with. I also have been involved with, ah, I'll have to use prejudicial terms here, with people who are overweight and, again, if they're, ah, overweight too much then I just eliminate them. The way they write, that's another thing that is a factor with me, because if they can't express themselves and if they can't spell and use a spell checker before they put the damn thing online, well, I have a hard time with that and, again, that's one of those factors that puts them well down the line. Russell (70)



Likewise, Lachlan was able to list a number of attributes that he looked for in his “ideal” partner, and both Liam and Owen went through a similar type of checklist to Russell when looking at profiles:

I had 5 items [that were important]: fun, intelligent, attractive, sorry I’ve lost one, and chemistry. Lachlan (63)

Photos... age group... height... you sort of try to look for somebody that you think fits the type of thing that you are looking for... and their music tastes have an affect [sic] on me too... and what they write... no it just pushes me away [if] we’ve not got the same interests... yes and sport and all that sort of thing. Liam (61)

For me, I guess that the person has to fit an age range. I can’t see myself being with a 30 yo. My daughters would not approve! Then there is the photo. They have to look OK... Then the profile, I like to use the zodiac as a rough guide to who will be compatible, then education and interests. Owen (66)

If prospective partners did not fulfill all or many of these criteria then Lachlan, Liam and Owen would not proceed to face to face meetings. In contrast, when faced with doubts about whether someone was compatible or not, rather than dismissing the possibility entirely on the basis of criteria, Joyce relied on face to face meetings as the deciding factor in whether to take the relationship further:

My experience has taught me that unless I like the photo and the criteria match up, it is no use pursuing the relationship. If in doubt, a meeting for coffee will usually sort it out. Joyce (66)

Despite these differences, the fact that Russell, Joyce and others like them could articulate quite clearly their criteria for a new partner indicates the reflexiveness involved in the process of browsing online profiles. This process also appears to extend inwards, in a self-reflective manner. This is evidenced by the changes that many of the older adults made to their own personal profiles over time – rewording their personal descriptions, adding or omitting certain details, for instance – in a continuous process, akin almost to a work in progress.

A number of factors influenced these changes. Usually older adults were motivated to make changes to their profiles in response to a lack of success in attracting any contacts, or to a lack of success in attracting the type of contacts they preferred. Christopher's comment succinctly sums this up:

The other thing of course [is] I think you've probably tailored your own profile to attract the sort of person you're wanting anyway. I'm finding now with [making] some small changes to my profile... I am attracting the sort of people, or [being] attractive to, I guess, the people that I'm looking for. Christopher (61)

Harry underwent a similar process of reinvention to Christopher. The way he conducts himself online now, he says, is significantly different from his early behaviour:

When I first went on RSVP about two years ago I forgot how to date and how to treat women - I am now 'well dressed' and know how to behave in an effective manner... - look [I'm] still learning - I am getting better at this all the time - the emails I send etc are so much better than what I used to send. Harry (71)

The ultimate aim of this ongoing reassessment/reinvention is to meet new dating partners. The following discussion describes how contacting and eventually meeting dating partners is structured to the extent, that it has been likened to following a "protocol".

### **Following a protocol**

Finding a partner through online dating sites follows a fairly orderly pattern: searching the personal profiles and photographs on display, initiating contact through the website, following up with email correspondence, proceeding to phone calls and, in due course, meeting in real life. The following anecdotes illustrate the way this happens and how, for many older adults, knowing how the system works makes the whole process relatively simple to negotiate and stress free. As Nicholas (63) commented, it was "very easy".

Once registered with a dating website and setting up a personal profile, the first step to finding a new partner involved searching the database and scanning photographs "for a

person fitting a 'preferred partner profile' in a [specific] geographic area" (Owen, 66). Neil, a veteran user of dating websites, explained what happens next in quite some detail:

1. Send an electronic kiss [to someone you like the look of]
2. 15-20% send back a "Yes, please email me". That means using an RSVP "stamp" costing \$4 to \$7
3. Then you can email but anonymously via RSVP for a month, but if it's going to go anywhere you soon exchange personal names, email addresses and phone numbers
4. Then you talk on the phone
5. With the ones who are really interested you start exchanging compliments. If the phone calls go on for a couple of hours at night a few terms of endearment start to creep into the conversation
6. You agree to meet for coffee
7. If you feel pretty good at the meeting, you go out for dinner afterwards
8. By then it's pretty obvious if you have a mutual enough liking to get round to actual dating
9. Keep in mind that we grew up in the swinging late sixties where everyone went to bed with everyone after a dinner date – so sometimes we just relive our youth and do that
10. If not, then there is a period of courting leading up to the physical – if it's obvious that both people want to move to that, sometimes an hour after the coffee meeting, sometimes a week, though often not to full intercourse [right away]. More like teenagers with heavy "petting" it used to be called, but definitely sexual. Neil (71)

Online dating websites are for-profit organisations, and part of the structure they provide enables them to earn money from connecting potential partners. "Kisses" (or "winks") can be sent for free, and both the older adult women and men felt comfortable sending them to many potential partners. The next stage of contact costs money. As Neil reported, if he received a positive response from a "kiss" he had sent, he was then required to spend between \$4 and \$7 on an RSVP.com® "stamp" to respond. The "stamp" enabled Neil and others to communicate through anonymous e-mails and/or instant chat or instant messaging (IM) via the dating website. The older adults found this method worked as a further screening measure before committing to talk by phone.

Christopher described the structured process of online dating as akin to a “protocol” and said that, for him, it was both logical and reassuring:

Yes, well, I found a kind of almost a protocol, whereby I’ll send an email and I get an email response back and I might send another email and then we get on the phone and we talk and often those conversations could last quite a long time. So essentially you know, it’s at a more advanced stage... you can hear inflections in voice and you can hear people saying things and, I mean, it’s easier than say on email of course. So I guess the crescendo builds. So email to telephone to meet is a very logical course for me. Christopher (61)

Amanda, in her first long-term relationship post-divorce, portrayed a similar experience to Christopher – emails, phone calls and then meeting – but she also made use of the Instant Chat software supplied by the dating website. She said:

[We] exchanged emails and then phone calls and then met face-to-face. I liked the look of his profile, I liked the sound of his voice and we did do the chat thing on RSVP and that went off very well. Amanda (60)

Likewise Dennis, who had never been involved in online dating before, found the process to be quick, easy and beneficial. At the time of the study, he and his online partner had been living together for three and a half years:

So I enrolled in RSVP... I received a kiss and we started exchanging emails for some 3-4 days, then ICQ [IM] for 2 days, then exchanged telephone numbers and after about 2 weeks I came up to see [her]. Dennis (60)

The system does not suit everyone of course. Despite resorting to online means to meet new partners, Liam did not like having to use email as a means of contacting people because he said he was a “lousy typist”. The process set up by the dating website forced him to make initial contact through email correspondence; however, once initial contact was made with someone new, he circumvented the need to continue using it by providing his phone number. His current relationship began with just one email and then quickly progressed to telephone contact:

There was one email. She phoned me the following [day]. 'Cause I always give my phone number because I'm a lousy typist and so all the emailing stuff I don't like. I just give my phone number and I give the ladies the option to ring me. Liam (61)

Many of the older adults in the Online Romance group initiated meetings with numerous prospective partners over many months, whilst for others the online dating experience was comparatively brief as they found a connection with someone almost immediately. Neil, referred to earlier, had been using dating websites for seven years where he had established contact with approximately 200 women. The stages of this contact followed a regimented process:

Of those 200 only one third progressed to regular communication, phone calls and e-mails, and those 66 about half got to the coffee meeting stage. So that gets down to 33 RSVP coffee meetings. Out of those coffee meetings, usually only about one out of five developed into a romantic relationship. Now this may sound like rather poor odds, but from my point of view six or seven romantic relationships over 6 or 7 years at my age is an extremely positive outcome. Obviously one has to be persistent and incredibly optimistic, but from my point of view I have had seven happy years, made some wonderful and permanent friends and lost nothing along the way. Where else can I get anything like that except on the Internet? Neil (71)

In contrast to Neil's experiences, Elaine's online presence was relatively short-lived, as she found a compatible partner in a very short space of time:

The 3<sup>rd</sup> man I'd contacted replied to my message... and suggested meeting for coffee. I replied that I'd like to email him a bit to learn more about him. We exchanged about 3 emails apiece and then we met for coffee. Elaine (61)

The process of setting up profiles, viewing others profiles and photographs, sending "kisses", responding with emails, chatting online or by phone and eventually meeting is a process organised and regularised by the online dating websites. To what extent the older adults in this group choose to follow this "protocol" is highly individual but, on the whole, is governed by the norms established on the website. It has previously been suggested that online dating supports 'gendered patterns of interaction' (Barraket & Henry-Waring 2008: 159), with older men initiating first contact – that is, actively sending out "kisses" to

possible new partners. In the current study this was not the case. As Elaine's anecdote indicates, she took control of contacting men she was interested in. The following discussion thus centres on the topic of gendered norms and female agency on online dating websites.

### **Gendered norms and female agency online**

Henry-Waring and Barraket have argued that online dating reinforces heteronormative roles and responsibilities, because of its reliance on what they call 'highly gendered' activities (2008: 26): men are required to be the 'initiators', making the first move by sending a 'kiss' or a 'wink' and women the passive recipients of their attention (page 26). This finding suggests that relationships initiated in the online environment will hold little resemblance to the democratic principles of pure relationships that Giddens espouses. However, they also noted that a small number of female participants resisted this normative behaviour and were instigating contact themselves. This latter contention was clearly supported in the current study where, like Elaine, many of the online female participants frequently commenced contact and controlled the pace and development of their new relationships. For instance, Nellie sent many "kisses" over a long period of time before finally meeting someone she connected with and Nicholas said he was "inundated" with contacts from "a range of ladies". Likewise, Dennis received a "kiss" from his now partner and Joyce described "pursuing" relationships beyond the photograph/criteria stage. Russell (70), who had been using dating websites for quite some time, said he never had to personally initiate contact with anyone and estimated that "150 or more women" had made "direct contact" or had "looked" at his profile.

It is clear from the preceding anecdotes that female initiation of contact was quite normal for these older adults in the context of dating websites. Indeed, many participants, both men and women, spoke of the reciprocal nature of the process of online dating – there were no "he does this/she does that" rules to follow. Furthermore, waiting around to be contacted did not sit well with most of the older adult females in the online group, as they

preferred to be autonomous and to be in control. Given this, I would argue that the structured processes of online dating websites – the personal profiles, the establishment of criteria and the adherence to behavioural protocols – govern the way relationships evolve online, not gender. Furthermore, the back and forth nature of early online contact reflects more a state of reciprocity and egalitarianism than Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008) have found. This assertion is tempered, however, as it could well be an age, or indeed a sample difference, which accounts for this variance in findings.

The stories illustrate that the initiation of these older adult online romances was centred around and organised by the dating website, whereby prospective partners met each other through their personal profiles, photographs and emails, before moving on to online chat and/or telephone contact and then eventually meeting face to face. The role of the Internet, in this respect, was as initiator and moderator for these burgeoning relationships and without this role these relationships would not have begun. This next section looks at the beginning of online romances: the attraction felt in the virtual environment and the subsequent transition of the romance offline.

### **Online attraction: identifying what “clicks”**

The older adults in the Online Romance group were asked how they actually connected or “clicked” in the virtual environment without the benefit of the normal everyday (visual, auditory, physical) cues that accompany meeting face to face – and what it was that motivated them to take their burgeoning romances offline. Their answers indicated they were persuaded of their partner’s compatibility, albeit in diverse ways. For some, **hyperpersonal communication** played a key role and for others it was identifying **common interests and/or physical characteristics** which provided the catalyst for moving the relationship forward.

## Hyperpersonal communication

Elaine thought the photograph and personal profile of her new partner were important when they first met online, but it was the way he answered his emails which really attracted her to him:

Firstly, I liked his picture – not an oil painting, but interesting – and he looks just like it. Secondly, his profile was interesting – mentioning feelings etc. Thirdly, the way he wrote his emails attracted me – he answered my questions, gave information about himself and asked me questions. I felt it was the beginning of a real dialogue – not just a male monologue. Elaine (61)

Likewise, Bob described an online attraction that he and his partner, Caroline, took great pains to develop slowly, over a prolonged period of time. Both had undergone difficult experiences with previous partnerships and were in no hurry to establish a new one. Unusually, in the context of the Online Romance group, their relationship remained exclusively online, with no other form of contact, for twelve months. Like Elaine's experience, it was their ongoing email correspondence which provided the catalyst for Bob and Caroline's relationship to develop into a caring bond:

One year of regular emails, up to 3 per day (no phone contact ever!)... I felt strongly attracted to her before we met and discontinued other relationships with the hope [she] would feel the same way, once we met... Meeting on the Internet, accepting a pen pal, was a total [sic] new experience for me, which enabled me to get to know her more thoroughly than the others. It focused more on compatibility rather than lust. Bob (62)

Both Elaine and Bob felt extremely connected to their new partners before either couple met face to face. This was accomplished without the benefit of everyday visual, auditory or physical cues, which are usually regarded as necessary prerequisites for any relationship to develop (see for instance Rice & Love 1997). As commented further by Elaine:

I can't really explain it, but something "clicked" and I just knew he was right for me... I guess when I'm intellectually challenged, and the outer wrapping is reasonable, I'm interested. Although, it's never happened to me like this before. Elaine (61)



For Dennis the initial attraction was driven and magnified by the extensive exchange of emails during the times he and his now partner were apart:

During the email sessions – and in the first 4 days there were over 15 emails – I noticed a wit, humour, full of life person – and over the 11 months before moving [in together] we had nearly 1000 emails – most of which I still have... Dennis (60)

In all three instances, the email correspondence between the couples created an emotionally-charged connection, which fuelled the desire for their relationships to develop further. Although Bob said “nothing romantic” was said between him and Caroline, Walther has argued that online communication (the text) itself is hyperpersonal – imbued with more intimacy than normal communication (1996: 34) – which means that the text would appear romantic even if it was not intended to. This may well describe what occurred between Elaine, Bob and Dennis and their new partners. In effect, their online text exchange exceeded ‘the level of affection and emotion’ of ‘f2f [face to face] interaction’ (Walther 1996: 17) creating a tenderness and a vibrancy that then translated to their offline relationship. Certainly Elaine remarked, in terms of her feelings for her partner, “it’s never happened to me like this before” and Bob said he was “strongly attracted” to Caroline based purely on what she wrote to him. For Dennis, the attraction created by the email interaction was so strong he went interstate to see his new partner after only two weeks of meeting online.

### **Common interests and/or physical characteristics**

For Nellie, attraction to her new partner was based on their many interests in common, particularly in terms of travel. She described how moving their connection offline to talking on the phone became a natural extension of the ease with which they communicated online:

Firstly he was intelligent (important to me), a good communicator, many interests in common especially travel to the same places. I was taken by all this and we talked freely for hours on the phone. Nellie (63)

Like Nellie, Freddie also identified telephone communication as playing an important role in his developing relationship. He originally met his now wife Mimi online, totally unexpectedly, through a work association. He described the early stages of their relationship as a “series” – going through “episodes” of text correspondence [emails], phone calls, photos, video and letters:

We felt at ease with each other within a month of first talking... The “click” was simply we loved talking to each other. At one time for 9 hours straight! ...I at first thought the idea [of getting together] was too wild, but that click made us both persevere. After hours of talking it just grew exponentially. Freddie (69)

Although Freddie met his partner by chance, all other aspects of his relationship development and progression mirrored that of the other older adults in the Online Romance group who deliberately sought new partners. However, his feeling of “surprise” at finding himself involved after being a widower for many years mirrors the emotions felt by the members of the Face to Face Romance group who, like Freddie, found themselves in unexpected relationships.

Talking was also very important to Liam. He identified a very strong attraction to his new partner’s voice, which he said “surprised” him “amazingly”.

Well the photo of course. She put a series of photos up, which was nice. They were all photos where I could see her face clearly... She just looked like a very gentle person and... our music was the same. Some of the things we did were the same and others were absolute opposites. And I thought well, that’s a good thing anyway because it’s nice to go into a relationship with, you know, to see and learn about other things and she seemed to be about the same with that too. And we were the same age group, the same height... you know, you sort of try to look for somebody that you think fits the type of thing that you are looking for. And she did. Her voice surprised me, amazingly actually... she’s a nicely spoken women and has great vocabulary and her background was business but she’d ah suddenly changed from business and is now a full time artist, so there were some things about her that intrigued me. Liam (61)

Liam felt compatible with his new partner on many levels, and was both captivated and intrigued by her. Any differences between them he construed as positive and as a chance for him to “learn about” new things. For Dennis, shared ideals and the ability to be self-reliant in a fiscal sense was vitally important:

We appeared to have similar values, politically, socially, emotionally and, importantly she was financially independent. Dennis (60)

Like Nellie and her partner, Max and his online date established a common link in terms of their like of travel, but he also found they both emphasised a sense of humour as being an important component of any new relationship:

I was impressed by her profile, as I think she was with mine... I stressed in my profile... that I wanted to travel... and she's someone whom travel appeals to, and we both strongly stressed a sense of humour, which I think is *extremely* important [emphasis in the original]. And so this appealed to her and it appealed to me. Max (69)

Although Naomi said she was attracted to her new partner's “brain”, she too, like Max, also found her partner's humour a great attraction:

He was funny and intelligent. We like the same music and would often write a line of a song each [in our emails]. I was attracted to his brain. Naomi (61)

The stories show that, in the online environment, email communication followed by offline talking skills provided the foundation for these new late life romances to go forward. The hyperpersonal nature of online text was matched by what appeared to be the equally hyperpersonal nature of the telephone conversations between these older adults. In Freddie's case the chemistry evoked by writing and talking to Mimi over a period of twelve months sustained his interest and effectively compressed their face to face courtship period when they finally met, as evidenced by their engagement within two weeks of their first meeting. For Nellie, Max and others, their shared interests in travel and humour provided a basis for ongoing communication and shared experiences.

Intimate communication forms the basis for today's pure relationships. The anecdotes indicate that this was the case for these older adults who, for the most part, desired egalitarian relationships based on intimate communication and shared ideals. The following section looks at meeting face to face: the speed with which this occurs and whether online attraction translates offline.

### **From the virtual to the real: meeting face to face**

After the initial online attraction, the couples then proceeded to meet. The vast majority of the relationships in the Online Romance group progressed to offline dating very rapidly, on average in less than two weeks from first email contact, which has also been found in other studies (Whitty & Carr 2006). The long, slow development of Bob and Caroline's relationship, described earlier, was relatively rare. Not surprisingly then, a **sense of urgency** was a recurring theme, with older adults describing how quickly and intensely their relationships developed. The second theme concerns whether the attraction felt online translated offline: **instant attraction versus initial ambivalence**.

#### **Speed: a sense of urgency**

George (69) thought the "best thing" about online dating was the "speed" with which relationships could be initiated online and swiftly advanced to real life experiences. He was dating for the first time since the death of his wife and met his new partner offline within four days of meeting online. Lachlan described a similar situation, but said both he and his partner were actually stunned at the outset by how quickly their relationship developed:

Fast and intense, the speed left both of us having panic wobbles... both of us were stunned by the pace and both found it overwhelming at various times in the first few weeks. Lachlan (63)

These sentiments were echoed by Nicholas, Liam and Harry, whose descriptions of their early days of online dating were instilled with their sense of urgency to meet in real life as quickly as possible:

We had a flurry of emails before my partner offered a photo and pretty soon there was a mutual need to converse by phone and an almost immediate move to meet for dinner... There was the exchange of emails and photos within the first 24 hours, phone contact and dinner within 48. Nicholas (63)

This girl rang me the following day. We met about three days later and it was one hundred percent go from the start. Liam (61)

In my first email via RSVP I included my telephone number and she rang me that night... then we arranged to meet. Harry (71)

These results substantiate those of Whitty and Carr, who found that online daters aimed to move relationships offline as quickly as possible (2006: 127). The "urgency" with which the stories in the current study are imbued is not restricted to the Online Romance group, however. It reflects the findings for the Face-to-Face Romance group, where the majority of new relationships were also instilled with the same need for speed.

Whitty and Carr (2006) maintain that online daters want to find out as soon as possible whether there is any "physical chemistry" between themselves and their dating partners (page 127). These researchers argue that online daters do not want to waste any time before meeting their prospective partners in real life – presumably so they can move on to the next contact or person if no such chemistry exists. My results suggest that for these older adults this so-called "urgency" is of a different nature to that found in the Whitty and Carr study. This urgency has more to do with the age of the older adults and with their sense of their own mortality, in effect, an awareness of a finite future (Carstensen 1992). Indeed, Lachlan (63) described the need for speed as a "realisation that there is not unlimited time" and George (69) succinctly described it thus:

"Life for me may only have another 20 years – not 50 – so why wait?" George (69).

This urgency may well be as a direct result of this perception of limited time left, but it is also coupled with what appears to be a driving need of these older adults to be involved in emotionally salient relationships (Stephure et al. 2009).

For Ester, the rapidity with which her relationship developed was sometimes overwhelming:

There were a lot of e-mails, 4-5 per day, with music attachments, poems and love songs. He was very good at that. We talked on the telephone quite a lot too before meeting. Having been on my own for so long, and meeting this man online who was using charm, he was witty, made me laugh a lot.... He was bombarding me with music I am very fond of... Ester (71)

After this whirlwind online courtship, Ester met her new partner face to face just three weeks later. She said he "swept me off my feet, almost to my peril!"

The urgency experienced by most of the older adults in this group propelled them to meet their new partners' offline within a very short time of meeting online. This involved determining whether the intense attraction felt online translated to the same attraction in real life.

### **Instant attraction versus initial ambivalence**

The majority of participants described their first real life meetings as occurring during the day time and on fairly neutral ground. This usually meant at a coffee shop where neither of them were known, and at a location mid-point between where both of them lived. If the coffee date was successful, other dates usually followed in quick succession. When it became apparent that Max and his date had enough things in common, they arranged to meet over a cup of coffee, which was quickly followed up by a dinner date – all within a just over a week of meeting online. Max and Wendy both felt an instant attraction:

It was an extraordinary night, Sue, it really was. We just hit it off. Full stop. Max (69)

For Lachlan and his partner, whose relationship was still at a very early stage, the attraction was so intense he said “we felt like we were seventeen again!”

Lorraine met her new partner four weeks after they connected online. The physical connection happened “immediately”:

I was immediately attracted physically to this person, and felt entirely comfortable in his presence. I was impressed by his politeness and attention towards me, his interest in me and my life, and his ability to make me laugh. Lorraine (65)

Elaine’s experience was similar to Lorraine’s. She and her new partner met for coffee and spent over four hours talking, and then went for dinner, chatting the whole time:

As I drove back... I knew that we could be not only good friends, but also that there was chemistry! Elaine (61)

Like Max and Wendy, Adam and his partner Maureen had their first date offline at a “morning coffee rendezvous” within ten days of meeting online. He said he knew immediately that they would be able to develop a relationship:

I felt right away that we could get somewhere together. She is tall enough to look me in the eye and has a great smile. She is pretty smart and I have always gravitated to intelligent women. Adam (66)

Adam’s initial feeling about Maureen was reciprocated and two years later they were still together. Like the face to face romances, for some there was very little initial attraction, for others romance was quick to blossom. For Nellie, Freddie and Liam, online and phone attraction was very strong. This attraction did not always translate immediately face to face however. Nellie was attracted to her new partner both online and over the phone – he had a “great voice” – but she felt “no strong, immediate physical attraction” when they first met:

Emailed for a few weeks. Then a few phone calls. Great voice. Then met for lunch. The face to face was a bit of a letdown to be honest. Nellie (63)

However, despite the unsatisfactory first impression, she said the “chemistry” between them was very strong and at the time of the interview, Nellie’s relationship had developed and was still ongoing after four months. Whilst their online attraction did not immediately translate to a face to face attraction, Nellie and her partner found they had a connection and liked each other enough for a relationship to develop between them. As Nellie said, they were more interested in each other’s personality anyway, so it allowed them to overlook the lack of initial offline attraction.

Edna met her new dating partner face to face within two weeks of meeting online. Like Nellie, she was also initially ambivalent as she wasn’t sure she was really attracted to him:

He was pleasant, friendly, quite fun to be with... I can’t remember what he said now and he was younger... I wasn’t sure as he had a moustache and I don’t like them, but when we met he was pleasant and seemed a nice enough person... Edna (68)

Despite this early ambivalence, Edna and her partner were together for a year and a half before breaking up. Like Nellie, Edna said that even though there was no immediate physical allure, once they “talked” in real life she realised she could have a relationship with this man. In contrast, Freddie and Mimi felt an instant connection when they finally met one year after initial online contact, so much so they became engaged within two weeks of meeting for the first time.

Once these older adults met their new partners’ offline, compatibility, based on common interests and emotional and physical attraction provided the catalyst for their new romantic relationships (Aron et al. 2006) as did intimate communication – all hallmarks of pure relationships. The following section explores how these older adults romances progressed from initial face to face meetings to established partnerships. Whilst the goal appeared to be to establish long-term, permanent relationships, for some this was not easily achieved.



## **Progression and consolidation: offline relationship formation**

This final section traces the progression and consolidation of these online romances into offline established partnerships – otherwise known as mixed mode relationships (Walther & Parks 2002). For some, early dating involved an exchange of emails, talking online by IM, phone calls, meeting for coffee and then going to bed, all within the space of five days. For others the scenario comprised emails, phone conversations and then interstate travel to meet, all within two weeks of registering on the dating website. Still others “dated” online for twelve months before meeting face to face for the first time. Like the Face to Face Romance group, consolidating relationships in the real world involved decisions regarding intimacy and partnering: marriage/cohabitation or living apart together and monogamy/non-monogamy.

As previously mentioned, the majority of the relationships reported in this chapter developed and progressed offline extremely quickly. All the participants in the Online Romance group reported that their relationships were or had been sexual and 27 of the partnerships became intimate in less than one month, with some as quickly as five days. For those who became intimate later, this was mostly because of proximity issues – their partners lived interstate or overseas, or because they had made a conscious decision to wait, like Bob and Caroline. These results are very similar to those reported in Chapter Six, where all relationships also became sexually intimate, and for the majority, in just over a month after meeting.

### **Long-term desires versus short-term outcomes**

It was clear from the interviews, that the men and women in the Online Romance group desired long lasting, committed relationships. However, many of the older adults in this group were not currently partnered and had been involved in a number of short-term, casual relationships. Whether this was because of an artefact of the sample – after all, participants were sourced from dating websites so potentially were still single – is hard to

determine. However, as a number of the Online Romance group still maintained contact with dating websites even though they were already partnered (both long-term or otherwise), it is difficult to judge whether this is actually the case and requires further research. Despite the short term nature of their experiences, these participants reported aiming for long-term relationships based on sexual and emotional equality:

The sort of man I want is an educated, well-adjusted man who is capable of sharing an equal relationship where we can enjoy our like interests. I actually do not want a sexual relationship with anyone unless there is some hope of it lasting. I take it seriously. Joyce (66)

I think that I am looking more for companionship, shared values and a person with an equal intelligence and curiosity to my own; someone with depth, who is willing to look within, to look beyond the surface. I definitely want recognition as a person, not as a stereotyped female... With the most recent it was his description of intimacy [which drew me to him]. He said he wanted a committed relationship. Amy (64)

The participants attributed the short-term nature of their connections to three main factors: First, the large numbers of people available through online dating sites made it possible to try out relationships before committing to them. Second, because all were seeking long lasting relationships, if the people they met were not looking for the same long-term involvement, these connections were ended. Finally, some attributed the short-term nature of their relationships to a lack of flexibility on the part of their partners. In these respects, online dating had played an important role in the longevity of these relationships – it acted as a facilitator for the relationships to begin, but at the same time it made them easy to exit.

### ***A plethora of partners***

The first explanation for the transitory, short-term nature of the relationships was the large number of possible partners available through online dating websites. Participants reported that there were far more potential partners available online via dating websites than in their offline or real world social environments:

If you want statistics, I would say that I have sent electronic kisses to well over 2000 women over the past seven years. Of that number probably only 200 responded with any kind of positive acknowledgement but one out of 10 is not bad odds really when you consider the alternatives, waiting to meet people in bars or clubs. Neil (71)

And, as Nicholas said earlier after he registered on RSVP, he was inundated with “a dozen or so email from a range of ladies” before he could get his own emails out (Nicholas 63).

This plethora of possible partners gave the participants chances to try out relationships before committing to them, meaning that they could leave partnerships that were not ideal as there were many other potential partners to pursue. For these participants the low entry and exit costs of online dating were an attraction. Such factors mean that the older adults could easily end relationships that did not suit them and just as easily look for ones that might.

### ***Sex versus commitment***

Several of the participants commented that their relationships had been short-lived because the people they met were not interested in commitment. For example, Veronica was divorced and had been involved with a number of men through RSVP.com®. None of her relationships had lasted longer than two months and she held the view that most of the men she met were not after ongoing, committed relationships, although she herself was looking for one.

[Most are after] casual sex. If you say no, you never hear from them again, and if you have sex you don't see them again. One guy a week later tried to contact me again; he hadn't remembered that he'd already met me. He states in his profile not after casual sex [sic]! Veronica (60)

This quote shows that Veronica felt somewhat duped by the men she had met who were interested in sex but not commitment. She did not desire casual relationships but nevertheless found herself participating in them. As there were so many people available

online, she continued to date, still hoping for a long-term connection. Other participants echoed Veronica's experiences.

### ***Inflexible attitudes***

The final reason the participants gave for the short-term nature of their relationships was a lack of flexibility on the part of their lovers. Neil, whom we met earlier, was divorced twice and had extensive experience with online dating. He had been involved in a number of romantic relationships, none of which had lasted longer than four to eight months. He described older women as lacking flexibility and used this as a reason for why his relationships had been short-lived:

Senior women are more fixed in their ways. They also carry a lot of baggage about power and control issues. Some have been badly abused in childhood and in their previous relationships / marriages – several women started out being loving and friendly but after a few months started getting bossy or angry – that's when I walk quietly away. Neil (71)

For Neil, senior women were "fixed in their ways" and, implicitly, so was he, making it difficult to come to a compatible place. The abundance of available partners through dating websites, however, meant that he could continue to begin and disengage from dating relationships on a regular basis, knowing that there were many more possible partners available. Kristen, also divorced, attributed the demise of one of her short-term relationships, like Neil, to a lack of flexibility, which she described as selfishness:

The relationship carried on for a few months off and on... I felt that he was very selfish and wanted me to fit in with the life he was planning; he wanted me to move and leave my family. Kristen (66)

Even though this relationship did not work out, Kristen continued to use dating websites and dated regularly in an effort to find "a man I could have a relationship with" (Kristen 66). Although several found themselves in short-term relationships, none of the older adults were seeking them. The three reasons given for failed romances essentially all involved a

lack of compatibility with a potential partner. Also, the large pool of possible partners available through dating websites meant that these older adults were less likely to compromise in their search for a long-term relationship.

Beyond the initial online attraction and the excitement of first dates, for the burgeoning associations which became longer term and committed, taking these further involved consolidating them into real life partnerships. Like those described in Chapter Six this involved decisions centred around intimacy, marriage and cohabitation.

### **Marriage, cohabitation or LATs**

Of the 14 partnerships which were ongoing at the conclusion of the study, eight were sustained (four of these involved marriage or cohabitation) and six were short-term. Many of the short-term partnerships were still in their infancy and could probably more rightly be regarded as dating or courting relationships, and so it is not possible to comment on their anticipated longevity – or, indeed, what form these partnerships would take – although the vast majority of the older adults, partnered or un-partnered, commented that they did not wish to cohabit now or in the future. Of the fourteen relationships which were currently or had previously been sustained or long-term (over twelve months and beyond) only five involved cohabitation or marriage. As was found in the Face to Face Romance group, all but one of those currently un-partnered had no intention of cohabitating or marrying which indicates that this form of partnership development is the exception rather than the rule. Interestingly, the two longest term partnerships were the unexpected relationships (lasting seven and five years respectively, although the latter of these had since ended). Although the older adults did not call their partnerships living apart together, the type of relationships they described and the kind they were interested in certainly fit that term. These older adults wanted commitment, companionship and sex, but they did not want to cohabit.

Bob (62), a widower, was one of the few older adults who were married or cohabiting. He and his partner Caroline delayed meeting until 12 months after connecting online. Once they established email contact, they then developed a deep and meaningful Internet relationship where they became very good friends and confidantes before meeting for the first time. They cohabited intermittently due to proximity issues, and five months after their first face to face meeting, they married and now live happily together. When asked why he got married, Bob said:

I like good company and I think I might get too feral living on my own. Bob (62)

In direct contrast to Bob's story, Nicholas (63) who was divorced after 35 years, connected with his new partner within a few days of registering online. They immediately met face to face and moved in together within two months. Cohabiting was clearly a necessary part of a committed relationship for him. He said:

I am not cut out to be single. It is a lonely existence. I am not suited to such an existence. I love to love and to be loved in return. Nicholas (63)

Dennis had been a widower for nine months before going online to find a partner. There was no question that he and his partner would not cohabit. Together for three and a half years at the time of interview, he and his partner first agreed to a trial period before committing completely, as they were constrained by issues associated with distance:

We agreed on a 6 week trial... and if that worked - which it did - I then moved in...  
Dennis (60)

The two consequential relationships also involved marriage or cohabitation. Freddie's and Yasmin's partners were initially overseas and subsequently moved to Australia so that they could be together. Their development into live-in partnerships is, therefore, perhaps not surprising under the circumstances and may well have had an impact on their longevity (Freddie's relationship was seven years old, married for two and a half years at time of interview and Yasmin's relationship had lasted five years). For Freddie, widowed for two

years and living in a remote rural area and despite his partner's visa issues, marriage was a joy:

She [was] retired unmarried, me sitting here watching the grass grow, now we are like two kids!! It is lovely! Freddie (69).

Interestingly, the four participants in the Online Romance group who were currently married or cohabiting were all male. This finding fits with previous literature which suggests that older adult males prefer to remarry or cohabit (Clarke 1995; Newman & Newman 2009), whereas older adult females prefer to remain autonomous (Borell & Ghazanfaraeon Karlsson 2007). In the current study, Yasmin was the only exception. Previously divorced and now single after her last long-term partner moved out, she said although she was no longer "looking" for a partner, if she found herself in another relationship: "I might consider living with someone else". Yasmin (64)

For the older adults in the current chapter, like those in the face to face group, the reasons given for non-cohabiting relationship forms spotlighted themes of separateness, independence and family. For many, these themes overlap.

### ***Separateness, independence and family***

Christopher was divorced and a single parent whose children had not long left home. He had been involved in a number of recent short term romances, but preferred to be partnered now that he no longer had the day to day care of his children. He was currently single, but marriage or cohabitation was not an option he would ever contemplate again. Christopher was concerned about protecting his assets, as he said, "it's not terribly romantic but it's a fact of life". He spoke quite candidly about what his "ideal" situation would be if he met someone and developed a long-term relationship:

My ideal would be... by the beach and an acreage in the country or the CBD – three different wonderful lifestyles – and what I would like is for me to have one of them and my partner to have one of the other ones. She'd have her pad in the CBD with

access to the art house movies and the coffee shops and the art galleries and I'd have my beach cottage where we could surf and walk the beach and so on. But ideally you don't live too far apart... you don't want a situation where you can only visit on weekends. We'd have lots of sleepovers and lots of mutual visits!  
Christopher (61)

Despite wishing to remain functionally separate from his partner, Christopher also wanted a committed, sharing relationship based on mutual interests such as "movies", "art galleries", and "the beach" and one in which intimacy was also important. Like Nigel and Mary from the face to face group who only lived one kilometre apart, he wanted to live close to his partner so that they could have "lots of sleepovers and lots of mutual visits". Like the majority of the older adults in this study, Christopher was desirous of a living-apart-together relationship based on what appeared to be the tenets of a pure relationship. Despite the short term nature of his previous associations, he was interested in finding a committed, long-term, egalitarian and sexual partnership but one that was functionally and financially separate. Amanda's quote also reinforces this notion of separation and financial independence which, like Edwin in Chapter Five, she tied in with family and inheritance:

[We] have spoken about that and what's mine is mine and what's his is his and his family... gets whatever he's got, I'm not going to encroach on [that] and I don't expect him to encroach on mine and that's why... we're keeping our separate properties... our separate houses and just being companions... He said he's really lucky to have found me because I'm happy to just have the friendship with, you know, the [sexual] benefits [laughs].  
Amanda (6)

Amanda was initially wary about becoming committed because of past trust issues, so it was important for her to take time to establish a connection based on friendship before allowing the relationship to consolidate further. Once trust was established and the relationship progressed, however, cohabitation was never considered. She guarded her autonomy and was determined to remain that way by retaining separate houses and finances. She was deeply attached to her new partner, but also recognised that he was "not the only man" that could give her "enjoyment". As she said:



I'm sure there's more than one person for each person. I'd be quite happy to get back online and try my chances again if this one didn't work. I think my age group... I think you can afford to be picky and choosy and you've got the confidence to say 'well no'... For some reason I'm not afraid to knock people back whereas I would have been a long time ago. Amanda (60)

Amanda's quote clearly expresses her sense of control and agency in all aspects of her life, relationships and sexuality. This agency is not something she necessarily had when she was younger; it developed over time, and is something she saw as a function of her "age".

Despite being currently single, Amy also expressed her need for a democratic, intimate relationship, albeit one that was "not joined at the hip". For her, a new relationship would entail many of the same elements expressed above by Amanda:

...being supportive of each other [and] accepting of each other's idiosyncrasies. Respecting each other's families and not trying to be mum or dad to each other's kids, but friends. I need to feel that I... trust the guy and that he would value me as a person, that he is not scared of an independent woman and that he is not looking for a mother or a nursemaid... Having said all that I do miss male companionship... I also do like the physical/sexual contact and I miss that [too, but I] don't want to be 'joined at the hip' with anyone who wants to spend a lot of time with me. Amy (64)

For Amy and other women in this study – both online and offline – being thrust into customary gender roles of nurse/caregiver was something they strove to avoid in their later life romantic relationships (see Dickson et al. 2005). One way of doing this was actively resisting marriage/cohabitation by living separately from their partners, as Amy said she didn't want to be anyone's "mother or nursemaid". In addition, the maintenance of family ties and relationships was clearly of importance for both Amanda and Amy.

Neville, a widow, involved in a relationship of 12 months, did not live with his partner and had no intention of ever doing so. His story provides an exemplar of all three themes of separateness, independence and family. He described the progression of his romance from meeting online, its early sexual beginnings and its rapid consolidation as a partnership:

We met face-to-face within a month [of meeting online] and the sexual relationship [began] soon after. We share common values and I think it's that aspect of it - the companionship, the values and compatibility that are the foundation rather than the sort of gung ho sexual aspect of it... We each look after our grandchildren [laughs] part-time. Well, there's separate families, separate dependencies...oh not dependencies, the kids are independent. But [pause] I'm not keen to relinquish my house, I'm hard to live with because I'm not tidy [laughs] and, and that's a difficulty I think for most women. And so I can minimise those sorts of difficulties [by living separately]. But apart from that my grandchildren now live [nearby] and attend schools locally and come to me after school and my partner's grandchildren come to her. And so it doesn't disrupt any of their lives. It also means that my own financial things remain confidential and [pause] I'm comfortable with this arrangement. Neville (76)

Like Edwin and others, whom we met in Chapter Five and here in this chapter, Neville was clear that he needed to remain both physically and financially separate from his long-term partner; not only to be able to facilitate his involvement in his family but also to protect his independence. Despite this, his relationship was sexual, fulfilling and committed.

Although these older adults did not call their long-term partnerships 'living apart together', the type of relationships they described certainly fit that term. These participants wanted commitment, companionship and sex, but they did not want to live with their partners. These results endorse the previous research of Borell and Ghazanfaraon Karlsson (2007), de Jong Gierveld (2002, 2004) and Levin and colleagues (Levin & Trost 1999; Levin 2004) which showed that older adults favoured partnerships which did not include living together because these types of relationships: (1) allowed them to maintain relations with their families, (2) allowed them to remain autonomous in terms of households, finances and possessions, and (3) provided a means for intimacy and commitment.

### **Monogamy/non-monogamy**

Amanda described her long-term partnership as "friends with benefits". Unlike Neville's experience, the sexual aspect did not commence till a later date. Her new relationship was

eighteen months old and did not become sexual until she decided it would, approximately eight months after she and her partner met online.

Both of us were a bit wary. He'd lost his wife after illness and I was a bit iffy about trust and so... it just sort of didn't happen for probably eight or nine months after [meeting]. It was more of a companionship up to that point. We call each other friends with benefits [laughs] [I wanted] to develop a friendship and then move off from there if it was going to move on. Amanda (60)

Amanda was initially wary about becoming committed and so it was important for her to take time to establish a connection based on firm friendship and other factors before she allowed the relationship to consolidate further. She was monogamous and expected her partner to be too:

I'm not into cheating or lying or anything. I've had that done to me [and] I'm not doing it to anyone. I'm not one into going behind the back... I think you need to be upfront with how you feel and what's going on. Amanda (60)

Amy, whom we also met earlier, reiterated the point that her ideal late-life partnership would be "permanent" and monogamous: "Being totally faithful, no flirting". Amy (64)

Lawrence (69) who was moving through the the early stages of a new relationship, said that he and other older adults involved in online dating were after much the same thing: "companionship and loving within a long-term relationship". He was monogamous and thought "cheating [was] cheating" and there was no excuse for it: "none at all".

The following anecdote highlights what appears to be a disconnection between what some people consider non-monogamy in a broad context and what they personally consider acceptable regarding their own behaviour. Veronica had been involved in a number of concurrent casual and intimate relationships. At the time of interview, she was involved with a man who was working overseas as well as with a married man she met through an online dating website. However, when interviewed, she said that there were "no" situations in which having an extra-dyadic relationship was ever acceptable, but then added:

My married guy knows ours will stop when I get into a permanent relationship. We are just fulfilling a need in both of us. Veronica (60)

Veronica said that prior to going on the Internet to find relationships she had been monogamous, but now her feelings had changed: “[Previously I] would never in my life date more than one guy at a time [but now] I have become more bold in what I say and do”. Despite the non-monogamous nature of her relationships, Veronica was after a long lasting and committed partnership (reported earlier in this chapter). She did not want short-term casual flings but found herself taking part in them. Veronica was able to solve the apparent paradox between her held views and actual behaviour by providing a rationalisation for her value conflict. By just “fulfilling a need” her non-monogamy was acceptable.

In contrast, Norah who described her eighteen month partnership as more of a “friendship-relationship” felt no need to rationalise her non-monogamous behaviour:

We actually established a very good friendship right from the very beginning. We talked online, we talked by telephone, talked by emails, went out on a few dates, and it just developed. It took about a month to get closer than friendship. We [now] have a close friendship-relationship, very dependable... And I still look [on RSVP]. And I still go out with other people. I’m keeping my options open... Even my partner has gone out with other women and he felt really bad and guilty, and I said ‘Good on you, I’m glad! You know, you’re expanding. I’m really happy for you!’  
Norah (60)

Like Neville, Norah’s relationship became sexual early on and despite her insistence that it was like a friendship, she also described it as “close” and “dependable”. Although she kept her “options open”, Norah was committed to her relationship, as indicated by its long-term nature. Like Veronica (above) and Nigel and Stewart from the Face-to-Face group who were involved in non-monogamous partnerships, and whose ideals were intimidated by Abbie, Norah’s story was in the minority, as the vast majority of the older adults relationships reported in this study appeared to be monogamous.

## Discussion and conclusion

For the older adults in this study the Internet acted as a means to firstly initiate online romances and then to facilitate their offline formation. Relationships progressed up to the first face to face meeting according to the predetermined structures put in place by the dating website, and if that meeting was not successful participants returned to the website to search for other potential matches. Arranging dates with several people simultaneously appeared to be the norm. After establishing an ongoing relationship, the website was no longer necessary, although many of the older adults still maintained their profiles and continued to visit the site.

Whether this mode of relationship initiation had any impact on the strength and longevity of relationships is difficult to say categorically, but the results presented here seem to indicate this may be possible. Certainly the face to face relationships reported in Chapter Six were more likely to be ongoing and longer-term than the online-initiated relationships. These results may be an artefact of the sample, as the majority were sourced from online dating websites and, by deduction, were still dating. As the online dating phenomenon is still in its infancy – at least among older adults – these results may well change over time, especially as the baby boomer population increasingly moves online.

It might be argued that the ease of finding and rejecting new partners online could, in fact, be detrimental to older adult relationships. However, as the Internet provides unparalleled access to others (Illouz 2007) – and far more than is possible in their everyday face to face situations – it could also be argued that this may be a good thing: (1) because it allows older adults greater freedom of choice – and a chance to try out a variety of relationships before committing to them – and (2) because it provides less impetus to “stick with” a relationship that does not altogether suit. Whilst online dating made relationships easy to enter and just as easy to exit, the older adults did not experience them as disposable. Unquestionably, the recurring theme throughout this chapter was the quest for stable,

long-term, commitment and there was no evidence to suggest that these online older adults favoured short-term, throwaway relationships.

The rapidity of online relationship development may have an impact on the strength and longevity of these mixed mode relationships, as they are of relatively short duration. However, many of the face to face romances reported in Chapter Six also developed rapidly, but had a longer life-span. It may be the mode of initiation – online versus offline – than any rapidity per se which has an effect on the longevity of these relationships. Or perhaps it is more that the level of connection created online cannot, in all cases, be sustained when people meet face to face?

Interestingly, the two unexpected online relationships were by far the longest lasting. As already reported, there was a fairly lengthy period of email correspondence before the couples met face to face. Whether this period allowed the relationships to become more established and added to their strength – and therefore their longevity – is difficult to ascertain without further work in this area. Further, as their number was so small it is very problematic to infer anything from the data. Nonetheless, they provide an interesting comparison with the deliberately-initiated online relationships.

As detailed earlier, Carstensen (1992) has argued that older adults are imbued with a sense of a finite future, which moderates their goal seeking behaviour in favour of meaningful interactions with familiar social partners (Carstensen 1995: 154). My online results appear contrary to this finding, as the older adults *deliberately* sought *new* social connections, albeit ones which were emotionally significant.

As also shown earlier, Stephure and colleagues proposed that increasing age could well be associated with an exaggerated need to find a romantic partner, as a direct result of this very perception of limited time left, but also *because of* their desire for emotionally-satisfying interactions (Stephure et al. 2009: 660). Further, the researchers argued that the

Internet provides a quick and viable means for older adults to achieve these goals, via the online selection process, which allows quick access to potential partners based on certain criteria (Stephure et al. 2009: 661). My results support this finding.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the findings for the Face-to-Face Romance group are different to those found here for the Online Romance group – and there is also no doubt there was a difference in the way relationships began face to face compared to those that began online. This, however, may be more of a reflection of the heteronormative networks within which the offline relationships were embedded when they began, rather than any conscious decisions on the part of the older adults involved. Others have argued that online dating reinforces heteronormative behaviour (Barraket & Henry-Waring 2008), however, the results from the current study indicate that online dating behaviour is more egalitarian, with older adult women actively initiating relationships with the men they are interested in. This is in contrast to members of the Face-to-Face Romance group, who initially met at various social and activity clubs, and through family or friends. Each of these groups – families, friends and social groups – serve to generally reinforce and maintain wider societal norms and expectations in terms of gendered behaviour. Moreover, the fact that these older adults were generally surprised at finding themselves romantically involved – an element missing from the online sample – suggests they had already internalised societal strictures precluding older adult romance (Levy 2009). It hardly seems likely therefore that they would then question the 'normal' way their relationships developed.

In contrast, going online to find a romantic partner and stepping outside one's normal (comfortable) networks implies, in and of itself, a questioning of the so-called 'natural' order of things. This is encouraged by the structures in place on dating websites, where the norms of who does what first are circumvented by the conventions inherent in using such services – where *all* members are encouraged to contact prospective partners through the sending of "winks" or "kisses". That said, this phenomenon would need to be investigated

in a much larger sample before any definitive conclusion could be made as to whether there is any real difference in behaviour.

It is possible, of course, that the differences in behaviour between the online and the offline groups could be attributed purely to their age differences and the different eras the participants grew up in, as the Face-to-Face Romance group were generally older than the Online Romance group. This should be borne in mind. However, the resultant relationships – in both groups – appear to be based on shared ideals, common values, intimate communication, sexuality and reciprocity, all hallmarks of pure relationships.

Giddens has argued that today's pure relationships are 'contingent' and not reliant on idealised, romantic love (1992: 61). In respect to older adult online relationships he may well be right. The process of setting up a personal profile and developing a set of criteria for an "ideal" partner, hardly equates with contemporary Western notions of "love" or "romance". In fact, it points more to Internet dating as a market (Illouz 2007), with love as a liquid concept and relationships as akin to commodities. This is illustrative of Bauman's notion of *homo consumens*, whereby website members can shop around for their perfect product (partners) and discard those who do not suit, simply because there are many more available on the dating websites, and because they are more easily accessible than in these older adults' offline networks. However, producing (and updating) a personal profile and an ideal partner profile, means ultimately, that these older adults undergo a process of reflection regarding self and relationships. This very process supports the 'reflexive transformation' which Giddens argues is at the heart of pure relationships (Barraket & Henry-Waring 2008: 162) and, which, ultimately these older adults are pursuing.

Like the face to face relationships – although not described as such by the participants themselves – many of the partnerships in this chapter were identified as LAT relationships in that they were committed, albeit functionally separate relationships (Borell &



Ghazanfareon Karlsson 2007; Levin & Trost 1999); an important finding – and the first of its kind to report this new family form amongst older adults in the Australian context.

The older adults in this study used words such as “friends”, “companionship”, “compatibility”, “values”, “intimacy” and so on, to describe the principles they prized in their new relationships. Being able to articulate what it was they wanted and expected in a new partnership as well as their needs and desires, also illustrates the reflexive nature of these new older adult romances, and shows the presence of the intimate communication necessary for these relationships to be regarded as ‘pure’ (Giddens 1992). Such reflexiveness is purportedly valued at the expense of the family (Gilding 2010): with the implication being that an individualised and reflexive partnership automatically cancels out or diminishes the importance of familial connections by prioritising the needs of the relationship over and above that of the family. Contrary to this argument, the anecdotes highlighted in this chapter in regard to LAT relationships, illustrate that these older adults favour contemporary late life partnerships which are (1) egalitarian and reflexive, and (2) functionally separate, but also that (3) existing family relationships continue to be maintained and prioritised even in the face of these new reflexive partnerships – particularly in terms of inheritance issues. Like the stories reported in Chapter Five, they dispute the notion that the family is in decline (Popenoe 1993) and serve to draw attention to its continuing primacy in society.

The results here suggest that the Internet provides opportunities for older adults to connect with like-minded others – providing unprecedented access to far larger numbers of possible partners than in their offline lives. Furthermore, the ability to find myriad partners online has the potential to transform the nature and development of late-life romantic relationships.

This chapter explored the early beginnings of older adult romantic partnerships as mediated and facilitated by the Internet. Like the face to face relationships reported in

Chapter Six, all those reported here were sexually intimate – and usually within a short space of time. These findings run contrary to existing ageist perceptions that persist in portraying older adults as asexual beings, despite evidence to the contrary. As outlined in the literature chapters, very little qualitative research exists which depicts older adult loving, sexual relationships – online or otherwise. The following two chapters seek to address this lack, by describing love, sex and intimacy in late-life relationships.

## Chapter Eight: Love and intimacy

Chapters Six and Seven laid the groundwork for the current chapter, by describing the initiation and development of late-life romances both face to face and in the online context. This chapter (Chapter Eight) and the one that follows it (Chapter Nine) go further, by looking at what is, arguably, the fundamental core of any contemporary relationship, the expression of love, sex and intimacy. To do this successfully, these next chapters need to look at both groups of older adults – the Face to Face group and the Online Romance group – from two perspectives: (1) combined as a whole group and (2) from a gendered viewpoint. The data reported in this and the following chapter is thus taken from all 45 interviews combined, although comparisons between groups will also still be made. Gender differences will be discussed as they arise. As in the previous chapters, participants will be referred to in the text by their pseudonyms, followed by their age, as well as the way they met their new partners, for example: Evie (92, F2F) with “F2F” designating those that met their partners face to face and “OR” designating those who met their partners online. Before such a discussion can begin it is important to lay the groundwork for it, by exploring the overall gender differences in this study. To that end, a broad synopsis is provided which highlights the overall gender differences between the men and women.

### Overall gender differences

As described earlier, there were slightly more women than men participants in this study (24 : 21 respectively). Overall, the women were older, aged 60 to 92 years, whilst the men were younger, aged 60 to 82 years – although the mean ages for both groups were very similar (67 years and 67.5 years respectively). In terms of previous relationships, twice as many women were divorced or separated compared to the men, whereas the number of

widowers<sup>7</sup> was double the number of widows. The only person who had never married or cohabited was a man. Table 8.1 provides a summary of previous relationship status by gender.

**Table 8.1** Previous relationship status by gender

| <b>Previous relationship status</b> | <b>Women<br/>n (%)</b> | <b>Men<br/>n (%)</b> | <b>Totals<br/>N (%)</b> |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Divorced/Separated*                 | 20 (44%)               | 10 (22%)             | 30 (67%)                |
| Widowed                             | 4 ( 9%)                | 10 (22%)             | 14 (31%)                |
| Never Married                       |                        | 1 ( 2%)              | 1 ( 2%)                 |
| <b>Totals</b>                       | <b>24 (53%)</b>        | <b>21 (47%)</b>      | <b>45 (100%)</b>        |

\* three divorced twice; one divorced, remarried and then separated; two divorced, remarried and then widowed; one divorced, widowed, cohabited and then re-widowed

In terms of education and employment, 17 of the 24 women were highly educated (with undergraduate and some postgraduate qualifications) and retired or semi-retired from professional occupations, compared to 18 of the 21 men. In general the women were more sociable, with approximately two-thirds being involved in offline social and activity clubs versus just over half of the men. This difference was also reflected in online social and support group involvement, where women were twice as likely to be involved. In regards to health, men were far more likely to report ongoing health issues than women, (12 compared to 9), although, as an overall group they were relatively healthy, with more than half reporting they had no health issues that affected their sex lives.

The greatest disparity between the genders was apparent when looking at relationship characteristics. Fewer women (9/24) were in a relationship that was currently ongoing than the men (14/21) and they were also less likely to be in a late-life relationship that could be

<sup>7</sup> As described in Chapter Four, the definition of “widowed” was taken to mean that the participant had only been involved in one long-term marriage or cohabitation (which had ended with the partner dying), prior to their involvement in new late-life relationships.

classified as long-term or sustained, that is, lasting twelve months or more (11 women versus 14 men respectively).

The difference may be a reflection of the lower ratio of men to women in the population generally, particularly in late life (ABS 2008). Alternatively, it could be a reflection of the desire to remain independent (see discussion Chapter Three) and an unwillingness to remain in relationships which did not suit. Although the women in the Online Romance group had access to more possible partners than their offline women counterparts, they were less likely to be in ongoing relationships. With such a small sample size, however, it is difficult to make any comparisons between the two relationship groups.

In terms of sexual intimacy and first sexual encounters with new partners, there was little difference between the women and men. For the vast majority of participants combined, sexual relationships began rapidly, in most cases in less than three months and on average within slightly less than a month. For the romances where intimacy began later (three months and beyond), the reasons given were the same for both women and men: either a conscious decision was made to wait, or relationships developed deliberately slowly or proximity issues limited access (partners lived interstate or overseas).

The preceding synopsis provides a brief overview of the gender differences between the women and men participants in this study. The current chapter is divided into three sections. The first and second sections look at **love**, specifically whether older adults actually “fall in love” in their new late-life romantic relationships and, if so, **whether love is experienced any differently** as an older adult compared to at an earlier age. The third section looks at the notion of **intimacy and what it means** for older adults – does it mean emotional or sexual intimacy, for instance, or something else entirely? The following chapter (Chapter Nine) looks at sexual activity itself, that is, whether sex is important – or not – in older adult lives.

## What's love got to do with it?

As discussed earlier, love, sex and intimacy are highly individual and highly contextual concepts, yet their meanings for contemporary late-life romantics have yet to be elucidated. This chapter looks at older adult interpretations of the concepts love and intimacy and whether they mean one and the same thing or whether they hold different meanings for those engaged in new late-life relationships.

This first section explores how love was experienced in these older adult romantic relationships. There were three main ways in which participants understood their love experiences: for some, **love was vivid** and an intense 'falling in love' event or was experienced as a **deep, caring bond** and, for others, love was experienced as **lustful attraction**. However, a small number of older adults in this study had **never experienced love** at any stage of their lives and, indeed, some were even sceptical that such a thing as "love" existed.

### Love is vivid and intense

A number of older adults described their recent romantic relationships as intense falling-in-love experiences, in some cases at "first sight". Nicholas was divorced and met his new partner within a few days of registering on RSVP.com®. The romance graduated offline very quickly, and they moved in together within two months. He explained his falling-in-love experience as "electric":

Over the space of a fortnight is hardly gradual, I guess. There were so many matters on which we coincided, so much common ground. It was dramatic. Electric. I liken it to a return to adolescence! Nicholas (63, OR)

Notwithstanding its fast and intense beginnings, after two years of cohabitation, Nicholas and his partner are still happy together. Likewise Ester, who also met her partner online, spoke of a similar sense of drama in her relationship. She said:

I did fall in love with him, it was overwhelming... it was quick and intense. Nothing had ever happened to me at the speed this romance developed. Ester (71, OR)

In contrast Freddie, despite thinking his relationship was unlikely to develop further due to age, as well as cultural and proximity issues, explained how it felt to meet someone unexpectedly online and to fall in love, even before he and his partner had actually met face to face:

For my part it was vivid, but unrealistic due to [different] cultures and age differences, but again, after hours of talking [online] it just grew exponentially. My feeling was more intense than when I was a teenager. Freddie (69, OR)

Freddie and his partner, Mimi, eventually overcame the obstacles he thought would keep them apart and have now been together for seven years and happily married for the last two and a half. The intensity and vividness described by Freddie and others was not restricted to relationships which happened online however. Lucy explained hers as particularly "vivid":

For me it was a very vivid falling-in-love experience... It was like an earthquake... I was very surprised at the intensity of our relationship and think I had been missing something out of my life for a long time. We just seemed to hit it off right from the start... Lucy (67, F2F)

Likewise Ursula, who met her partner Ziggy through a chance meeting at a social outing, knew within "an hour" that he was "the one" for her:

This was paradise this something... Something I didn't think exist... it was a beautiful thing we have, we show our love everywhere... everywhere it doesn't matter, we were in a train or we in a club or here or anything, you know. And when it's true love you show it to them all. And he said to me 'pity we didn't meet earlier', and I say 'well earlier you was married'. He said, 'but if I met you, I run away with you' [laughs]... You know the house was full of happiness when us two was together. Ursula (69, F2F).

Veronica (60, OR) whose relationship began through a dating website said that when she met her new partner she had not expected "the whistles and bells to be ringing" as she was

looking more for “strength, security, companionship” and a “best friend” who would then become a “lover”. The relationship did not develop this way, however, as she instantly “fell for” her partner the moment she “laid eyes on him”. Disappointingly the relationship was very short-lived and Veronica had gone back online to find someone new.

Elaine had a similar experience to Veronica, saying she felt connected to her online partner before they first met in person, but once they met she “fell” for him:

...hook, line and sinker – I’d never felt such a connection before... don't know if it was due to starting online or just two like-minded (old) people finding a soul mate.  
Elaine (61, OR)

In contrast to Elaine, Edwin’s face to face relationship took longer to develop, but for him, it was still very much a case of falling-in-love. He and his partner have now been together for two years:

And I decided, well, you might be 79 years of age, but I think you’re falling-in-love again. And I thought that was impossible at my age. I’d decided that I’d had many, many years of good relationships and I thought, no, I don’t really want another at this stage. But it developed and I decided to tell her I loved her... we went away and it was like a honeymoon. Edwin (81, F2F)

Although participants from both groups reported “falling-in-love” experiences, the incidence was almost double for the Online Romance group compared to the Face to Face Romance group (13 compared to 4). This could well be because there were many more participants in the online group compared to the face to face group, but also could be a function of the method in which these older adults met their new partners – that is, online dating websites provide more people to choose from and ergo more opportunities to fall in love. Another reason could be the way dating websites structure the early beginnings of romantic relationships, leading members through the procedure of initiating contact, email and instant chat correspondence, and then phone calls, till they finally meet in real life. A sense of anticipation occurs and is then heightened by this very process. Furthermore, the hyperpersonal nature of the initial text-based communication between online daters adds



to the intensity of the experience (see Walther 1996). Certainly others have found that the process of writing online facilitates 'stronger emotional bonding' and faster pacing of the involvement than offline means (Baker 2005: 104). As one dating website member explained "the crescendo builds!" (Christopher 61, OR) and indeed, Freddie, despite meeting his partner unexpectedly online rather than deliberately, also felt this way.

These findings suggest that computer-mediated relating promotes connections between people which appear both erotic as well as emotionally intimate (Cooper et al. 2000). Perhaps the very act of meeting and engaging online, either deliberately or otherwise, means that participants are then "primed" to fall in love? In support of this contention, Elaine described the process thus:

I guess it has to do with anticipation. You send someone a "kiss" (how tacky can you be) [sic] and then there's something like a waiting period to see if you're acceptable or rejected. Maybe this waiting period heightens the expectations and does something strange to older citizens – I don't know... Elaine (61, OR)

The lower incidence of falling-in-love experiences in the face to face group could similarly be a reflection of the manner in which people meet. Meeting someone unexpectedly in person does not allow for any sense of anticipation to occur – there is no crescendo to build – and subsequently the same priming factors are missing. If this argument is correct, the conclusion would be that the mode of initiation – face to face or online – has a fundamental impact on the initial intensity of relationship development, at any stage of life. This is supported, in part, by the experience of Randall from the face to face group, who initiated his new romance in the same deliberate manner as the online daters, when he responded to a newspaper advertisement placed by his new partner Hannah. The couple then went through a short period of exchanging letters and emails before their first face to face meeting. Despite his lack of "surprise" at finding himself in a relationship, Randall described his experience as a "strong attraction" and "vivid falling in love" and "very, very honeymoon, you know, type of stuff". This anecdote suggests that perhaps the written exchange between Randall and Hannah mimicked that experienced by the online daters in

their email exchanges. If this is the case, then it may well be a combination of priming factors together with the hyperpersonal nature of the communication – in both instances textual – which promotes the intimate bonding between the couples (Henderson & Gilding 2004; Walther 1996), rather than the online environment per se.

The vividness of these falling-in-love descriptions negates any suggestion that these older adults were experiencing anything other than passionate love (see Aron et al. 2006; Aron & Westbay 1996). Interestingly, both women and men experienced falling-in-love to much the same degree (8 versus 9 respectively), although Hendrick and Hendrick have noted that women generally say they are in love more than men (1995: 63). It is interesting to see whether this same passionate love exists for those who experienced it as a deep, caring bond.

### **Love is a deep, caring bond**

For some older adults in both groups, love developed gradually. Neil (71, OR) a long-time user of dating websites, had been involved in one monogamous relationship after another and felt that love for older adults was something that could “only” happen gradually. He said “anything else is an illusion”.

Max also met his partner Wendy online. Although he thought their first dinner date was “extraordinary” and there was an instant attraction between them, he described their feelings as an early bonding that slowly developed into love:

Love happened gradually. I think we both realised, fairly early on, we had something there, a bit of a bond... we'd had a tough time, we're in our 60s and we had a lot of life to go, and we talk each other silly, and this [bond] was apparent right from the beginning. Max (69, OR)

Amanda described a similar experience to Max. She also met her partner through RSVP.com® and felt that the love they shared developed through a period of “getting to know you” and was more of a “deep bond” than anything else:

I would label it as a deep bonding... it's a getting to know you, a deep bonding. And that's what we've got – as I said, a very strong bond. Amanda (60, OR)

Abbie met her partner locally and they developed a relationship that has continued for nine years. She and her lover did not consider they were a “couple” per se and had never lived together. They did consider that they loved each other though, and Abbie said the relationship was “quite exciting” despite its “gentle” beginnings. She described their love in the following manner:

I think it happened gradually. There was no sudden fascination or anything. It was – alright I'm willing to try this out – and then it started to prove quite exciting to both of us... So along the way it's all been a gentle lead-in to a different association, rather than that, “oh, I can't bear to have you out of my sight” kind of thing. Abbie (65, F2F)

Like Abbie, Evie also met her partner, Len, locally; their relationship progressed very slowly over a period of 12 months before they moved in together. In terms of love, Evie said that it developed almost as gradually as the relationship itself, and was consolidated when she realised she would miss him if she didn't see him anymore:

Love – well, it just gradually came on from when he started to come to the dance. I thought he was a decent bloke you know... and then I went on to think he's more than a decent bloke, he's a real gentleman and then it just, it just develops... and you start to know that if he wasn't around you'd miss him... he was just a lovely, lovely man... and you talk about love and as far as love's concerned I would consider that we were “in-love” with each other. Evie (92, F2F)

Katharine's face to face relationship also developed into love in a measured fashion. She described her connection with her partner more as a “caring” kind of love, rather than any grand passion as such:

Not an explosive “falling in love”, no, but more of a gradual appreciation of his attentions that flattered me... then a desire to care for his needs. I would describe it as more of a real *caring* love [sic]. Katharine (65, F2F)

The stories of Abbie, Evie and Katharine, all from the F2F group, describe a slow-developing, caring love which appears on the surface as almost passionless and resembles, perhaps, what was described earlier as companionate love (Aron et al. 2006). In other words, a deep affection, rather than passionate love – a love that some researchers say is characteristic of older adult relationships (Bulcroft & O'Connor 1986b). However, what the older adults say they feel and what is actually real is based purely on how the older adults expressed their stories to me. Saying that love was a “deep and caring bond” may be a way of making sexual passion socially acceptable to an outsider. Also, given that Max thought his early connection with Wendy was “extraordinary” and Abbie that her love for her partner was “quite exciting”, I would suggest companionate love is too narrow a definition to describe these older adult experiences.

In keeping with this argument, Nellie’s online relationship was intense from the outset. She signed up with RSVP.com® with no clear ideas or expectations of finding someone to date, and said it was “curiosity” more than anything else that motivated her to join the website. She met her current partner after three years of trying and although love developed slowly, she still felt the intensity from the beginning:

The love has happened gradually, [although] it happened much more intensely than past relationships, because he was a total unknown and because it was totally unexpected. Nellie (63, OR)

Despite the gradual growth of love in these relationships, these older adults describe deep, caring bonds. However, some participants in this study experienced love as lust: physical, sexual attraction rather than as an emotional bonding.

### **Love is lustful attraction**

Despite being once married, then widowed and now involved in a romantic relationship of five years, Susan said she thought that “love” was most likely “lust”:

I am still wondering what love is and feel it's probably mostly lust and the pleasure of being in a physical relationship... Yes, I really think it's mostly lust and the physical enjoyment of having someone to hold and to hold you. Susan (76, F2F)

Nigel had been married and divorced twice, was currently in a long-term (two-year) non-cohabiting and non-monogamous relationship. He said his primary partner would be more comfortable with the concept of love and marriage but he did not think that he was capable of, what he termed, a purely emotional love, as he was after "excitement all the time":

...if I could settle for love only, you know, especially a mental sort of love as well as a physical one, then I'd be very happy. But I don't think I'm capable of that. I think I shall die lusting [laughs]. Nigel (79, F2F)

Despite Nigel's assertion that he was not capable of "mental love", he was deeply committed to his partner as evidenced by the long term nature of their relationship and his embeddedness in her family life. Equally Larissa, like Nigel, had been married twice and experienced many romantic relationships, all of which were highly sexual. When asked about love, whilst not denying its existence, she spoke instead of her second marriage as involving a "joining of spirits" and her recent relationships, all with men who were much younger than her, as "lusty". Of her most recent involvement, she said:

I'm not in love with him, nor he with me, but we have pretty great sex. Larissa (73, OR)

It is clear from the preceding anecdotes that for this small group of older adults emotional love was subsumed by what was, arguably, a more fundamental and physical, kind of love (Förster et al. 2010). Of the three – Susan, Nigel and Larissa – Susan had the least number of romantic relationships but was also the most clear that, to her, love was undoubtedly lust. These results are very interesting and provide another dimension of late-life relationships – certainly one that could not be regarded as companionate or asexual.

### **Love does not exist**

A number of participants in this study said they were not in love with their partners or, indeed, they had never been in love in their lives, and others remained sceptical that such a “thing” actually existed. Adam, for instance, in a long-term relationship of two years with Maureen, whom he met online and with whom he considered he had a “partnership”, said he was not in love, but felt this was because of his past experiences rather than the relationship itself:

There was no “falling in love” from my end. Cannot speak for her, but would say that she fell in love with me, warts and all. I have a lot of respect and admiration for her, but love, no... Happened only once in my life, apart from all the falling in “lusts” in teens and twenties. And that lady died! No, love does not enter into it. Don't you find that life can be a series of compromises? Adam (66, OR)

Owen, a widower, who had been using RSVP.com® for the past three years, was currently looking for a new partner. He had been in a 15-month relationship which had recently ended, but said that his ex-partner remained a “firm friend”. Like Adam, Owen said that his failure to fall in love was also due to past experience:

For me so far I have not “fallen in love”. I suspect that is to a great extent due to the period of time since I lost my wife [four years]... I hoped that in the cases I have experienced that love would grow, but it didn't. [Or it could be because] the last few years of my marriage were not that fancy... Owen (66, OR)

Betty's marriage broke up over two decades ago. She had been involved in a number of non-cohabiting relationships since that time but, like Adam and Owen, felt that past experiences had impacted her ability to fall in love:

In the early days I used to fall in love, but disillusionment has stopped that... I don't think I am capable of “falling in love”. Betty (69, F2F)

Of a recent relationship which was now over, she said:

It was more that we seemed to have a lot in common and I enjoyed his company. He was also great in bed! Betty (69, F2F)

Joyce was divorced and joined RSVP.com® with the intention of finding a romantic partner. She had recently been involved in a relationship which ended after three months. Unlike Adam, Owen and Betty, who had once been in love but were now either incapable of it or were still waiting for it to happen, Joyce felt that love was something she had never actually experienced. She said this about her relationship and about love in general:

I never fell in love, although he started telling me that he loved me on the second date. I guess that I was flattered by this, but I didn't believe that it was true and told him so. I don't think that I have ever been really in love. Joyce (66, OR)

Christopher was divorced and after a hiatus of a couple of years had only recently begun looking for romantic involvement. He joined RSVP.com® a year before this interview and had experienced a number of romantic relationships during that time. He believed in the existence of love but, like Joyce, felt he had never personally experienced it:

I'm a fairly passionate person by nature, so I can be quite enthralled by a person fairly quickly if it's all going right, but you know, completely out-of-control "bells and whistles", that kind of love, I wouldn't say I've achieved. Christopher (61, OR)

Despite the fact that Christopher was yet to "fall-in-love", he believed that it existed and was open to the possibility of it happening to him. Stewart, on the other hand, whom we met in Chapter Five, thought the concept of "love" was spurious. He was currently involved in two concurrent long-term relationships and had never been married or cohabited with anyone:

I find that love is a rather artificial construct... romantic love is to continue forever and you're supposed to sleep in the same bed forever and stay together forever... it's not me and it never has been. Stewart (63, F2F)

Jacqueline's view was similar. She had been married, divorced and then cohabited with someone in her younger days and yet remained unconvinced that "love" itself was real:

I'm just one of those people who never really believed that love existed you know... my explanation for love was that it was just a liking of one person more than another. Jacqueline (72, F2F)

These examples provide an illustration of how older adults experience love in the context of their late-life romantic relationships. In terms of gender, there is very little evidence that the women in this study experienced love – or lust, for that matter – any differently than men, as has been argued previously (Hendrick & Hendrick 1995). Some of the older adults in this study underwent fast, vivid and intense falling-in-love experiences in their new late-life romances. Overall, a larger number of participants from the Online Romance group described such an experience; whereas more face to face participants described love as developing more gradually. Research is needed to clarify whether the structuring of online romance through a series of predetermined stages provides a sense of anticipation and “primes” participants to fall in love in such a manner. Further research is also needed to clarify whether the hyperpersonal nature of online relating serves to heighten this experience – creating emotionally intimate bonds online which are then sustained when the relationship moves offline.

In some ways the vivid falling in love experiences fly in the face of Giddens’ argument that today’s pure relationships are ‘contingent’ and *not* reliant on idealised, romantic love. Words like “paradise”, “electric”, “intense” and “soul mate”, as used by the older adults earlier in this section, challenge this argument, and describe what would appear to be highly romantic relationships. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, developing what amounts to a shopping list for an ideal partner – especially in the case of the deliberate online daters – hardly seems to equate with notions of love and romance; a finding which would support Giddens’ argument. This apparent contradiction is difficult to reconcile and warrants further investigation.

Some older adults do not appear to be “in love” with their new partners or, indeed, have never been in love, and some believe that love itself simply does not exist. It could well be



that age and the consequent disillusionment of past failed love experiences has contributed to this view. Regardless of how they label their feelings, however, the majority of older adults in this study report deep, caring bonds.

The second section of this chapter explores older people's perceptions of whether they now experience love differently compared to that at an earlier age.

### **How does love feel as an older adult?**

One of the goals of this project was to portray how love is experienced as an older adult. So far this chapter has established that some older adults fall quickly in love and others come to care deeply over time for their late-life romantic partners. For others, the bond developed is sexual. For those who did not experience love and who questioned its very existence, the need to be in a romantic relationship was still very strong. In the following section, the themes are clear: nearly two-thirds of the participants describe late-life love as something which is **completely different** from their earlier love experiences. The remaining older adults experience love as either **very similar or no different** to how they previously felt as younger adults.

#### **Love is completely different**

The following anecdotes highlight how these older adults experienced love as a distinct experience compared to their earlier love experiences, which in most cases was within long-term marriages. For some, love felt deeper, or stronger, or lustier than when they were younger. For others, love was different because they had more time to enjoy it and more time to "care" for each other. Overall though, love as an older adult was experienced as completely positive.

Evie said she found her feelings for Len, whom she met when she was 82, were different than her feelings for her husband, whom she met at a much earlier age:

Well, being older you think so different. I had a lot of love and affection for my first husband... but I had a *deeper* sort of thing for Len [sic]. You might have two phases in your life... you start off and be very fond of somebody and then, then as you get older you are [fond] again but it's a bit deeper... that's the only way that I can explain it. Evie (92, F2F)

For Freddie, and his new wife Mimi, age and experience helped make the attraction stronger than earlier romances:

We discussed this a lot, and this time, with age and experience behind us, the attraction was stronger than say our younger years. It is more of a partnership without the hassles of careers, finances etc. Freddie (69, OR)

Owen agreed with this view. He said that love was "absolutely" different when you were older because age gave you the foresight to anticipate potential problems:

When you are 20 something, you don't know the problems ahead, and anyway you have all your life to correct any that crop up. At 60+ you have to get it right in a much shorter timeframe and you KNOW the problems... [sic] Owen (66, OR)

Owen emphasised that time was foreshortened in late-life romance. His notion of "you have to get it right in a much shorter timeframe" illustrates the concept of an awareness of a finite future, as outlined in socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen 1995). It could also explain why the older adults in this study strive for significant love relationships, as advancing age is said to be associated with an increasing impetus to extract "emotional meaning from life" (Carstensen et al. 2003: 103). Certainly the stories highlighted in this thesis thus far point to the pertinence of this concept in late life romance.

Lucy too explained how being in love as an older adult was "different" because there was more time to enjoy it and far less pressure on relationships than when she was younger:

For me it certainly is different. We spend more time together walking, sight-seeing, making love... Being older you have more time to be together, not having to worry about looking after kids... less pressures from trying to pay the mortgage, so more time to "care" for each other. Lucy (67, F2F)

Ursula thought that age made “everything” better but it was dependent on having the “right” partner to share it with:

All in our life we are involved in romance and things, but I think this is a different time and different feelings and different everything with age... For me it was better. This is so peaceful... but you have to have the right partner. Ursula (69, F2F)

Larissa thought her involvement was “more lusty” as an older adult and, like Freddie and Owen, she attributed this directly to her age and experience:

Will only speak for myself, can't get in behind the eyes of another. Yes, it's different, even more lusty, more intense and quicker. [It's because] I'm older, more courageous, more truthful... Larissa (73, OR)

Larissa's experience highlights what is distinctive about being older and experiencing a romantic relationship. As an older adult she felt she was braver and more honest in her dealings with her partner.

For Abbie, love as an older adult was “completely unique” and completely misrepresented by society. She and her partner were quite angry with the portrayal of late-life romance in the media, especially those accounts that patterned it on “adolescence” vis-à-vis the film *Innocence* (starring Julia Blake and Bud Tingwell, 2000), which they felt was an effort to propagate and maintain a romanticised, Hollywood image of love and old age. In describing the film, Abbie said scathingly: “here's the love of my life and we're going to go off and be happy ever after? I don't think so.” Abbie felt that a lot of older people, like her, operated according to “different rules” than the ones society had assigned them, not necessarily monogamous and definitely not asexual:

Love at 60 is so different to love at 20, or 30, or 40. It's very different, it's completely unique... from adolescence to your 20s there [are] sudden bolt-like flashes when you meet people and... you are continually falling in and out of love and having very strong physical relationships. Then there's that long stretch of marriage... and that particular relationship was selected quite intellectually and [although] it was a reasonable sex life... matters of the heart [were] put aside. And

now I'm free and all that trauma has been worked through... and it's a perfect time for an interesting relationship... a bit of an adventure. Abbie (65, F2F)

Abbie's anecdote indicates a process of questioning, re-evaluating, and re-envisioning: not only of love and sexuality, but also her (and her lover's) role within wider society. For Abbie, love at 65 was liberating, an "adventure" and completely "unique" to love at any other age and she was prepared to embrace it, regardless of society's view.

A small number of participants felt that love was indeed different as an older adult, but rather than the passionate experiences and "romantic emotions" just described by Abbie and Yvonne, they portrayed or imagined their love experiences as more in keeping with companionate love – a feeling of companionship and deep affection (Aron et al. 2006). This finding is in keeping with the literature (Bulcroft & O'Connor 1986b) which showed that for some older adults love and romance were subsumed for more pragmatic concerns. To illustrate, Neville (76, OR) said:

I think it's love and companionship at our age. You bring probably different energies and things into your [early] relationships. And so I think that compatibility and companionship is probably more typical of an older age romance. You're over the family raising stresses, and we have more tolerance and more energy and more reserves I think. You have more time for a relationship when you are older. Neville (76, OR)

Amanda said that she thought love as an older adult was more about friendship and companionship:

You are not looking for the mad passion... you're looking for something more solid I think... companionship and friendship. I think my age group... you can afford to be picky and choosy and you've got the confidence to say 'go away I don't like you', you know. Amanda (60, OR)

Norah said that she thought older adult love was based on factors which were more important than sex:

I think our values and our outlook on life are totally different. And, you know, sex is not number one, whereas with younger people, it's all it is. You know, sex first, and then build a relationship, where the older people like to have their friendship, and [then] their relationship...Norah (60, OR)

Lorraine (65, OR) thought that love was "appreciated more" as an older adult, because:

...it includes companionship and mutual enjoyment of activities you are both interested in – rather than just the sexual side of the relationship. Lorraine (65, OR)

Nigel was involved in a number of extra-dyadic relationships whilst still maintaining his primary, long-term partnership. He described what love for his partner felt like in this respect:

I think it's more comfortable now... it certainly is much less worrisome in lots of ways than it used to be [when younger] and yet the challenge, the excitement, knowing that you have someone you can depend on in some ways is less exciting than wondering if you can or you can't, you know, make a conquest. Nigel (79, F2F)

It appears Nigel's primary relationship fits the mould of one that is "companionate". However, as shown in Chapter Five, his life is far from passionless or asexual. On the contrary, he leads a very passionate life maintaining his extra-dyadic relationships. As he stated earlier in this chapter, he would probably "die lusting". Nigel's description of his experience of love highlights what appears to be a discrepancy between discourse and behaviour – that is, what is actually said versus what is actually apparent. However, it could be that, in this instance, Nigel's feelings for his primary love relationship differ from that for his extra-dyadic relationships: a deep caring bond versus a lustful attraction. However, his extra-dyadic relationships are also long-term and committed, so there is no evidence to suggest he experiences these connections as disposable.

Whilst these older adults depicted their relationships as being of the "love and companionship" variety, nonetheless, there were some that still described such companionable relationships as also being sexual and filled with passion. For instance,

Betty discussed the “friendship and understanding” that exists in older adult romances, which appeared to fit within a companionate relationship. On the other hand, she also maintained that the “feeling of lust” experienced was no different from when she was younger, which seems to contradict the notion of passionless asexuality associated with a relationship based purely on companionship:

Certainly with the love you are more able to give to just the one person without so many other demands on your time... Love changes [as you get older]. That is, from mad passion to deeper friendship and understanding. However, the feeling of lust seems to be the same. Betty (69, F2F)

This apparent contradiction invites explanation. At a semantic level, it could be because the current definitions of companionate versus passionate love are too simplistic. For instance, as referred to in Chapter Three, a passionate love is seen as both intense and inherently sexual, whereas a companionate love is one that is characterised by affection but not sexuality (Aron et al. 2006). Given the evidence presented here, it appears that these definitions do not fully capture the multi-faceted nature of older adult love – companionate or otherwise. For some of the older adults in the present study, although a romantic relationship may well be akin to companionship, this does not appear to preclude it also being “lusty”.

Perhaps the contradiction has arisen because of the way questions of love and sexuality are routinely asked? Certainly quantitative methods cannot hope to capture the multi-dimensional nature of such complex social phenomena. The qualitative interviews employed in the current study, however, have provided a more intricate view than has been suggested in the past.

Some older adults in this study did not think that love had changed with age, in fact, they argued it was “just as exciting” as when they were younger.

### **Love is the same as it ever was**

In contrast to the previous stories which detailed late life love experiences as different from earlier life stages, the older adults depicted here felt that love was the same as it had been when they were younger. For instance, Ester thought that love itself was no different as an older adult, with the exception that she felt romantic relationships were less likely to be ruled by emotions:

Age doesn't alter the way you feel about it. In fact I think it is just as exciting, but with the difference, that you don't let your heart rule your head. Ester (71, OR)

Nellie (63, OR) expressed similar views to Ester. She thought that late-life love was not dissimilar to her early experiences but said that older adults tended to be "more realistic" about it. Although both Ester and Nellie thought that love was the same, they also said that as older adults love was "more realistic" or more "understanding", which in itself implies a difference from love at earlier life stages. It suggests that although love might feel the same, the experience of it is qualitatively altered by age and experience.

Lachlan also said he did not think love itself was different and, as many of the other older adults have likewise done, he mentions the impact that time has on older adult love:

Love does not seem different, except you have a greater understanding of the process. Kids, pregnancy, expectations, etc., not having to worry about them, it all helps the process... also the realisation that there is not unlimited time. Lachlan (63, OR)

Although Stewart didn't believe in love per se, he felt that his experiences with older adult romantic relationships were also no different from when he was younger:

Not for me, no, not at all. I know I'm getting older, but I don't feel I'm getting older... We joke that we're all still 28 and you know, in terms of your desires, you're *not* getting older [laughs]. Now when I'm 73 or 80 it may well be different and you may look for differences in your relationships then but, no, they are no different now. Stewart (63, F2F)

Yvonne thought that, as an older adult, love itself was the same as what she had experienced as a younger person, but that ageism and prejudice created a need to “hide” it from society, as it was not socially acceptable:

I think it's the same. I have felt some very youthful romantic emotions. But perhaps we hide the need for it better, as “wrinklies” feeling love is socially not acceptable... [Also] I think having time [as an older person] for love or less stress in one's life doesn't increase love per se... in my view it just increases opportunity to have more intimate moments. Yvonne (66, OR)

Yvonne's view mirrors one of the arguments outlined previously, that society continues to view ageing and sexuality as a paradox (Schlesinger 1996), despite much evidence to the contrary (see for instance Waite et al. 2009). Ageism, both explicit (Wilkinson & Ferraro 2004) and implicit (Levy 2001) serves to inhibit and constrain older adult behaviour. Such societal strictures against older adult sexuality have served to limit Yvonne's expression of herself as an older sexual woman, as her response to such negative stereotyping has been to keep her love hidden, rather than to embrace it as Abbie had.

It is clear from the stories thus far that these older adult men and women experience similar bonds and similar ways of expressing them. Heteronormative ways of behaving and relating (Hawkes 1996) based on gendered norms of dating – such as men being active and dominant and women being passive recipients (Eaton & Rose 2011) – appear to be lacking in these accounts. This finding is surprising given the gendered eras in which these older adults grew up. Given the evidence presented here and in other chapters, it seems likely then that the democratisation of intimacy that Giddens champions has occurred or is occurring within these age groups. These ideas will continue to be discussed throughout the rest of this chapter and the next.

Owen emphasised that time was foreshortened in late-life romance. His notion of “you have to get it right in a much shorter timeframe” illustrates the concept of an awareness of a finite future (Carstensen 1995). It could also explain why the older adults in this study



who used online dating websites, strive for significant love relationships, as advancing age is said to be associated with an increasing impetus for meaningful connections (Carstensen et al. 2003: 103). Certainly the stories highlighted in this thesis thus far point to the pertinence of this concept to late life romance.

Love, sex and intimacy are considered vital components of romantic relationships across the life span (Hatfield et al. 2007). So far in this chapter I have explored older adult love and its meaning for the older adults in this study. This next section now explores the notion of intimacy and sexuality in late life relationships. As these concepts are closely aligned, it attempts to delineate the difference between the two terms, as it is not clear in the literature what they actually mean.

### **What is intimacy in late-life romantic relationships?**

The terms intimacy and sexuality are often used interchangeably. As highlighted in Chapter Three, sexuality can mean sexual intercourse or even just close companionship (Deacon et al. 1995) and intimacy can mean either 'emotional/romantic and/or sexual relations' (Barraket & Henry-Waring 2008: 150). Reporting on what actually constitutes sexuality or intimacy per se can be a difficult process, however, because of the myriad feelings and definitions that people ascribe to their loving partnerships.

All the older adult relationships reported in this study were sexual – and the vast majority became so within a relatively short period of the couples meeting for the first time. This following section looks at the notion of intimacy/sexuality and attempts to differentiate sexuality and intimacy within these older adult romances. It asks what intimacy is and, relatedly, it asks if intimacy is different to sex or are sex and intimacy one and the same thing? Not surprisingly, the participants expressed a range of views on the subject, which were then distilled into three basic themes.

For a small number of older adults, intimacy meant **sexual intimacy and nothing more**. A similar small number of older adults viewed **intimacy as emotion**, expressed in romantic behaviours such as holding hands, walking on the beach, cuddling in front of the fire and so on. The vast majority of older adults, however, felt that **intimacy was a combination of both emotional and physical (sexual) intimacy** – something that could perhaps be expressed as a meeting of minds as well as of bodies. The number of participants who fell into each category is presented in Table 8.2. Each of the themes will be discussed in turn.

**Table 8.2** What does Intimacy mean in late-life romantic relationships? (n(%))

|                     | <b>F2F Romance group</b> | <b>Online Romance group</b> | <b>Both groups combined</b> |
|---------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Intimacy is sex     | 3 (23%)                  | 4 (12%)                     | 7 (15%)                     |
| Intimacy is emotion | 2 (15%)                  | 6 (19%)                     | 8 (18%)                     |
| Sex plus emotion    | 8 (62%)                  | 22 (69%)                    | 30 (67%)                    |
| <b>Totals</b>       | <b>13 (100%)</b>         | <b>32 (100%)</b>            | <b>45 (100%)</b>            |

### **Intimacy is sex**

For a small number of older adults, intimacy in romantic relationships meant purely sexual intimacy. Indeed, both Jacqueline (72, F2F) and Joyce (66, OR) said that, for them, intimacy meant “sexual matters”. Evie, the oldest participant, epitomised this view:

Well, I mean, intimacy... you’re a man and you’re a woman aren’t you? And if you’re fit and well [giggle] you’re just happy to be intimate with someone. All that stuff about *a cuddle on the sofa*, and stuff like that, yeah, well, that’s not real *proper* intimacy... [sic] Evie (92, F2F)

Evie, who had expressed the view in Chapter Five that she was “happy to be intimate” when her relationship “got to that stage”, was also quite scathing about how some people saw intimacy as a “duty” rather than the enjoyment that it was:

There’s a lot of hypocrisy goes with age. You know, you hear people that really are not intimate... they’re really not intimate with the sex. They don’t [do it]... it’s a

duty. That's all it amounts to... they marry, it's a duty. And that's no comparison to the type of way I've had it... no comparison at all. That's why I volunteered to go in this [study] because I thought there's no comparison and I wanted people to know. I'm an old lady and I've worked [in many different places] and I've talked to, you know, women 45 [years of age] and, of course, soon as they have the change-of-life they say 'oh no more bloody sex', you know, something like that, whereas, I never thought of that. I never, ever thought that when I went with Len. Evie (92, F2F)

Evie grew up in a time dominated by heteronormative values (Hawkes 1996) and gendered norms that positioned the man as breadwinner and the women as homemaker (Blieszner & Roberto 2006) – and a time when sex was more a means of procreation rather than enjoyment (Giddens 1999). It is perhaps surprising then, given her historical positioning, that she has a view of sex beyond “duty”.

Like Evie, Katharine also thought intimacy meant a sexual relationship and she was surprised at the degree of sexual freedom she was experiencing as an older adult:

Intimacy means a sexual relationship. Love now is a combination of a relief of object loneliness and experiencing a sexual freedom not previously expected. Katharine (65, F2F)

Prior to her new partnership, Katharine had been married for 46 years – a marriage which she described as “total devotion”. Being involved in the one relationship for most of her adult life, perhaps explains her sense of “sexual freedom” within her new relationship.

Owen was very clear that intimacy meant the same for him as it did when he was a younger man. It was also clear from his remarks that, like Yvonne in the previous section, he thought older adults were regarded as sexually incapable:

I am still a man, all my bits work. My needs are the same. I think that you need to understand that older people are still people (no offence). The things you miss as a single person, and I don't think it's any different today from when I was 20, is the touch of bare skin... Owen (66, OR)

And, for George, intimacy meant fulfilling his – and his partner's – sexual needs:

Further than passionate kisses, meaning going on towards meeting some or all of each other's immediate sexual wishes. George (69, OR)

These older adults regarded intimacy as purely physical, that is, as sex, and they considered it an important component of their romantic relationships (this is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter). The next theme discusses intimacy as emotion.

### **Intimacy is emotion**

As outlined in Table 8.2, an equal number of participants thought that intimacy was far from being about sex; instead it meant emotional intimacy which was manifested in sharing feelings and emotions, as well as romantic gestures such as holding hands, cuddling up watching movies, strolls on the beach and so on. These romantic representations of emotional intimacy serve to highlight that, for some older adults, the words 'sex' and 'intimacy' are not interchangeable and they do not mean one and the same thing. In other words these older adults see a clear distinction between intimacy and sex. However, despite their non-sexual definition of intimacy, these older adults were still involved in relationships which were, in fact, sexual.

Adam (66, OR), who earlier professed that he was not in love with his partner of two years, said intimacy was, for him, about feeling close to his partner and "shared moments":

I guess intimacy means more a meeting of minds. Often I phone her and she says she was just thinking of calling me. Intimacy... is shared moments, quiet evenings at home, a picnic out in the bush, strolls together on the beach in the evening. I am a touchy feely person, we like the feeling of feet in the sea and holding hands in the small breakers. Adam (66, OR)

As discussed in a previous section, Veronica's view of love was the complete opposite of Adam's as she fell instantly in love with her new partner the first time they met face to face. However, despite this difference in their experiences of love, Veronica and Adam's views of intimacy were very similar. She portrayed it as a sedate, companionable, almost reserved

experience, which in some ways appeared to be at odds with her intense experience of falling in love:

Just enjoy being alone together, quiet nights cuddled up watching a movie, or holding hands when out in public, or a hug and kiss, just to show you care about one another. Veronica (60, OR)

For Ester too, like Veronica, intimacy was associated with romantic gestures such as hugging, holding hands and so on. She was very clear of the distinction between sex and intimacy:

I don't think intimacy is synonymous with sex. There are other ways in daily life in a caring relationship that people can express intimacy. Being intimate in my view means that people want to hug one another, holding hands, expressing loving gestures to one another, touching etc... This was a hard question to answer. Intimacy doesn't belong in the bedroom only. Ester (71, OR)

Despite not having a current partner, Harry was very sure what intimacy meant for him, not only in terms of his immediate past late-life relationship but also in terms of any possible future partnerships:

It would be rather nice for me to have a woman friend who loves me and I am able to shower with things that express my love. I used to love walking with my last partner arm-in-arm – it made me feel good. Sending romantic emails and writing poems – that is what I am all about. Harry (71, OR)

Like Adam, intimacy for Harry involved communication via romantic emails and poems as a way to express emotional closeness.

Bob and his new wife Caroline, who had taken great pains to ensure their relationship developed slowly over a long time before they finally met face to face. He described intimacy as being able to share anything:

Being comfortable with each other in any situation. Being able to share feelings about anything and being able to share the bathroom together [laughs]. Bob (62, OR)

Despite Bob's description of "intimacy" as "being comfortable", he also earlier described his relationship with Caroline as experiencing "a depth of passion never previously enjoyed". Like Veronica, Bob's definition of intimacy appeared to be at variance with his description of the passionate nature of his relationship. However, it could also be that for these older adults, intimacy and sexuality are very distinct entities, so much so that for them it is possible to be intimate and comfortable *at the same time* as they feel sexual and passionate.

Similarly, Norah and Neville were also quite clear that, for them, intimacy was not about sex, but more about "closeness" or "common values". They defined it in the following manner:

Oh, just the closeness of being around... [having] somebody there and saying 'oh, you can do this', or you know, just to sit beside me or whatever. Nothing to do with sex. Norah (60, OR)

We share common values and I think it's that aspect of it... the companionship, the values and compatibility that are the foundation rather than any sort of gung ho sexual aspect of it. Neville (75, OR)

Likewise for Susan, intimacy meant being completely at ease with her partner "at all times and in all situations" (76, F2F).

These anecdotes indicate that, for some older adults, intimacy and sexuality are entirely different concepts and it highlights the need to take this disparity into account when conducting research in this area. These anecdotes also describe what would, on the surface, first appear to be companionate relationships. However, as all these relationships were intimate in a sexual sense, it is difficult to assign such a definition to them. It does suggest however that the definition of companionate is not nearly nuanced enough to

describe some late-life romantic relationships. Furthermore, given that Veronica and Bob saw their partnerships as both intimately “comfortable” and sexually “passionate”, suggests that, for these older adults at least, companionate and sexual are not mutually exclusive terms.

In some ways these romantic representations of intimacy suggest gendered norms and expectations about romance and behaviour. However, the words used by the older adults such as “closeness”, “common values” and a “meeting of minds”, suggest a more egalitarian outlook and contradict such heteronormative assumptions. Further, there do not seem to be any gender differences in terms of who ascribes to intimacy as emotion and who does not.

The following theme explores how for most of the older adults in this study, intimacy and sex could not be separated.

### **Intimacy is sex plus emotion**

Whilst the distinction between sexuality and intimacy is often blurred in the literature – sex means intimacy and intimacy means sex – the older adults reported here are very clear about the distinction between the two concepts. Over two-thirds of the participants in this study depicted sex as purely physical sex and intimacy as a combination of “mind and body”: in other words, as consisting of both emotional and physical closeness. This is perhaps best summed up in the following quote from Nicholas:

Intimacy to me includes both emotional intimacy, the sharing of personal emotions and thoughts, and physical intimacy. Physical intimacy can range from a warm hug through to the most sensual sexual contact. I love to love and to be loved in return. Nicholas (63, OR)

It means everything really. It means you're very comfortable with one another's company. It's companionship and it's not just physical relations. Of course, the physical part of a relationship is extremely intimate... [but] there are so many

factors of intimacy... it's just a closeness that two people have, sitting across at the breakfast table... and in bed... that's my idea of intimacy. Liam (61, OR)

Intimacy has many meanings, holding hands when out walking, companionship, as well as love making. Being together is important. Lawrence (69, OR)

Some older adults described this kind of intimacy as involving "more" than just a sexual relationship. As Stephanie suggested, it involved constructing a history of shared experiences:

It is more than a sexual relationship. It means being close, like a comfortable old slipper. Being able to finish off each other's sentences, building up a history. Stephanie (64, OR)

Other older adults mentioned that "communication" – talking, sharing ideas, secrets and experiences – was an important aspect of this "mind and body" intimacy.

Well, there's different kinds of intimacy [sic]. Sexual is only one of them... communication is very much another... and, of course, [that means] discussion of everyday things, whether it's movies and books and what not... that's where you find out values, attitudes and opinions. Randall (63, F2F)

For Stewart, engaged in two concurrent non-cohabiting partnerships, intimate communication was a key feature of their success:

I think its communication, you can actually talk to each other and you're comfortable with the person. It's 'sharing secrets' in inverted commas, you know, sharing stuff they may or may not tell other people, listening to stories... so you get a sense of who the person is. It's "like" and "respect". It's sexual. It has to be a good sexual relationship as well. You're actually aware of and sensitive to their needs... where they're coming from when there's problems and difficulties, but it's not being all over them [sic]... So it's all of those sorts of things. Stewart (63, F2F)

The stories highlighted in this section, more than any other, describe partnerships which echo Giddens' ideal of emotionally and sexually equal relationships, in particular, its emphasis on 'intimate communication' (1992: [4]). The anecdotes indicate that intimate self-disclosure and reflexivity is an integral part of these late-life romantic relationships.



Although Amy was not currently partnered, her quote about the type of person she was looking for also illustrates this concept well:

Being best mates, sharing experiences, ideas, allowing each other space to do things the other is not interested [in], but also joining in some of those things, to expand horizons. Helping and challenging each other to be the best person we can be. Being close physically, having lots of nurturing touch. Being sexual as long as possible in whatever way that is possible. (Amy 64, OR)

Unlike Bauman's (2003) description of liquid love as akin to brief episodes of affection which are then disposed of, Amy was looking for meaningful and lasting love. She also expressed the desire for companionship and intimacy on egalitarian terms, reflecting Giddens' (1992) idea of the democratization of intimacy.

In keeping with this "mind and body" theme, some older adults felt that sex itself was, in fact, just one separate component of an intimate relationship:

It depends on how you define love and your expectations. I define it as a feeling of acceptance and bliss – wanting to be in the company of that person. As a younger woman I felt that romance and love were linked to a more sexual feeling. Now as a mature woman, I feel that there's more of a whole package, and sex is just a part of it. Elaine (61, OR)

This anecdote highlights how sex is construed as purely a physical act, whereas intimacy combines both emotions and physicality. Elaine's idea of sex and intimacy had clearly changed over time, possibly indicating the changing nature of intimacy as people age. Barraket and Henry-Waring would argue that this personal 'self-reflection and disclosure' is part and parcel of the process of using online dating websites (2008: 162). And, clearly, there is an element of that, as illustrated by the results in Chapter Seven. However, given that such self-reflexivity was also present in the face to face group, I would also argue that this process is not restricted to those who use the Internet to find love. This 'self-reflection' may also be evidence of a deepening introspection associated with age and an increased impetus to derive emotional meaning from life through salient connections

(Carstensen et al. 2003); but equally it may be an element inherent in contemporary new late life relationship formation – a reflexivity akin to that found in pure relationships (Giddens 1992).

For Betty and Yvonne, although they regarded sexual intimacy and loving intimacy as two separate entities, they thought the ideal was to have both combined in one relationship:

To me, intimacy means a deep understanding and caring for another person. I think I separate sex and love – therefore sexual intimacy is different to a loving intimacy. Of course, the ideal is to have the two together. Betty (69, F2F)

For me there are two kinds. One, having someone who is willing to listen to my life secrets and stories without judgement (and who shares theirs too) [and] is willing to accept me as I am. AND if I'm lucky to have that, the ultimate bonus is that person is someone who I can enjoy a sexual intimacy with. Yvonne (66, OR, emphasis in the original)

Abbie described intimacy, like Yvonne, as consisting of both sex and “sharing particular ideas”, amongst other things. She said there were different kinds of intimacy and, although she was highly sexual, she considered it a “lesser kind of intimacy” from the other intimate components of her long-term relationship. She explained it thus:

...I've often felt sex is just a... lesser kind of the intimacy of talking or being together or sharing particular ideas or frankness or just hugging someone if they're upset. Sex to me is the easiest of all the other things... Abbie (65, F2F)

The preceding anecdotes provide myriad descriptions of intimacy. These variations indicate that whilst there is no one clear definition of what intimacy means in terms of late-life romantic relationships, the majority of older adults in this study thought intimacy meant sex plus emotion – a mind/body connection. The definition supplied by Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008) which denotes intimacy as a combination of both emotional/romantic and/or sexual relations, therefore, appears to illustrate how the majority of older adults reported here experienced it.

## Discussion and conclusion

The results in this chapter highlight that, like their younger counterparts, older adults fall in love, some vividly and intensely, others gradually. Some older adults had never been in love and some doubted that such a concept really existed. This chapter also looked at whether love was experienced differently in late-life. For a majority of older adults this was certainly the case, as love was described as “completely different” from their younger love experiences. In contrast, others said it was no different or very similar to how they had felt as younger adults. These findings emphasise how individual and subjective peoples’ experiences of love are and how difficult it is to make blanket assumptions about what such concepts mean for any one group of people. Further, the findings emphasise that the term companionate as applied to late life partnerships may not be nuanced enough to describe what, in effect, can be both intimately “comfortable” and sexually “passionate” relationships.

Barraket and Henry-Waring suggest that online dating affords opportunities for 'self-reflection and disclosure' and the older adults in this study describe such processes. However, this particular finding was applicable to *both* groups – those whose relationships developed through face to face means and those who found their partners online. Clearly, then, the processes involved in online dating – and most specifically the construction of personal profiles and partner profiles – cannot be attributed as the sole reason for this. I argue that this self-reflexivity could be credited to wider societal changes, as Giddens (1992) has already expressed, but could equally be attributed to a desire for emotionally salient connections (Carstensen 1995).

In support of this argument, the anecdotes in this chapter describe relationships based on companionship, intimacy and communication and what appear to be egalitarian terms – akin to Giddens ideal of the pure relationship. Unlike Bauman's (2003) description of liquid love as akin to brief episodes of affection which are then disposed of, the older adults were looking for meaningful and lasting love. For those whose relationships were over, there

was no indication that they had experienced the relationship as trivial. Nevertheless, particularly for the Online Romance group, relationships appeared to be easy to enter and also easy to exit, providing support for both Giddens' (1992) and Bauman's (2003) arguments.

The findings contained in this Chapter serve to emphasise the importance of using qualitative methods in researching social phenomena. The interviews provided a depth of information regarding late-life romantic relationships, which would not have been achievable with other, more quantitative methods. With the rare exception of some recent studies (see for instance Gott & Hinchliff 2004; Hurd Clarke 2006; Potts et al. 2006), the majority of existing studies of older adult relationships have tended to focus on sexual activity rates, rather than the meaning older adults place on love and sex within the context of their new late-life romantic relationships.

The findings also endorse the benefits of interviewing two contrasting groups of older adults. Without the evidence from the offline group, the mooted changes in older adult self-disclosure and intimacy over time could possibly have been credited to the influence of the online environment – as they were in the Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008) study.

The following Chapter looks at sex in new late life romantic relationships, in particular, it asks how important is sex to the older adults involved? The chapter also looks more in-depth at issues of health and sexuality in later life.

## Chapter Nine: How important is sex?

All the new romantic relationships reported in this thesis were or had been sexual and the vast majority became so very quickly. The importance of sexual activity in new late-life relationships varied, but on the whole appeared to be a significant factor in older adult lives (see also Gott & Hinchliff 2003). Again, the data revealed a number of themes: for nearly two-thirds of the older adults interviewed, **sex was vitally important**, fundamental, even, to their health and well-being and for just over one-fifth of the sample, **sex was a necessary part** of their romantic relationships. For a small minority of participants (four), however, **sex now mattered little** or did not matter at all (numbers do not sum to 45 due to incomplete data from three participants). It was also clear that some older adults found late-life sex a liberating and superior experience to that of their previous – mainly married – experience.

The second part of this chapter deals with ill health and its impact on sexuality in later life and how the older adults in this study circumvented its negative effects – or otherwise – and is followed by a discussion regarding safe sex practices in late life relationships.

### Is sex important?

It should be borne in mind that some of the older adults in this study were single at the time of interview and others were dating intermittently. This factor may have had an effect on the results presented herein, as the absence of an available sexual partner has been shown to effect older adult involvement in and interest in sex, and particularly so for women, who are less likely to be partnered than men (Carpenter et al. 2006).

## Sex is vital and fundamental

Surprisingly, nearly all participants in the Face to Face Romance group said that sex was a fundamentally vital part of their late-life romances compared to just over half of the Online Romance group. This may be a reflection of the number of currently single older adults in the online group compared to the face to face group and the higher number of single women in the group compared to men (15 versus 7).

Nellie, whom we met earlier, had been intentionally celibate for many years before meeting her new partner. Whilst celibate, sex had not been important to her but once her new relationship had become sexual (within five weeks of meeting online) she found that sex had now become “very” important:

A few months ago, I would have said not much. I have been celibate for 15 years out of choice. Now, I would say VERY [important] [sic]. Never have had any inhibitions anyhow, so it became sexual quite quickly... Nellie (63, OR)

The absence of a viable partner is as a chief factor in whether an older woman will be sexually active or not (Carpenter et al. 2006; Minichiello et al. 1996). This is clearly illustrated here by Nellie's response. Without a partner Nellie's interest in sex waned, but then was rekindled when she was re-partnered – a finding which I would argue points to a situational response to being alone rather than any age-related decline in sexual interest, which is usually the conclusion in medically-based studies (Waite et al. 2009).

For Ursula and Ziggy, who were married, sex was not only crucial to their relationship but it was also an everyday occurrence:

...and I said, like this, 'Ziggy are you going to kiss me?' [laughs] And he came and kissed me so nicely you know... so, so, so perfect and since that moment we knew. *He was my friend... and he was my lover* [said crying]. We was playing love... and every morning it was the same thing 'oh, we not going to miss this come on, come on'... we play life. We play in the mornings and he say 'come on, we not going to miss this'... Ah, ah, we was playing life, *we was playing love* [said crying]. Ursula (69, F2F)

For Ursula and Ziggy sex was an ongoing joyous, sustaining experience, but for others it happened less frequently. For instance, sex occurred relatively rarely in Edwin's relationship, however, he still thought it was "essential":

Ah it is lovely. It rarely happens but when it does it's wonderful. It is essential... it like gives you a three-month spurt for the next three months [laughs]. Edwin (81, F2F)

Edwin was engaged in a living apart together relationship with his long-term partner and subsequently they did not see each other every day. There is no way of knowing what impact, if any, this lack of cohabiting had on their opportunities to be sexual, although sexual opportunity has been linked to partner availability for men as well as women (Lindau et al. 2007).

Nicholas (63, OR) said that "physical sex" was "vital" for him and, indeed, sexual involvement has been shown to positively influence overall health and well-being (Hinchliff & Gott 2004; Kamp Dush & Amato 2005) and reduce the effects of social isolation and loneliness amongst older adults (de Jong Gierveld 2002).

Elaine's partner of five months had undergone prostate surgery. Despite this, their relationship was highly sexual and Elaine thought sex was a "process which shouldn't stop":

To me it [sex] is a process which shouldn't stop – a woman should always be romanced by her partner. And I don't know if I'd feel romanced if there was no sex. On a sexual level, we're very compatible. Elaine (61, OR)

As reported in Chapter Eight, Elaine's response emphasises that, for her, physical sex and emotional intimacy (romance) are inextricably linked, as she would not feel intimate without sex. Findings such as this are valuable as they provide a more nuanced view of older adult sexuality than has previously been reported.

Like Elaine's partner, Adam had also undergone surgery for prostate cancer but said that sex was still "very important" to him despite limitations from his surgery:

I hope I am not obsessed here. It is very important to me... Adam (66, OR)

The responses by Adam and Elaine indicate that health can play an important role in late-life romantic relationships (Waite et al. 2009), albeit not necessarily a negative one or one that precludes sexual interaction, as has been suggested in some other studies (see for instance AARP 1999 and Carpenter et al. 2006). Once again, though, the nature of the sample of interviewees – self-selected and convenient and therefore possibly biased – may have some bearings on these findings and consequently they should be treated with caution. Further discussion of the impact of health on sexuality is followed up more closely later in this chapter.

For a number of older adults who found sex of fundamental importance, it was also different – and in many cases, better – than their earlier experiences (Brecher 1984). Certainly for Abbie, sex in her long-term late-life relationship with her much older partner was not only very important, it was also the best sex she'd ever had. She explained it thus:

He's a rather, I don't know, strange man – principles and yet driven by certain desires which he was never able to express and so I indicate 'why don't you just relax and we'll enjoy [what happens]... if you want a bit of bondage, I'll give you a bit of bondage, you want this, I'll give it to you. And he'd protest... but occasionally he would try something [different]... He was very skilled at what he did, so it was the best sex that I've ever had which, given that, you know, I was quite promiscuous when I was young, and then I was married for [a very long time] and I felt I never had any hang-ups about sex or anything... so that he was very generous in his giving of pleasure and so his skill in bed was also very attractive... and it's a very liberating, strange relationship... Abbie (65, F2F)

Abbie describes her late-life sexual experience as "very liberating" – a finding which corresponds with that found in the *Love, Sex and Aging* report (Brecher 1984) for other older adults involved in new late-life romantic relationships. Many older adults commented in the Report that despite less frequent sexual activity as they aged, sex was



far more meaningful, far less inhibited and more arousing (and orgasmic) than when they were younger. These sentiments were echoed by Christopher who said that sex was “essential” and that older adult women were “incredibly sexual”. In this respect, he also argued that older females were looking to “make up” for lost time after long-term relationships where the sex had been “pretty ordinary”:

...in [their] 50's and 60's I find that people are far more relaxed [about sex]... they actually do relate more with their sexuality... I find [older] women are incredibly sexual... I'm generalising of course, but in terms of willingness to engage in sex and be sexual, I've found no problem with women... it's a far better experience, it's more relaxed. [Older] women, as I say are... more comfortable with their sexuality. Plus also there's an element too of 'I spent 25 years with that clown, and our sexual life [was] pretty ordinary and now I'm going to make up for it' [laughs]... so there's a lot that points to actually an increased and a far more satisfactory sex life I think. Christopher (61, OR)

Susan (76, F2F) said that she enjoyed sex “very much” and Katharine (65, F2F) said that sex in her new late-life relationship was “extremely important”. In an endorsement of Christopher’s observation that sex for women in long-term relationships could be “pretty ordinary” and that women in late-life romances were making up for lost time sexually, Katharine – who had been married for 45 years and was now widowed – said the following:

My sexual responses have been newly awakened as a result of the attention I've received... my relationship is highly sexual... this gives me a youthful enthusiasm for life. I am greatly satisfied with my own self-esteem. Katharine (65, F2F)

For some of these older adults sex had become more pleasurable with age, but it was also more important to them now than when they were previously married (Gott & Hinchliff 2003). These sentiments were not limited to female participants, however, as they were also expressed by some older adult males. For instance, Max in a relationship with Wendy for the past ten months, said sex was definitely important and was “staggered” (and pleased) at not only how sexual older women were, but how sexually attractive he personally was to them:

Look, [sex] it's important [and] I think it's important to be recognised for me, as being, well to be frank, as being sexy at the age of 69... I guess one of the things Sue, that I've been absolutely staggered [about] and you know, god, I'm no oil painting, but I've been staggered on the number of many relationships that I've had on RSVP, how the middle aged and mature woman is a very sexual individual who wants to go to bed and be stroked... I'm talking both sort of physically and mentally... and this, this surprised me. I didn't think it happened to the... ease and extent that it does... I didn't realise how sexually attractive I was to so many women. Why didn't it happen in my 20s? [laughs] Max (69, OR)

Lawrence's comments are also very similar to those expressed by Max and Katharine:

Sex is very important... Mutual satisfaction is very important. I now realise I am more sexy than I would have thought I was when I was married. Ha ha. Maybe I'm trying to catch up on lost time? Lawrence (69, OR)

For Yvonne, like Katharine, sex was also "very important" and using the Internet to find new partners provided opportunities for its expression:

It's very important... [and] since being involved in online romances, in some ways it has opened my eyes to the fact that some men still find me quite 'yummy'. I like having that view of myself. Yvonne (66, OR)

The sentiments expressed in these stories also tie in with those from earlier chapters, where participants articulated a sense of urgency or "no time to waste" in regards to their romantic relationships. Indeed, Yvonne (66, OR) said she thought that late-life romantics feared that "if it doesn't happen now it will be too late" – a fear that she claimed created a "desire to speed things up", which may effectively heighten the intensity of older adult romances. These findings are also illustrated in the study by Stephure and associates (2009), who argued that older adults may well experience "intensified desires" to find a romantic partner because of this perception of limited time left, as well as a need to pursue emotionally-satisfying relationships – in keeping with socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen 1995). The current study shows that the Internet provides a quick and viable means for older adults to achieve these goals (Stephure et al. 2009).

The additional elements of catching up on “lost time” and feeling “more sexy” now, as found here, highlights too, how for some older adults, sexual expression and fulfillment appear to improve with age. This may be the direct result of new sexual partners combined with the added element of having the time and the freedom for sexual experimentation. The following quote from Joyce supports this viewpoint:

Was the sex good? Yes it was. I had a troubled sex life with my [long-term partner] who was emotionally remote and suffered from premature ejaculation so I was never satisfied... I have been becoming increasingly sexually frustrated – this relationship was very satisfying sexually and I feel much more relaxed now. Joyce (66, OR)

These quotes indicate that, for some older adults at least, long-term marriages/partnerships may limit their sexual experiences and/or the way they express themselves sexually. Finding new partners in late-life and enjoying new sexual outlets appeared to be a liberating experience for many of these older adults and, in particular, the women. These representations also serve to indicate that gendered norms and behaviours usually constraining dating and mating practices were not so prevalent amongst this group of older adults. Older adult women were shown to be agents of change in this respect, by expressly seeking and embracing their sexuality.

The preceding descriptions of sex serve to highlight that the mind/body connection is very important and that sex itself cannot be reduced to the mere physical act of penile/vaginal penetration or even orgasm (Gott & Hinchliff 2003; Weeks 1985). They also illustrate that health concerns in late life do not necessarily signal the end of sexual expression, which some medical studies have failed to recognise (see Carpenter et al. 2006 for a detailed discussion). For the older adults in the current study, being “creative” in a sexual sense enabled them, as Adam so forthrightly described, to have “fulfilling” sex lives.

### **Sex is important but not vital**

Whilst sex was of vital importance for the majority of older adults in this study, for others it both a necessary and important part of their lives, but not one they considered absolutely essential. Overall, this applied to just over one-fifth of the participants but, again, there was a difference between the groups, with only two participants in the face to face group, compared to eight participants of the online group feeling this way.

Lachlan, who was divorced and involved in an intense new relationship, which he said, made him feel like he was “seventeen again!” made this comment about sex in older adult romance:

The sensual things do benefit from a little bit of experience over enthusiasm... [and although] it is not the be-all and end-all, I have missed the idea of it as much as anything. Lachlan (63, OR)

Neville expressed similar sentiments to those of Lachlan, in that, although sex was necessary, it wasn't everything:

Oh it's use it or lose it... I mean, it's very positive and necessary, but it isn't the be-all and end-all... Neville (76, OR)

Amanda's relationship was one of the few which had not become sexually intimate quickly. She and her partner deliberately waited until they had known each other for about “nine months before the sexual thing happened”. Amanda said it was because they both had difficult past experiences and wanted the relationship to develop “one step at a time”. Amanda also said:

It is important but it is not vital. Now should either of us have a problem in the sexual intimacy part I would hope that we are still intimate mentally with each other... that we can still, you know, respond to each other in other ways... So I think [sex] is just a complement. I think it's the icing on the cake actually the sexual bit. Amanda (60, OR)

Amanda's comments echo the findings by Bulcroft and O'Connor who found that the older adults in their study often depicted romance, love and sex as 'nice but not essential' and the 'frosting on the cake' (1986b: 400). In contrast, however, many other participants in the present study consider love and sex as necessary or important elements of late-life relationships. For instance, although Owen said sex was no longer the "driver" of his life, nonetheless he still considered it "integral":

I enjoy sex. It is not the driver of my life as it may have been in the past. I feel better when I have a sexual partner, both physically and mentally. Sex is an integral part of life. In ageing it merely moves down the list of importance a bit. Owen (66, OR)

Likewise Harry, who enjoyed sex very much, said he didn't feel it was as important as it used to be. However, because he was not currently engaged in a relationship, he found he missed it:

[Sex is] probably not as important as it once was. However, the sex is so much better and romantic [at this age] – and well worth having. I really miss it!! Harry (71, OR, emphasis in the original)

These anecdotes highlight how some older adults reprioritise sex and its importance in their lives (Gott & Hinchliff 2003). For some this is because health issues impact on their sexual functioning, but for others it appeared to be because of limited opportunity (Carpenter et al. 2006; Lindau et al. 2007).

For the vast majority of participants in this study sex was clearly a vital part of, or an absolutely necessity, in their late-life romantic relationships. Again, as discussed earlier, this finding may be a reflection of the self-selected nature of the sample, as all those interviewed were interested in the topic of love, sex and intimacy. This "interest" could be construed as manifesting in positive rather than negative data, which might have an effect on the findings. However, as some of the older adults who participated in this study

indicated that, for them, sex itself did not matter much at all, this possibility is largely unsupported.

### **Sex is not important**

Although all participants – in both the online and the face to face groups – were or had been sexually active, a very small number (four) of older adults expressed the view that sex was not very important to them. Interestingly, all were from the Online Romance group and all were females. Additionally, only one of the four was involved in a relationship which was currently ongoing. Their stories are brief, but enlightening.

Stephanie had been divorced for quite some time and had recently been in a two year relationship with someone she met through RSVP.com® which had subsequently ended. She said that whilst she had been involved in the relationship sex had been important, but she now felt that in the future it would not be:

When I was with my partner it was important and this surprised me after such a long absence, but if I meet someone else it would not be important as long as we could develop a close relationship with cuddles... A good cuddle goes a long way.  
Stephanie (64, OR)

Stephanie's words indicate that sex was not something she had dismissed altogether, rather her anticipation of it in future relationships had diminished. She now regarded it as something that she could do without should she find someone new, preferring the intimacy of a "good cuddle". Stephanie's view of sex ties in with the reprioritising of sex in later life that was discussed earlier (Gott & Hinchliff 2003), but also illustrates what this, and other studies have found, that waning interest is associated with being un-partnered (Waite et al. 2009). It is possible, however, that should Stephanie become re-partnered in the future, she may experience a reawakening of her currently dormant sexual drive like Nellie did.

Ester's experience paralleled that of Stephanie. Despite "falling in love" quickly and intensely with her ex-partner, sex had "never" been important to her, but she thought this was because of her upbringing and past experiences:

I will be honest about it, sex was never an important issue with me. The reason being first and foremost because of my upbringing, then marrying two men who only considered themselves and not me... I've had an early menopause and after that it was a very painful experience for me. I went along with it in order to keep the peace in the family. I was brought up by grandparents in a very strict manner. My grandmother was the old-fashioned type, so [sex] was a taboo subject... In this romance it was gushing out of me to my great surprise. I doubt if I would react in the same way again as I did with this recent romance. I am not so confident that it could happen again. Ester (71, OR)

Although Ester argued against it, it is clear from her anecdote that sex was a surprising and positive component of her recent past relationship as indicated by her words "it was gushing out of me to my great surprise" and "I doubt if I would react in the same way again". Her closing statement indicates that despite not being confident that "it could happen again", she, like Stephanie, did not dismiss the possibility entirely. In contrast, Norah, the only one of the four involved in a current sexual relationship, said this of sex:

It's not very important. Not at all. [Older people] know that it could be possible that [they're] not going to have sex anyway. And if you realise that and accept that, then it's a lot better. Norah (60, OR)

This comment indicates that Norah believed older adults are not – or should not be – sexually active, despite the fact that her relationship *was* sexual and became so quickly (within four weeks of meeting face to face) and continued to be so (the relationship had lasted 18 months and was still ongoing).

There is no doubt from the evidence presented thus far that the late-life romantic relationships portrayed in this thesis were sexual, with experiences ranging from the physical act of sexual intercourse to what some have called "sexual play". Unlike quantitative studies which have showed a general waning of interest in sex with age (Waite

et al. 2009), the vast majority of older adults in the current study were still vitally interested in sexuality and intimacy. The following section explores sexuality and health in greater detail.

## **Health and sexuality**

As discussed previously, all participants were asked whether they had any health issues which affected their love lives in any way. Overall, fewer people said they had health problems (21) than not (24). The range of health issues was diverse and some participants reported more than one; in these cases, the conditions were often inter-related, such as erectile dysfunction and depression. The list of health issues affecting the older adults in this study is presented in Chapter 5: Box 5.2.

It has previously been reported that ill health plays a key role in moderating the importance of sex in older adult relationships, rather than age per se (Hinchliff & Gott 2004). Although a number of the older adults in the current study said that health issues affected their sexual functioning/performance in some way, they also said they had learnt to adapt to their conditions by becoming more innovative sexually, or by making sure they were fully aroused beforehand, or even by using sexual aids or sexuopharmaceutical products (Tiefer 2006), such as the male virility drug, Viagra.

As discussed in Chapter Seven, some participants like Adam, had undergone major surgery for conditions such as prostate cancer. As Adam said:

I am far from normal in that I have a huge scar across my stomach and my penis does not work. I may have medical problems that limit sexual intercourse, but [I am] still able to have a fulfilling sex life... even though I have to be a little creative nowadays. Very fortunate that my partner is too, also that she is such an understanding person that we get so much from it. Adam (66, OR)

In biomedical studies, Adam's inability to achieve penile-vaginal penetration – the 'gold-standard' by which sexuality is usually judged (Gott 2006: 106) – would be regarded as a



'problem' (DeLamater & Sill 2005). As can be seen from his anecdote, however, for Adam and his partner Maureen, the act of sexual intercourse was not necessary for them to have a "fulfilling sex life". The "creative" way in which he and Maureen circumvented the limitations of his physical functioning allowed them both to derive "so much from it". As Larissa also explained:

There is so much sexual play one can have when penises no longer work as they once did. Larissa (73, OR)

These older adults paint a very positive picture of late life sexuality. Rather than forego sexual activity, they embraced their limitations and adapted their behaviour to achieve sexual fulfillment.

In direct contrast to Adam and Larissa, Lorraine's sexual involvement definitely meant "making love" or sexual intercourse. However, unlike when she was younger, full sexual arousal beforehand was now a crucial component of her sexual enjoyment.

I enjoyed making love with my most recent partners. There is (sex) life after menopause, although foreplay is [now] essential. Lorraine (65, OR)

Similarly, Edwin who was impotent said he needed to be fully aroused before he and his partner could engage in sexual intercourse:

At my age, I don't know what the male term is, I'm ah... impotent. I have to have a lot of stimulation to get going... sexually. Edwin (81, F2F)

In a narrative which echoes that of Adam, Elaine's partner had also undergone prostate surgery. Unlike Adam, however, Elaine's partner used Viagra, which had allowed him to avoid the limitations of the surgery to such an extent, that it did not interfere in any way with their sexual relationship:

On a sexual level, we're very compatible. Due to a prostate operation some years ago, he found it necessary to use Viagra/Cialis which works very well. He's a caring

and careful lover and I respond very well to his advances and stimulation. On a scale of 10, he's a good 9! Elaine (61, OR)

Edwin and Lorraine had adjusted to their need for more arousal and incorporated this need into their sexual practices, as had Elaine and her partner through the use of pharmaceutical intervention. These older adults and their partners had found ways and means to adapt to, accommodate – even to circumvent – the effects of ill health, age-related health conditions or even radical surgery, on their sexual involvement and enjoyment. In this way they continued to be both sexually active and sexually fulfilled. These findings highlight that ill health was not a barrier to sexuality in later life. Despite the existence of a number of health issues, the older adults appear to have managed their conditions and remained sexually active.

Surprisingly, even though older adults reported health issues as affecting their love lives, only one said the issues actually acted as a deterrent to their engagement in sexual activity. Jacqueline had developed a number of health conditions and had undergone some major operations since her recent romance broke up. She said that despite being highly sexual in all her previous relationships, these health issues had caused her to re-evaluate her needs. She was no longer interested in pursuing new relationships despite having many offers, because “inevitably” they would become sexual and she no longer felt able to accommodate sexual intimacy:

I do knock a lot of them back that I meet because inevitably it will lead to a sexual thing and with all my operations and things... it presents problems... and I think, no I can't do that anymore... also I don't like the thought of looking at an older body and I feel conscious of them looking at me with all my scars and bits and pieces. Jacqueline (72, F2F)

This finding correlates with prior research which found that some older adults no longer engaged in sex due to physical and emotional constraints (Gott & Hinchliff 2003). Jacqueline's story in the context of the current study, however, is at variance with the rest of the participants, as no other older adult reported such constraints.

Like Jacqueline, Larissa was also affected by ongoing health constraints. In particular, she suffered from a chronic pain condition which limited her mobility. In contrast to Jacqueline's experience, however, Larissa found that whilst she was engaged in being sexually active, her pain disappeared:

I'm always amazed that although I can't walk very far without more pain, which I have most of the time... when I'm romping on the bed, I don't feel pain... LOL... sex is sooooooooooooo good for me. Larissa (73, OR).

These anecdotes highlight two opposing views of how health can impact continuing sexuality in older adult relationships. Compared to Jacqueline, sexual activity for Larissa was invigorating and a panacea for her usually painful day to day life. Larissa's experience also shows that involvement in sexual relationships can have a positive impact on older adult health and well-being (Gott & Hinchliff 2004).

These stories show that sexuality is far more than just the physical act of sexual intercourse (Weeks 1997). They highlight that sexual activity in late life relationships varies, and can range from behaviours such as kissing, cuddling and hugging (Hurd Clarke 2006) and stroking and rubbing (Potts et al. 2006), which can be just as important as intercourse (Hurd Clarke 2006). They also show how some older adults are able to circumvent the impact and severity of their health issues by becoming sexually inventive.

The next section discusses safe sex practice within contemporary late life relationships.

### **Safe sex practices**

When the subject of health and sexuality was introduced to the participants, a minority made a special point of discussing the subject of safe-sex practices in new late-life romantic relationships. This topic was not a focus of the current research project although, perhaps in retrospect it should have been, but it was clear this was an issue of some importance to the three participants who wished to highlight it.

Interesting that in this day of AIDS and the like, [and] much education on the subject, etc, that the women I met, and I guess it is the same statistic viewed from the other side... There was much highly charged interest in sex from these older women, and never once did the word "condom" surface. I am confident I have no STD but then I guess I looked at our age group and felt the risk was very low. Foolish in hindsight but I'm all clear. People should take less risks [sic], but when you get to 66 and AIDS takes 20 years to kill, then you worry more about falling under a bus or a heart attack taking you out. Adam (66, OR)

Adam makes an interesting point concerning older adults and their awareness of a finite future. This perception of "limited time left" (as per Carstensen 1992) may well have a – previously unrecognised – impact on older adults' risk taking behaviour. As Adam says: if AIDS can take "20 years to kill, then you worry more about falling under a bus". Adam's comment ties in with sentiments expressed in previous chapters regarding a feeling of "no time to waste", especially in terms of how this relates to the fast onset of new relationships and their early sexual intimacy.

Adam's comment "I guess I looked at our age group and felt the risk was very low" highlights what researchers have recently shown – that older adults do not think they are at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS or STDs when, in fact, the estimated numbers of older adults with AIDS is increasing rapidly (Minichiello et al. 2011). In regards to safe sex practices, Neil also expressed similar views to Adam concerning the lack of "protection" in older adult relationships and, further, brought up the subject of blood tests:

I notice you didn't ask me anything about safe sex amongst people who meet online and in their 60s or older. I think this is a critically important issue in terms of any survey. For the record as you know already... I have had about 10 intimate sexual relationships over the last eight years. In each case, by the time we had got to know each other well enough to go to bed, we had talked a lot about our sexual backgrounds and previous relationships and were confident enough to agree that there was probably no need for protection or blood tests. Nevertheless that means we were both prepared to take the risk. It's interesting that there just doesn't seem to be any attention given to safe sex at our age. I do have blood tests regularly at least once a year, and have offered to show these to partners, but they have said they felt it was unnecessary once I told them that I am clear. None of my partners

have offered to show me their blood tests and I have not insisted on this. I would, however if I was to get into a long-term committed relationship. Neil (71, OR)

In both these cases, Adam and Neil had been involved in a number of relationships over the last few years, although Adam was now in a long-term, non-cohabiting partnership. Presumably each of the women Adam and Neil had once been sexually intimate with had also been involved, before and since, in a number of other intimate relationships themselves. Given that research has already shown the Internet may act as an incubator for the spread of STDs (Couch & Liamputtong 2008) and older women who find love online are less likely to refuse sex without a condom (Bateson et al. 2012), the results of the current study beg the question, just how far could HIV/AIDS or STDs extend via the older adult online dating community? Although Neil says by the time he and his partners became intimate they had talked about their sexual backgrounds in some detail, this in itself is no guarantee of true and honest disclosure. Furthermore, his statement is contradicted by another of his (Chapter Seven) in which he said:

Keep in mind that we grew up in the swinging late sixties where everyone went to bed with everyone after a dinner date – so sometimes we just relive our youth and do that. Neil (71, OR)

The preceding anecdote suggests that spontaneous sexual activity does occur – at least for Neil and some of his partners – where *no* consideration of previous sexual partners is taken into account. It seems somewhat ironic that Neil would only wish to see someone's blood test if he was in a "committed" relationship; whereas, the notion of being "safe" with someone he was not committed to, did not seem to overly concern him.

In Joyce's case, it was her partner's failure to address her apprehension regarding "sexual diseases" which contributed to the break-up of their six month relationship:

I objected to the fact that he wasn't prepared to assure me that I was safe from sexual diseases, particularly AIDS, and when I asked him to follow up on this he chose to ignore my concern. Joyce (66, OR)

This “concern” of Joyce’s however, did not appear to feature early on in her new romance – in fact, she described the relationship in Chapter Eight as “very satisfying sexually”. It appears that her worry over sexual diseases only occurred to her as the relationship progressed. This equates with Neil’s comment earlier, indicating that his worry over blood tests occurred in the context of committed relationships but not for those which were relatively short-lived.

The use of safe-sex practices in these late-life relationships thus appears to be a contentious issue. Although the question of safe-sex practices was not a focus of the current research project, the fact that only three participants brought up the issue themselves could reflect one of two things: (1) it is not something that the older adults in this study were concerned about, or (2) because it was not addressed during the interviews, the participants did not volunteer any information.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The goal of this chapter was to find out how important is sex in older adult lives? The results indicate that for most of the older adults in this study, sex was vitally important, liberating and superior to their previous, mostly married, experiences. There was a surprising difference between the two relationship groups, as just over half of the online group compared to nearly all participants in the face to face group felt this way. As outlined earlier, this may well be a reflection of the higher number of older adults in the online group who were single as opposed to the number in the face to face group.

Decreases in sexual interest and a reduced capacity are said to be an ‘intrinsic part of the ageing process’ (Denmark 2002: 17) and quantitative studies emphasise a decline in sexual involvement with age and ill health (for example, Lindau et al. 2007). The results from the current qualitative study indicate, however, that most of the older adults retained interest in sexual activity and many were able to adjust to and even circumvent the effects of ill health, by becoming creative in regards to their sexual practices. These results signify that

sexual penetration/intercourse is not necessary for older adults to feel sexually engaged and fulfilled. Using an absence of sexual intercourse as a marker to indicate that sexual activity has ceased is therefore not valid (Deacon et al. 1995; Minichiello et al. 1996).

The findings emphasise the positive but complex nature of new older adult romantic relationships and sexuality. The results of this current chapter indicate that, for the majority of the older adults in the current study, ongoing involvement in sexual activity was not only desirable, it was necessary and as some said, absolutely vital, for their health and wellbeing. There were no gender differences in this finding, although for a small number of women, the absence of a sexual partner signalled a lack of interest in sex. This finding endorses the literature, which reports that being without a partner can take away the desire for a sexual relationship, particularly for women (see Carpenter et al. 2006; Minichiello et al. 1996). Nevertheless, for two of these older women, their anecdotes suggest that their lack of interest is more a reaction to a lack of opportunity – and therefore situational – and may be rekindled with the availability of new, and willing, partners.

The overall results run contrary to persistent ageist perceptions about the lack of late life sexuality and indeed, are contrary to findings in medical studies which focus on levels of sexual activity rather than the desire to be involved. Older adult descriptions of their sexual activity ranged from touching and caressing to sexual play and full sexual intercourse. These stories highlight not only the personal nature of such experiences, but also how variable the notion of sex and sexuality can be (Gott 2005; Weeks 1995).

One of the limitations of the study is the lack of attention to safe sex practices, particularly since health and sexuality was a focus of the research. In retrospect it would have been advisable to re-contact the older adults involved in this study to follow up on this issue. The three responses received were in-depth and passionate, but it is interesting in itself that only three of the forty-five older adults thought to bring it up. As discussed earlier, it

could be because it was not addressed in the interviews but, equally, it could be because it is a "non-issue" to these older adults. There is not enough evidence to make any judgement one way or the other, but it warrants further attention in the future.

As in previous chapters, the findings contained herein underline the importance of using qualitative methods in researching complex societal phenomena. Asking in-depth questions provided rich and very detailed responses regarding the importance of sexuality to older adults and their late life romantic relationships. Quantitative methods, as so often used in biomedical studies of health and intimacy, provide broad answers to broad questions and cannot reproduce the nuanced data generated here. Very few existing studies of older adult relationships have tended to focus on the meaning older adults place on love and sex within the context of their new late-life romantic relationships (see recent studies by Potts et al. 2006; Hurd Clarke et al. 2006). This study is an exception.



## **Chapter Ten: Conclusion**

### **Living apart together in later life: a new family form in Australia**

In this thesis I set out to contribute to knowledge about older adult new romantic relationships in today's contemporary society. I addressed four main research questions: What are late-life romantic relationships like today? What are the differences, if any, between those that are initiated via the Internet and those that happen face-to-face? What does love and intimacy mean to these older adults? And how central is sexuality within these new romantic partnerships?

Until this study there has been little recent information about how and where single older adults meet prospective new partners – or indeed, whether they intentionally seek new partners. My research thus addressed significant gaps in the scholarly literature, by describing the various stages of late life romances, including how and where older adults met, their early dating experiences, the progression and consolidation of these relationships and, in particular, decisions around commitment and partnering. My study further explored the notions of love, sex and intimacy, and whether such things actually exist in new later life romantic relationships and what they meant for the older adults involved.

By looking at relationships which began through face to face means and comparing them to relationships which originated through the online environment – and more particularly, through dating websites – this study provided different perspectives on late-life relationships within an Australian context. Specifically, my study looked at the differences and similarities between the two relationship types.

My argument for the originality of my work is that there is a dearth of qualitative research regarding older adult romance, love and sexuality – and none in regards to relationships

which begin in the online environment, and particularly within the Australian context. The research that does exist tends to be quantitative and grounded in the health and biomedical field and omits what these relationships mean and how important they are for the older adults involved. My study thus addresses the gap in the literature by providing a comprehensive description of older adult late life romances and their development beyond dating and courtship. I argued that for these older adults the desire for love, sex and intimacy was of fundamental importance, regardless of their age.

The remainder of this chapter brings together the findings of my study, providing a summary of the major themes that emerged from the data and highlighting my contribution to this area. It provides a fuller discussion of how my study extends or challenges the existing theoretical literature on late-life romance and sexuality. Finally, I reflect on the limitations of the study and make suggestions for further research.

### **What are late-life romantic relationships like today?**

#### **What are the differences, if any, between the online- versus face to face-initiated relationships?**

I found that the older adults in this study met each other (1) unexpectedly through their social networks and community involvements and (2) deliberately through intermediaries such as online dating websites or personal ads. These new late life romances developed rapidly and quickly became intimate due, in part, to a sense of urgency, which was based upon a perception of a foreshortened future or of limited time left (Carstensen 1992). These late life partnerships did not develop along the same trajectory as that postulated for postmodern relationships, namely, casual sex, dating, visiting (spending the night together), followed by cohabitation and/or marriage (Kamp Dush 2009). Instead, I found that these older adult romances involved dating and intimacy, but in terms of consolidation and commitment the partnerships did not include marriage or cohabitation. Significantly, my findings showed that these older adults preferred instead to 'live apart

together' (LAT; Levin & Trost 1999) – a concept which has just recently entered the Australian lexicon (Reimondos et al. 2009) and which has, until my study, had extremely limited research exposure here compared to overseas.

These Australian late-life romantic partnerships were characterised by their emphasis on reflexivity, intimate communication and shared values, all tenets of Giddens' (1992) notion of 'pure' relationships. Perhaps not surprisingly then, these relationships appeared to be less bound by gendered norms than previous studies have shown. My study also showed that, contrary to ageist perceptions which continue to posit older adults as 'grandparental, nonsexual, non-physical beings' (Schlesinger 1996: 118), love, sex and intimacy were, in most cases, vital components of these late life romances. These themes are discussed below.

My findings show that there were differences between the deliberate and the unexpected relationships in terms of "surprise", the intensity of early romance experiences and relationship longevity. The older adults who met their partners unexpectedly expressed "surprise" at finding themselves involved in late life romance and intimacy. I argued that this surprise was a reflection of the entrenched nature of ageist myths (Angus & Reeve 2006), in particular, the perception of the asexual older adult, which is ingrained to such an extent in our collective consciousness that older adults believe this myth themselves (Levy 1996; Levy et al. 2000). In contrast, the deliberate daters expressed no such surprise at finding themselves involved. These older adults did not buy into the notion that they were beyond late-life romance. I argued that the very process of actively pursuing potential new partners seemed to influence the way these older adults viewed their new relationships, at least in the very early stages. The manner of repetitive dating – of contacting and meeting new people, and subsequently rejecting them or being rejected by them – thus appears to circumvent the surprise component of dating.

### **Living apart together in later life: a new family form in Australia**

The older adults in my study dated to establish 'serious' and long-term romances (Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991: 246) but not, as is usual for younger cohorts, as a 'prelude' to marriage or cohabitation (Eaton & Rose 2011: 844). For these older adults marriage (and cohabitation) appeared to be, for the most part, a defunct institution (Cherlin 2004), at least in their later life preferences, as only six of the relationships reported here developed into such relationship forms. The rest of the participants, whether they were in ongoing relationships or still looking, expressed a desire for stable, committed and sexually intimate partnerships – but relationships which were functionally and physically separate. This outcome was supported by the literature, which showed that older adults increasingly favour living apart together (Levin & Trost 1999) arrangements in their new late life romances (Borell & Ghazanfareon Karlsson 2003). This finding provides the first qualitative description of this family form amongst the Australian older adult population.

The reasons for older adult involvement in such relationships appears to be different from those experienced by younger generations, who see LATs as a temporary measure prior to cohabitation or marriage (Reimondos et al. 2011). My findings show that the older adults in this study viewed LATs as long term, permanent arrangements. The reasons for favouring such partnerships were remarkably similar between both the online- and offline-initiated relationship groups and underscored the overlapping themes of separateness, independence and family.

For some older adults freedom was of vital importance and they strongly guarded their independence by remaining structurally, financially and emotionally separate from their late life partners. Findings such as these were echoed throughout this dissertation, particularly by female participants, who said they valued not having to care for and look after their male partners, in some cases for the first time in their lives. Living apart together relationships allowed them to remain autonomous and to avoid providing instrumental support, as well as being thrust into the normative gender roles of care giver

and housewife (see Dickson et al. 2005). These findings suggest that it is very important to consider an individual's stage of life when trying to understand LAT relationships, as older adults have different considerations than those at earlier life stages.

Both men and women were also conscious of the impact their new romances could have on their adult children, grand-children and extended families. Choosing to live separately from their partners served not only to help preserve existing familial ties and relationships but also appeased children's concerns regarding inheritance issues (Gilding 2010). This latter finding is of particular importance. Contrary to the doom and gloom expounded by conservative scholars regarding the so-called demise of the family (Popenoe 1993), and individualisation theorists who see personal reflexivity prioritised at its expense (Giddens 1992), this finding shows that "the family" continues to have prominence and value, as well as remaining strongly embedded within these older adults' lives (Gilding 2010; Smart & Neale 1999) in spite of their involvement in new romances. These LAT relationships thus represent the new orthodoxy of personal life in their focus on individualisation coupled with their ongoing maintenance of autonomy. Simultaneously, they continue to honour the past orthodoxy of the family as an institution, as evidenced by their emphasis on children and grand-children in terms of care-giving and, in particular, inheritance issues.

### **Pure relationships**

I argued that the relationships which the older adults described and valued – which were, in the main, LAT partnerships – were, to all intents and purposes, the embodiment of pure relationships (Giddens 1992). They were not, as suggested of today's postmodern relationships, episodes of shallow, fleeting affection (Bauman 2003); they were deep and meaningful connections with the promise of "foreverness" (Förster et al. 2010: 237). Nevertheless, it must be said, that for those who found love online, relationships did appear to be easy to enter and also easy to exit. This not only provides support for the aspect of Bauman's argument which suggests that contemporary relationships are 'loose and eminently revocable' (2003: 90), but also for Giddens' (1992) claim that today's

relationships are unstable and last only as long as they are needed. However, these contentions do not fit with the older adults' expressed desire for sustained, long term partnerships. What's more, for those whose relationships were over, there was no indication that they had experienced their romances as anything but important and meaningful.

The older adults in this study described their late life partnerships in terms of companionship, intimacy, communication and egalitarianism, and they appeared to involve highly reflexive practices on the part of those involved: all hallmarks of Giddens' ideal of the pure relationship. Not surprisingly then, the gendered norms that usually govern such relationships were not so apparent, at least in their early beginnings.

### **Gendered norms versus female agency**

Whilst other studies have found gendered relationship norms operating within online dating sites (Barraket & Henry-Waring 2008) and, indeed, in dating behaviour in general (Eaton & Rose 2012), my study did not. As stated earlier in this thesis, the degree to which the participants' words reflect their *actual* lived experiences and practices is unknown. However, many of the older adult women who found love online appeared to take active measures to control the pace and progress of their burgeoning relationships through the structured process of the dating websites, by sending "kisses", initiating email contact and organising first dates and so on. I thus argued that it was the very structure of the dating sites – the use of personal profiles, the formation of criteria and the observance of protocols – which governed the way these relationships evolved online and not gender per se. I also argued that the back and forth nature of early online contact reflected a more reciprocal and democratic beginning to relationships than Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008) found.

In the face to face group the situation was a little different, in that most of the men made the first move, a finding which I argued was a reflection of the heteronormative groups

that these older adults were involved in, although some of the older women did initiate follow-up contact rather than waiting passively to be approached further. Like the women in the online group, these women also described relationships that were democratic, intimate and based on common values.

It could be argued that the agency these women displayed was just a function of their "age" – that is, it developed over time and with experience. And, yes, there probably is an element of that operating here. However, as all the women in this study are products of a time when heteronormative behaviour was practiced and enforced by structural agents operating within society, this is hard to believe. It appears to be more a reflection of changing mores in society, combined with a response to divorce or widowhood which, for many of these women, marks the first time in their lives they have been autonomous. These factors, coupled with the reflexive nature of online dating – preparing personal profiles and articulating ideal partner characteristics – I believe helped foster their behaviour as agents of change in their own lives. However, it could also be a sample difference which accounts for the difference in findings. That said, the agency of these women was also reflected in the qualities they sought in their new relationships, which appeared to reflect the principles of Giddens' (1992) pure relationships – such as intimate communication and shared ideals. This agency also extended to their sexuality, which for many became a more liberating experience than their previous, married, experiences had been.

But what of the older men in this talk of female agency? For the most part they appeared to embrace it. Many expressed surprise and delight at being approached and enjoyed the ease with which women articulated their needs, particularly in terms of sex. The dissenting voice was Ivan, who despite being partnered in a non-cohabiting relationship for the past eight years, conveyed a sense of dismay and bewilderment at today's "modern woman" who he said wanted to be "equal all the time", which he found "off putting".

The relationship forms these women favoured also highlighted their apparent agency: they resisted cohabitation or marriage, preferring instead to live separately from their partners by maintaining discrete residences and finances. In this manner they were able to remain independent, separate and avoid being thrust into the care giver role (Dickson et al. 2005).

### **Relationship longevity**

As there is little information available regarding the longevity of new late life relationships, it was a topic of interest in the present study. Just over half of the partnerships described were sustained or long-term, ranging in length from one to ten years. There was a difference between the two relationship groups. Whilst the majority of partnerships in the offline group could be classified as long-term, less than half of those in the online group could be classed as such. As previously argued, the romances in this study resembled Giddens (1992) notion of pure relationships, although, he contends that their reflexive nature makes them intrinsically unstable. This contention may well account for the short term nature of many of the relationships in the online group, but does not account for the sustained partnerships in the face to face group. However, I argued that this could be because of the nature of online dating: that the sheer number of possible partners available online (Illouz 2007) allows older adults countless choices and the possibility of trying out a number of relationships before committing to them, and it also lessens the need to persevere with a relationship that is not quite right. Bauman's (2003) contention that postmodern relationships are liquid, that is, easy to enter and just as easy to exit, would appear to apply here. However, my results indicate that the online daters were highly invested in their partnerships and did not view them as disposable. On the contrary, they expressed a desire for committed, ongoing relationships.

### **The importance of time in new late life relationships**

As described in Chapter Four, the socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen 1992) posits that older adults, with their awareness of a finite future preference interactions with



familiar social partners and possess a decreased motivation to try new things, coupled with an increased drive for emotionally meaningful connections (Carstensen et al. 2003). The face to face romances supported these contentions, particularly because of their unexpected nature: the older adults did not go looking for new relationships, they occurred by chance and many of the older adults were “surprised” at finding themselves involved. Also, as the relationships quickly became committed and sustained over long periods, the finding supports the contention that, ultimately, older adults prefer to interact with those who are familiar to them and that the relationships were emotionally salient.

The theory also explained older adults’ use of dating websites by their desire to seek (“more”) emotionally satisfying relationships in later life *because of* their perception of limited time left (Stephure et al. 2009). However, by finding and embracing new romantic relationships, these older adults negated the deficit (“less”) aspect of the theory which focuses on a ‘decreasing motivation to expand one’s horizons’ in later life (Carstensen 2003: 103). These older adults went to great lengths to try new skills (online dating) and in some instances to use computers and the Internet for the first time; they opened up new worlds and new possibilities for themselves, some moving to new states and even new continents to be with their new partners – certainly not displaying the behaviour illustrative of those who were meant to be contracting their lives and favouring the familiar. These factors also held true for the two deliberately-initiated relationships in the face to face group.

The importance of time as a limiting factor was also a recurrent theme throughout this study for both the online- and offline-initiated relationships. The awareness of a foreshortened future, of no time to waste (Carstensen 1995) provided the impetus for the deliberate daters to seek out new partners and explains why, for many, their relationships were so intense. Equally it provides an explanation for the speed with which most online daters met their prospective new partners, because if their online connection did not translate into offline attraction, it meant they could quickly go back online and try again

without wasting any precious time (Whitty & Carr 2006). The theory also explained the urgency to advance and consolidate relationships very quickly, for both the online- and offline-initiated romances – because of this very focus on a finite future.

For many of the older adults in this study, time was also relevant to how they saw and experienced love in their new late life romances. In many cases the notion of time was equated with the notion of “more” – more tolerance, more energy, more reserves and more care – as well as more time for relationships and more time to enjoy intimate moments, and a picture of themselves as “more sexy”. As older adults their accumulated experiences through different phases of their lives brought more perspective to their later life romances, and their retirement from the workforce gave them more time to enjoy these romances. This notion of “more” was also juxtaposed with the notion of “less” – and was characterised by a feeling of catching up on “lost time”, but also of experiencing less worry and having less demands and fewer pressures on their relationships, in particular, regarding family rearing, mortgages and the like.

### **What do love and intimacy mean to these older adults?**

Given the lack of qualitative research in this area, a large part of the current study was concerned with love, sex and intimacy in contemporary late life romantic relationships. For the older adults, love held multiple meanings, as did intimacy. On the whole, older adults in this study experienced love as something which was completely different from their earlier, mainly married, love experiences, although a few defined it as the same as when they were younger. The new relationships described in this thesis were, for the most part, ‘prototypical’ of what are universally understood to be love relationships, that is, they comprised ‘intimacy, commitment and passion’ (Aron & Westbay 1996: 535); as opposed to companionate love relationships – which are understood to consist of deep affection, rather than passionate love – a love that some researchers say is characteristic of older adult relationships (Bulcroft & O’Connor 1986a,b).

### **It's (vivid) love, actually**

As evidenced in the literature, whilst romantic love may be a 'pan-human characteristic' (Hatfield & Rapson 2002: 308), individual meanings of love vary (Langhamer 2007). This was certainly borne out in my study. Some older adults described vivid falling in love experiences, others a deep, caring bond and yet others defined love as basically lustful attraction. A small number of older adults said they had never been in love and did not think that love existed. Regardless of how they defined love, the majority of participants described experiences which were intense. These findings are unique, as they have not been previously described in terms of older adult romance.

Interestingly, my study also showed that the intensity of these love relationships was more apparent in the relationships initiated online than those that occurred face to face. I argued this could simply be an artefact of the different sample sizes between the two groups, or perhaps because of the greater number of possible partners available on dating websites, which meant there were greater opportunities to fall in love. I also argued that conceivably it could be the manner in which dating websites structure the early stages of romantic relationships – through "kisses", emails, IM and phone calls before initial meetings. This process appeared to promote a sense of anticipation occurring and, in effect, "primed" the older adults to fall in love – an effect which was missing from the relationships which occurred by chance. Moreover, as the hyperpersonal nature (Walther 1996) of the text-based online communication has been shown to facilitate intimate bonding between couples (Baker 2005; Henderson & Gilding 2004), I argued that it could be a combination of the two factors: priming coupled with hyperpersonal communication, which served to enhance the intensity of these older adult love experiences. Whatever the outcome may ultimately be, the majority of romantic relationships in this study were based on love.

The experience of love as an older adult was, in the main, completely different from earlier love experiences. Some described it as deeper, stronger or lustier than what they had

previously known. Others felt the difference was more a reflection of having more time to enjoy being in love and because the pressures associated with earlier love relationships were missing. Whichever way love was viewed, the experiences highlighted in this thesis showed that, for many of the older adults, love was a vital component of their late life romantic relationships.

## **Intimacy**

The terms intimacy and sexuality are often conflated as meaning one and the same thing. This is because what actually constitutes intimacy or sexuality per se has not yet been elucidated (Gott 2007) and explanations vary from sexual intercourse to close companionship (Deacon et al. 1995), or emotional/romantic and/or sexual relations (Barraket & Henry-Waring 2008). As there has been very little research which details what these terms mean for older adults, I asked the participants in my study to define what intimacy meant for them. The older adults differentiated intimacy into clear categories: intimacy as sex, intimacy as emotion and intimacy as sex plus emotion.

The older adults who regarded intimacy as sex described it as purely a physical act, whereas those for whom intimacy was emotional intimacy, described sharing feelings and emotions as well as romantic gestures. For these older adults there was a clear distinction between intimacy and sex and these terms did not mean one and the same thing. On the surface these relationships would appear to be companionate (Aron et al. 2006) and passionless, however, as all these relationships were also intimate in a sexual sense, I argued that it was difficult to assign such a definition to them. Further, I argued that the term companionate might not be nuanced enough to describe some late life relationships.

Two thirds of the sample regarded intimacy as both emotional and physical closeness. These older adults clearly differentiated that sex was just sex, but that intimacy meant far more. They regarded it as a mind/body connection: "holding hands when out walking, companionship, as well as love making". For some it was also apparent that their views of

intimacy had changed over time, which I argued could indicate a process of introspection associated with age, as well as an increased impetus to extract meaning from life through their salient connections (Carstensen et al. 2003). However, I also argued that this introspection echoed the reflexivity which was apparent in many of the late life partnerships described in this thesis – a reflexivity which marked them as pure-type relationships (Giddens 1992). Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008) have argued that this self-reflection is a product of online dating due, in part, to the process of compiling personal profiles and partner profiles. However, as this reflection was also apparent in the face to face group, I argued that wider societal processes were at work, as Giddens (1992) has already postulated.

### **How central is sexuality within these new romantic partnerships?**

Earlier in this thesis I highlighted the incongruence in the literature in regards to older adults as sexual beings. First, quantitative studies, chiefly consisting of survey-based sexuality research and usually from a biomedical – health and illness – perspective, invariably indicated that older adults are sexual, but with limited functional ability (see Lindau et al. 2007). This literature was criticised for its androcentric emphasis, its focus on ageing as decline and deficit and its reliance on counting the number of times (hetero) sexual intercourse occurred over time, a view which does not account for differences in sexual functioning or alternative means of sexual expression. Second, in contrast to the medical literature, a plethora of studies continued to position older adults as asexual, despite the evidence to the contrary (Connidis 2010). The incongruence between the literatures was difficult to reconcile, however, it was acknowledged that ageist perceptions of the asexual older adult are firmly entrenched in society and are extraordinarily difficult to change (Angus & Reeve 2006). There were very few qualitative studies illuminating how older adults perceived or experienced themselves as sexual beings – which might have provided a more nuanced account of ageing and sexuality. Accordingly, I asked the older adults in this study how important sex was for them. Given that the biomedical focus of

the literature reports that ill health plays a key role in moderating the importance of sex, I also asked whether ill health impacted on their sex lives.

To the older adults in this study, sex was, for the most part, either fundamentally important for their health and well-being or, at minimum, a necessary part of their romantic relationships. For a very small number of participants, sex mattered little. Overall, the older adults described late life sex as the “best” they’d ever had as well as “more important”, “satisfying” and “more pleasurable”, and for some of the older women, more “liberating” than their previous, experiences (see also Brecher 1984). My findings also show that, for some of the single older adults, the importance of sex had diminished over time because of the lack of a viable partner, especially for women (Carpenter et al. 2006). I argued that this appeared to be more of a situational decline in response rather an age-related decline per se, as evidenced by sexual activity recommencing and, what’s more, becoming very important with the presence of a new partner. In contrast to the quantitative studies, my study found there was no general waning of interest in sex with age – although once again, this statement must be tempered with the observation that whether this finding reflects *actual* lived experiences is unknown.

Nearly half of the older adults reported they had health issues – some multiple – which affected their love lives in some way. Whilst ill-health did have an impact on their sexual practices, many of the older adults in this study were able to embrace the limitations of their sexual functioning by adaptive and creative behaviours. My findings indicate that sex for these older adults was far more than just the physical act of sexual intercourse (Weeks 1997). It encompassed activities such as touching and caressing (Hurd Clarke 2006) to sexual play (Potts et al. 2006) as well as, for some, penile penetration. My study highlighted that sexual intercourse was clearly not necessary for the majority of the older adults to feel both sexually engaged and fulfilled. My results ran contrary to ageist perceptions about asexual older adults and diverged from the biomedical literature which highlighted levels of sexual activity rather than the desire to be involved.

Safe-sex practices were not directly addressed in this study. However, three single participants brought up the matter themselves. Their responses flagged the possibility that older adults involved in new late-life relationships might be in danger of developing sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) due, in part, to the number of sexual partners they were involved with but also because of a naïve sense of security regarding safe-sex practices. What the anecdotes highlighted was that for these older adults the issue of HIV/AIDS and STDs did not become an issue paradoxically *until* their relationships were ongoing and committed. In contrast, casual sex experiences did not appear to be a cause for concern. Given the recent research which highlights that the Internet has the potential to act as an incubator for the spread of STDs (Couch & Liamputtong 2008), these results beg the question of just how far HIV/AIDS or STDs could be transmitted via the older adult online dating community? These findings warrant further investigation.

## **Conclusion**

There appears to be an assumption in Australia that older adults do not re-partner, as evidenced by the reliance on remarriage rates in both Government and academic circles, with which to explain relationship status amongst older adults. Moreover, sociology itself barely mentions older adults in terms of partnering and and/or intimacy. With the impending social changes in Australian society and the rest of the world as a result of 'boomageddon' (Asquith 2009; Hamilton 2007), late life partnering has now become an issue of some prominence.

The older adult partnerships described in this study echo those of younger generations: they meet, they fall in love and they are sexually intimate (Kamp Dush 2009). However, unlike their younger counterparts who look for partners for 'mate selection' (Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991: 246) and whose ultimate aim is to eventually live with or marry their partners (Reimondos et al. 2011), the majority of older adults expressed a desire to remain functionally separate in the long term, preferring instead to live apart together (Levin & Trost 1999). These findings are unique in that they provide a definitive description of this

new family form amongst older adults in Australia for the first time. This new form of partnering has implications beyond the couples themselves, and which extends to wider social and economic structures and raises significant questions for the future. For instance, given that this new family form does not involve care giving or instrumental support, what effects will LAT relationships have on older adult health care and end of life care needs, social support requirements such as retirement pensions, as well as the on-flow of housing stock and so on?

These and many more questions besides would benefit from a more comprehensive and wide-ranging study of this partnership form. Although Reimondos et al. (2011) have found preliminary evidence arising from the HILDA study which highlighted the occurrence of LATs in Australia, the actual incidence is confounded by the wording of the questions and the classification of LATs. A mixed methods study consisting of a quantitative survey coupled with in-depth interviews, would provide valuable data: (1) to determine the true prevalence of LATs amongst older adults, and (2) to provide further descriptive evidence to ascertain whether the results presented herein are reproducible or just an artefact of the sample. Such a study would also allow for a thorough forecasting of the impact of this new family form on Australian society.

The prevalence of online dating amongst older adults also needs to be addressed further, as there is little conclusive evidence to date. Additional questions about sexuality and intimacy need to be followed up, particularly older adults use of (or lack of) safe sex practices and the implications this will ultimately have for health costs in the future. The juxtaposition of online dating and the spread of STDs is of particular concern and warrants further study.

The findings highlighted the benefits of using qualitative methods to investigate late life romantic relationships. The in-depth interviews generated rich and descriptive data regarding this phenomenon and provided a more nuanced picture than other, more



quantitative data has done in regards to older adult feelings and behaviours about love, sex and intimacy.

Given the 'socially sensitive' nature of the research topic (Liamputtong 2007: 5), in particular, its focus on 'private and personal' behaviours (Wellings et al. 2000: 256), it might have been expected that the data generated would have been less rich and detailed. However, the findings highlight that discussing sexuality with older adults is not only a legitimate research topic, it is also one that the participants in this study fully embraced. Far from being reluctant to talk about their intimate lives as has previously been proposed (Minichiello et al. 1996: 186), these older adults talked freely and openly about every aspect of their relationships, sexual or otherwise. Indeed, Evie – the oldest participant at 92 years of age – said most emphatically that she volunteered to take part in this study *because she "wanted people to know"*.

This study is also unique in that it highlights the use and applicability of instant messaging and email as suitable interview methods to use with older adults. Prior to this study, online interviewing has typically not been considered appropriate in this population group. The interview methods were easy to use and of great benefit to both the researcher and the older adults, who embraced the use of this technology. With issues of population ageing becoming more and more prevalent, it is time for researchers in ageing to champion these methods for their own research agendas.

This research is not without its shortcomings. The most obvious deficiency is the small number of face to face participants. For this reason, the differences highlighted between the two groups of older adults needs to be approached with caution. Further, as the study used a convenience sample of 45 older adults, the results only reflect the views of those involved and cannot be generalised to a broader population of older adults (see Chapter Five). Nevertheless, the value of this type of exploratory research is in its ability to provide

insight and understanding into the social worlds of others, in this case, into the experiences of late life dating, romance and sexuality.

Despite the small sample size of the face to face group, the findings also endorse the benefits of conducting interviews with two complementary groups of older adults. Without this additional group, the changes that were found in older adult self-disclosure and intimacy over time might well have been attributed solely to the online dating environment (Barraket & Henry-Waring 2008). Instead these changes were noted in both the online and offline groups. This finding lends weight to Giddens (1992) assertion that the so-called transformation of intimacy is producing profound societal changes as well as directly personal ones.

A further shortcoming of this study is its heterosexual sample. Not one of the participants involved was gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender or intersex – that I was aware of. However, this was not because of any deliberate strategy on my part, as only heterosexual older adults responded to my call for participants. Whether this was because of the wording of the various research notices in seniors' newspapers or the placement of the CFP in particularly heteronormative environments, such as RSVP.com® rather than say Pink Sofa® a lesbian dating website, for example, is difficult to say definitively. Certainly this research would benefit from comparing the findings of the current heterosexual sample with those from other relationship groups.

This research thus provides a starting point for further research in the area of older adult love and sexuality in Australia and, particularly, the role and impact of the Internet and online dating on late life romantic relationships. This research raises a number of questions that should be investigated. For instance, how many Australian older adults actually find love online? How many older adults are engaged in LAT relationships in Australia? How do older adults negotiate new romantic relationships within the context of their families and friends? Are there qualitative differences – beyond those that have

already been highlighted here – between long term relationships which begin as a consequence of one's daily interactions and those which are deliberately sought and if there are, what are they? And, finally, what are the safe sex practices amongst late life daters – online and offline?

The stories presented in this thesis reveal older adult perspectives of their new late life romantic relationships and provide insight and understanding into the world of late life dating and romance. They show that love and intimacy continue to be of vital importance in later life, as do 'pure'-type relationships based on emotional and sexuality equality, as well as an ongoing need for autonomy. Despite the individual emphasis of these stories, however, they also bring into sharp focus the continual prominence of adult children and grandchildren in older adult lives, particularly in terms of care-giving and inheritance issues. These stories thus provide evidence that the past and present orthodoxies of family life and personal life are deeply entwined – and that older adults favour LAT relationships *because* they preserve *both* their individual interests and that of their families. In so doing, they represent a new family form within Australian society.

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- Malta S & Farquharson K (2012a) The initiation and progression of late-life romantic relationships. *Journal of Sociology, Online First* (April 12). Available at: doi: 10.1177/1440783312442254 (awaiting print publication)
- Malta S (2012b) Using online methods to interview older adults about their romantic and sexual relationships. In: *Researching Later Life and Ageing - Expanding Qualitative Research Horizons* (ed) Leontowisch M (pp. 146-172). Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, UK.
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## Appendix 1. SeniorNet® Call for Participants

### Research Project

---

My name is Sue Malta and I am a PhD candidate from Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia. I am doing research on older adults and their intimate online relationships. I am looking for participants to take part in some online interviews.

For my research, I need to gather data from people who are currently in or who have recently been involved in an online romance. I am interested in the views of people **aged 60 years or over**, as I think people this age are often left out in research regarding the Internet and romance and intimacy in particular.

Your responses will be treated as confidential. It **will not** be possible for you to be personally identifiable in any report of this work. All screen names and identifying information will be changed, and a pseudonym will be assigned to you to protect your privacy.

At this stage, I am keen on gauging your interest in the project, and would appreciate it if you could email me or reply here if you would like to be interviewed. My details are as follows:

**Sue Malta, PhD Candidate,  
Australian Centre for Emerging Technologies & Society,  
Faculty of Life & Social Sciences, Swinburne University, Melbourne**  
[smalta@swin.edu.au](mailto:smalta@swin.edu.au)

## Appendix 2. RSVP.com Call for Participants

### Research Project

---

My name is Sue Malta and I am a PhD candidate from Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne. I am doing research on older adults and their romantic online relationships. I am looking for participants to take part in some online interviews.

For my research, I need to gather data from people who are currently in or who have recently been involved in an online romance. I am interested in the views of people **aged 60 years or over**, as I think people this age are often left out in research regarding the Internet and romance and intimacy in particular.

Your responses will be treated as confidential. It **will not** be possible for you to be personally identifiable in any report of this work. All screen names and identifying information will be changed, and a pseudonym will be assigned to you to protect your privacy.

At this stage, I am keen on gauging your interest in the project, and would appreciate it if you could email me or reply here if you would like to be interviewed. My details are as follows:

**Sue Malta, PhD Candidate,  
Australian Centre for Emerging Technologies & Society,  
Faculty of Life & Social Sciences, Swinburne University, Melbourne**  
[smalta@swin.edu.au](mailto:smalta@swin.edu.au)

|   |
|---|
| <b>Appendix 3. Interview Schedule [Offline]</b> |
| <b>Face to Face and Telephone</b>               |

---

**Older Adults and their Romantic Relationships: Online and Offline**

---

I would just like to reiterate that this interview is entirely confidential and that you will not be able to be identified in any manner. I would also like to remind you that I am going to be taping this interview for future use. OK?

*Demographic Questions:*

---

**Age:**

My study is of older adults, therefore I need to keep track of participants' ages. Can you please tell me how old you are?

**Gender:**

Can you please state for my records whether you are male or female?

*Internet Use:*

---

Part of my research involves older adults and their online relationships. As a comparison to that group, I would like to ask you some basic questions about the Internet.

---

**Are you connected to the Internet at home?**

[if not, where do you use the Internet? →work, library, friend/relative, café, other]

**If YES, how MANY YEARS have you been using the Internet for?**

**How MANY HOURS per day do you use the Internet?**

**What exactly do you use the Internet for?**

[→for instance, email, information/education, financial advice, support]

**If you had a choice, would you like to use the Internet *more* or *less* than you do now?**

**Why?**

**Do you belong to any online discussion groups, social groups or support groups?**

[→special interest groups such as Genealogy groups, sports groups, SeniorNet, health support groups (such as Diabetes Australia) and so on]

**Do you belong to any social, activity or support groups in your offline life?**

[→for example, U3A, community groups, exercise groups, Probus and so on]

[→how often do you attend activities?]

### *Romantic Relationships*

---

Thank you for answering those questions. As explained earlier, this study is about older adults and their relationships, specifically romantic relationships.

---

**Can you please confirm whether you are currently involved in or have previously been involved in a new romantic relationship as an older adult?**

[→yes / no]

**Is this relationship still ongoing?**

**If yes, how long?**

**If you are not together anymore, how long did the relationship last?**

**Are you currently or have you previously been married or living with a romantic partner?**

[→married, divorced, separated, single]

[→yes / no? →how long? →encourage discussion]

**Is this the same person you are having a romantic relationship with?**

[→yes / no? →encourage discussion]

**Can you tell me how long it has been since you were involved in a romantic relationship?**

**Are you currently looking for a romantic relationship?**

---

Research I have read suggests that many people join clubs, go to dances or use the Internet as a means to finding a new romantic partner. I'm interested in hearing about your experience, especially how you met and how your relationship developed over time. I will now ask a series of questions that reflect this focus.

---

**How did you meet your current or previous romantic partner?**

[→Did you go to a dance or a club of some kind with the *intention* of finding a romantic partner?]

[→if yes, please explain]

[→if not, but you found one anyway, how did it happen? as a consequence of participating in a special interest or support group perhaps?]

[→did you experience any difficulties finding a romantic partner?]

**Did the relationship happen quickly? Or did it take a long time to develop?**

[→time estimate, encourage discussion]

**What stages did your relationship go through before you thought of yourselves as "a couple"?**

[→telephone contact, postal letters, photos, face to face meetings, other?]

**How long after you met, did you start having a sexual relationship, if at all?**

[→time estimate, encourage discussion?]

[→do you have other ongoing sexual relationships with any other partners?]

**I'm interested in finding out how you knew you "clicked" with this person? For instance, what "clues" were there, that suggested this person might be someone you would be willing to have a romantic relationship with?**

**Did this romance involve a vivid "falling in love" experience or did love happen gradually, if at all? Would you even use the word "love" to describe this relationship?**

[→please explain]

**How did this particular romance differ from any other romances you may have had or are currently having?**

[→please explain]

**What does "intimacy" mean to you – in terms of older adult romantic relationships?**

**Do you think that love, in general, is experienced differently as you get older?**

[→explain / discuss]

**Many people believe that a romantic relationship almost always involves sex. Do you think it is possible to have a romantic relationship WITHOUT engaging in sex?**

[→why / why not →discuss]

**As an older adult, how important is sex to you?**

[→explain / discuss]

**If currently involved:**

**If your current relationship ended, would you try to find romance again?**

[→if yes, what means would you use to help you find romance again?]

[→if not, please explain]

**What means would you use to help find another romantic relationship?**

**Would you ever consider using the Internet as a means of finding romantic partners?**

**Have you ever used the internet to find a romantic partner?**

[→is yes, please explain, →if not, why not?]

**Do you think it is easy to meet potential partners face to face? Easier than online?**

**If not answered already, ask:**

**Have you ever used or thought of using an online dating service such as RSVP or Match.com?**

**Many people mention that they don't tell their families that they have met a new partner.**

**Can you tell me about your experience with your family members?**

*Cheating:*

There has been much written about primary relationships and about “flirting”, “casual sex” and “cheating”. I would like to ask you a few questions around this theme. Some of these questions may not be pertinent to you. Just say so and we will move on.

---

**Some people consider flirting as harmless fun, whilst others consider it as a precursor to infidelity. What are your views and experiences regarding flirting?**

[→discuss]

**Do you consider that a person who has a primary relationship and who then develops another romantic relationship is “cheating”?**

[→why / or why not? →possible prompt re “casual sex”?]

**What if that relationship develops online and stays online – would you still consider that “cheating”?**

**What if that relationship ultimately became sexual?**

**Are there any situations in which having a sexual relationship with other people outside of a primary relationship is acceptable?**

[→yes / no →health, incapacity, mental deterioration and so on?]

**Do you have other ongoing sexual relationships with any partners other than your primary partner?**

[→yes / no / discuss]

**Have you ever used the Internet for sexual encounters?**

*General Questions:*

I now have a few general demographic questions to ask you before we finish off. Is that okay?

---

**Do you still have paid employment?**

[→if yes, please explain]

[→if retired, what was your occupation?]

**Can you tell me the highest level of education you received?**

[→high school, undergrad, postgrad etc]

**Do you have any health issues that affect your love life in any way?**

[→if yes, how do you manage those?]

[→if not, how would you describe your love life?]

**Do you consider yourself to be someone who is outgoing or someone who can be a bit shy at times?**



**Do you think your experiences with a new romance have had any impact on the way you consider (or previously considered) yourself to be?**

**Further, do you think your romantic experiences have had or will have any impact whatsoever on possible future romantic experiences?**

**Is there anything I haven't asked you that I should have?**

[→yes / no; discuss]

**Do you know of anyone else who would be willing to speak to me about older adults and their romantic relationships?**

**Once I have analyzed the interview transcript, I may need to contact you again, if I need to clarify some of the issues we have discussed. Would this be okay?**

[→yes / no]

|   |
|---|
| <b>Appendix 4. Interview Schedule [Online IM]</b> |
| <b>[Online Cohort : Instant Messaging]</b>        |

---

**Older Adults and their Romantic Relationships: Online and Offline**

---

I would just like to remind you that this interview is entirely confidential and that you will not be able to be identified in any manner. I am also going to be copying the text to use in the future. OK?

*Demographic Questions:*

---

**Age:**

My study is of older adults, therefore I need to keep track of participants' ages. Can you please tell me how old you are?

**Gender:**

Are you male or female?

*Internet Use:*

---

I would like to ask you some basic questions about your use of the Internet.

---

**Where do you use the Internet?**

**How long (YEARS) have you been using the Internet for?**

**How MANY HOURS A DAY do you use the Internet?**

**Would you like to use the Internet *more* or *less* than you do now?**

**Why?**

**What exactly do you use the Internet for?**

**Do you belong to any online discussion groups, social groups or support groups?**

**Do you belong to any groups in your offline life?**

*Online Romantic Relationships:*

---

Thank you for that information. We will now move on to questions about relationships.

---

**Can you please confirm whether you are currently involved in or have previously been involved in a romance with someone you met online?**

**Can you tell me if you are currently married or living with a romantic partner?**

[→married, divorced, separated, single]

[→if yes →how long? →PLEASE DESCRIBE]

[→if not →why not →PLEASE EXPLAIN AND DESCRIBE]

**IF YES: Is this the same person you met online?**

**IF NO: Are you single by choice?**

**Can you tell me how long it has been since you were involved in a romantic relationship?**

**Would you like to be in a romantic relationship?**

---

Research I have read suggests that many people use the Internet as a means to finding a new romantic partner. I'm interested in hearing about your experience, especially how you met online and how your relationship developed over time.

---

**Did you go online with the *intention* of finding a romantic partner?**

***[If YES, go to the next question. If NO, skip the next question]***

**Why did you go online to find a partner?**

**Did your online relationship happen quickly? Or did it take a long time to develop?**

**Are you still together? *[If NO, go to the next question. If YES, skip the next question]***

**If you are not together anymore, how long did the relationship last?**

**If you've never met your online partner face to face (F2F), do you intend to in the future?**

**If you have met F2F, how long did this happen after you met online and when did you start having a sexual relationship (if at all)?**

**What stages did your online relationship go through before you actually met?**

**I'm interested in finding out how you knew you "clicked" with this person (esp. if no photos exchanged). For instance, what "clues" were there, that suggested this person might be someone you would be willing to have a romantic relationship with?**

**Did this online romance involve a vivid "falling in love" experience or did love happen gradually?**

**How did this particular romance differ from any offline romances you have had?**

**Do you think that love, in general, is experienced differently as you get older?**

**What does "intimacy" mean to you – in terms of online romantic relationships?**

**If your current relationship ended, would you try to find romance again?**

**Would you use the Internet to help find another romantic relationship?**

**Do you think it is easy to meet people online? Easier than offline?**

***IF NOT ANSWERED ALREADY, please answer:***

**Have you ever used or thought of using an online dating service, such as RSVP or Match.com?**

*Cybercheating:*

---

There has been much written recently about primary relationships and online relationships and "cyberflirting", "cybersex" and "cybercheating". I would like to ask you a few questions around this theme.

---

**Some people consider cyberflirting as harmless fun, whilst others consider it as a precursor or lead-in to infidelity. What are your views or experiences regarding cyberflirting?**

**What are your views about flirting in general?**

**Do you consider that a person who has a primary relationship and who then develops an online romance that stays online is really “cheating”?**

**What if that online relationship progressed to F2F encounters and ultimately became sexual offline?**

**Are there any situations in which having a sexual relationship with other people outside of a primary relationship is acceptable?**

**Is the person you are having a romantic relationship with now, the same person you are married to or living with?**

**If you have an offline partner, do they know about your online romance?**

**Many people believe that an online romantic relationship almost always involves cybersex. Do you think it is possible to have an online romantic relationship WITHOUT engaging in cybersex?**

**Have you ever engaged in cybersex?  
With your current partner?  
With somebody else?**

**Would you recommend the Internet to others as a means of finding romantic partners?**

*General Questions:*

---

I now have a few general questions to ask you just before we finish off.

---

**Are you still in paid employment?**

***If YES, please describe position, if NO please list previous occupation:***

**Can you tell me the highest level of education you received?**

**Do you have any health issues that affect your love life in any way?**

**Do you consider yourself to be someone who is outgoing or someone who can be a bit shy at times?**

**Do you think your experiences with using the internet have had any impact on the way you consider (or previously considered) yourself to be?**

**Further, regarding your internet experiences, do you think they have had any impact whatsoever on subsequent romantic experiences?**

**Is there anything I haven't asked you that I should have?**

**Do you know of anyone else who would be willing to speak to me about older adults and their romantic relationships?**

**Once I have analyzed the interview transcript, would you mind if I contacted you again, if I need to clarify some of the issues we have discussed?**

|   |
|---|
| <b>Appendix 5. Interview Schedule [Online: Email]</b> |
| <b>[Online Cohort: EMAIL]</b>                         |

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### **Older Adults and their Romantic Relationships: Online and Offline**

---

The questions presented here are to be used as a general guide only. Please feel free to add anything else that you consider relevant.

I would just like to remind you that this interview is entirely confidential and that you will not be able to be identified in any manner. I am also going to be copying the text to use in the future. OK?

#### *Demographic Questions:*

---

**Age:**

My study is of older adults, therefore I need to keep track of participants' ages. Can you tell me how old you are?

**Gender:**

Are you male or female?

#### *Internet Use:*

---

I would like to ask you some basic questions about your use of the Internet.

---

**Where do you use the Internet?**

[→home, work, library, friend/relative, café, other]

**How long have you been using the Internet for?**

[→newbie (<12 months) versus veteran (>12 months)]

**How often do you use the Internet?**

[→hours per week or daily use?]

**Would you like to use the Internet *more or less* than you do now?**

[→why?]

**What exactly do you use the Internet for?**

[please provide as much description as possible]

[→for instance, email, information/education, financial advice, support, games]

**Do you belong to any online discussion groups, social groups or support groups? PLEASE LIST**

[→for example, special interest groups such as Genealogy groups, sports groups, SeniorNet, health support groups (such as Diabetes Australia and so on)]

**Do you belong to any groups in your offline life? PLEASE LIST**

[→for example, U3A, community groups, exercise groups, Probus and so on]

*Online Romantic Relationships:*

---

Thank you for that information. We will now move on to questions about relationships.

---

**Can you please confirm whether you are currently involved in or have previously been involved in a romance with someone you met online?**

[→yes / no]

**Can you tell me if you are currently married or living with a romantic partner?**

[→married, divorced, separated, single]

[→if yes →how long? →PLEASE DESCRIBE]

[→if not →why not →PLEASE EXPLAIN AND DESCRIBE]

**IF NOT: Are you single by choice?**

[→PLEASE EXPLAIN]

**IF YES: Is this the same person you met online?**

[→yes / no]

**IF NOT CLEAR: Can you tell me how long it has been since you were involved in a romantic relationship?****Would you like to be in a romantic relationship?**


---

Research I have read suggests that many people use the Internet as a means to finding a new romantic partner. I'm interested in hearing about your experience, especially how you met online and how your relationship developed over time.

---

**Did you go online with the *intention* of finding a romantic partner?**

**[If YES, answer the next question. If NO, skip the next question]**

[→if yes, please explain, eg, which websites did you use?]

[→if not, but you found one anyway, how did it happen? As a consequence of participating in a special interest or support group perhaps?]

**Why did you go online to find a partner?**

[→were you experiencing difficulties finding a romantic partner offline?]

**Did your online relationship happen quickly? Or did it take a long time to develop?**

[→time estimate, please elaborate]



**Are you still together? [If NO, answer the next question. If YES, skip the next question]**

[→online partner / offline partner? →how long have you been together?]

**If you are not together anymore, how long did the relationship last?**

[→did it move from online to offline?]

[→was the relationship sexual?]

[→would you look for romance online again?]

**If you've never met your online partner face to face (F2F), do you intend to in the future?**

[→if not, why not?]

[→if yes, do you anticipate that the relationship will become sexual?]

**If you have met F2F, how long did this happen after you met online and when did you start having a sexual relationship (if at all)?**

[→time estimate, please discuss]

[→do you have other ongoing sexual relationships with any other partners?]

[→yes / no / discuss]

**What stages did your online relationship go through before you actually met?**

[→exchanging photos/webcam, telephone contact, postal letters, other?]

**I'm interested in finding out how you knew you "clicked" with this person. For instance, what "clues" were there, that suggested this person might be someone you would be willing to have a romantic relationship with?**

**Did this online romance involve a vivid "falling in love" experience or did love happen gradually?**

[→please explain]

**How did this particular romance differ from any offline romances you have had?**

[→please explain]

**Do you think that love, in general, is experienced differently as you get older?**

[→explain / discuss]

**What does "intimacy" mean to you – in terms of online romantic relationships?**

[→please explain]

**If your current relationship ended, would you try to find romance again?**

[→if yes, please explain]

[→if not, please explain]

**Would you use the Internet to help find another romantic relationship?**

[→is yes, please explain]

[→if not, what other methods would you use?]

**Do you think it is easy to meet people online? Easier than offline?**

**IF NOT ANSWERED ALREADY: Have you ever used or thought of using an online dating service, such as RSVP or Match.com?**

[→yes / no; →how did you decide which one to use?]

[→number of times used]

*Cybercheating:*

---

There has been much written recently about primary relationships and online relationships and "cyberflirting", "cybersex" and "cybercheating". I would like to ask you a few questions around this theme.

---

**Some people consider cyberflirting as harmless fun, whilst others consider it as a precursor or lead-in to infidelity. What are your views or experiences regarding cyberflirting?**

[→discuss]

**What are your views about flirting in general?**

[→discuss]

**Do you consider that a person who has a primary relationship and who then develops an online romance that stays online is really "cheating"?**

[→why / or why not? →possible prompt re cybersex?]

[→under what circumstances might it **not** be cheating?]

**What if that online relationship progressed to face to face encounters and ultimately became sexual offline?**

[→discuss]

**Are there any situations in which having a sexual relationship with other people outside of a primary relationship is acceptable?**

[→yes / no →health, incapacity, mental deterioration and so on?]

**Is the person you are having a romantic relationship with now, the same person you are married to or living with?**

[→explain / discuss]

**If you have an offline partner, do they know about your online romance?**

[→yes / no / discuss]

**Many people believe that an online romantic relationship almost always involves cybersex. Do you think it is possible to have an online romantic relationship WITHOUT engaging in cybersex?**

[→why / why not →discuss]

**Have you ever engaged in cybersex?**

[→yes / no / discuss]

**Would you recommend the Internet to others as a means of finding romantic partners?**

[→if yes, please explain the benefits and pitfalls of online dating]

[→if not, why not?]

*General Questions:*

---

I now have a few general questions to ask you just before we finish off.

---

**Do you still have paid employment?**

[→if yes, please explain]

[→if retired, what was your occupation?]

**Can you tell me the highest level of education you received?**

[→high school, undergrad, postgrad etc]

**Do you have any health issues that affect your love life in any way?**

[→if yes, how do you manage those?]

[→if no, how would you describe your love life?]

**Do you consider yourself to be someone who is outgoing or someone who can be a bit shy at times?**

[→self-rating]

**Do you think your experiences with using the internet have had any impact on the way you consider (or previously considered) yourself to be?**

[→for better or worse?]

**Further, regarding your internet experiences, do you think they have had any impact whatsoever on subsequent romantic experiences?**

[→helped or hindered in any way? discuss]

**Is there anything I haven't asked you that I should have?**

[→yes / no; discuss]

**Do you know of anyone else who would be willing to speak to me about older adults and their romantic relationships?**

**Once I have analyzed the interview transcript, would you mind if I contacted you again, if I need to clarify some of the issues we have discussed?**

[→yes / no]



**SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY  
FORM OF DISCLOSURE  
[Offline Cohort]**

**Older Adults and their Romantic Relationships:  
Online and Offline**

**Appendix 6. Disclosure & Consent Form [Offline]**

My name is Sue Malta and I am a PhD student in the Faculty of Life and Social Sciences at Swinburne University of Technology. I am doing research on older adults and their relationships: those that develop through the Internet (online) and those that develop face-to-face (offline). If you are reading this form it is because (1) you are 60 years or older and (2) you are interested in talking to me about your experiences in regards to establishing and building romantic relationships in older years.

The interview will explore a number of themes. You will be asked questions about your current relationship status, its form and function in your life and how your relationship developed over time. You will be asked whether you were actively seeking a new relationship or whether it happened as a consequence of some other activity. Some questions will ask your views on various matters and others will explore the issue of intimacy; for instance, whether your current or past relationship(s) were of a sexual nature. Your contribution will be helpful in gaining insights into older adults and their romantic relationships. The interview should last about 1 hour.

If you agree to take part, your responses will be treated as confidential. The interview will be digitally-recorded, but it **will not** be possible for you to be personally identifiable in any report of this work. All names and identifying information will be changed, and a pseudonym will be assigned to you to protect your privacy. All digital recordings will be transcribed and analyzed for thematic analysis. The work may be published at a later time.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to refuse to take part, or to withdraw your participation at any stage during the interview, or even after it has been completed. If there is any particular question that you'd rather not answer, just say so and we will move on.

Please retain this sheet for your information.

If you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me at 0409.433.077 or by email at [smalta@swin.edu.au](mailto:smalta@swin.edu.au); or you may contact my supervisor, Dr Karen Farquharson at 9214.5889 or by email at [kfarquharson@swin.edu.au](mailto:kfarquharson@swin.edu.au)

If any of the questions asked today raise concerns that you would like to discuss further, please contact the Psychology Centre at Swinburne University (9214.8653).

If you have any queries or concerns which the Supervisor was unable to satisfy, contact: The Dean, Faculty of Life & Social Sciences, Mail H24, Swinburne University of Technology, PO Box 218, Hawthorn, Victoria 3122; Phone: 03.9214.8209.

If you have a complaint about the way that you were treated during this study, please write to:  
The Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee, Swinburne University of Technology, PO Box 218, Hawthorn, Victoria 3122;  
Phone: 03.9214.5223.



**SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY  
INFORMED CONSENT  
[Offline Cohort]**

**Older Adults and their Romantic Relationships:  
Online and Offline**

---

I, ..... have read the letter explaining this project. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in this project, realizing that I may withdraw at any time.

I agree that the interview may be digitally recorded (or, if I prefer not to be taped, by Sue Malta taking notes).

I agree that the research data collected for this project may be published or provided to other researchers on the condition that my anonymity is preserved and that I cannot be identified.

**NAME OF PARTICIPANT:** .....

**SIGNATURE:** ..... **DATE:** .....

**NAME OF RESEARCHER:** .....

**SIGNATURE:** ..... **DATE:** .....

## **Appendix 7. Instructions for setting up Instant Messenger HOW TO DOWNLOAD AND INSTALL WINDOWS LIVE MESSENGER**

Type in "Windows Live Messenger" in Google

Click on the "Windows Live Messenger" link which will take you to the download page

Click on the orange button that says "Get it free"

This takes you to the "Set up Messenger" page. There will be four boxes for you to tick. I don't like my browser set to MSN.com, so I always untick this box. The other three are up to you.

Then you click install.

A box will appear that asks you to "Run, Save or Cancel". You click "Run".

Another box will appear that asks you to "Run or Don't Run". You click "Run".

The Windows Live Installer will then install the software on your computer. It should automatically install into your program file.

A box will appear that asks you to nominate any additional programs you may want (Writer, Mail, Photo Gallery, Family Safety). I usually don't bother with those.

When it has finished installing it will tell you "You're done". You just click the "close" button. A new box will then appear that invites you to sign up for your "Windows Live ID". You cannot access Messenger until you have this. Again, it is very simple to do and is free of charge.

Click on the orange "Sign up" box. This will take you to a page where you fill in your details, including a new sign in name, which can be anything you like. You then click "I accept" and take it from there.

You then go into Windows Live Messenger, sign in and then add me to your list of "Contacts". My email address for Messenger is: [sue.malta@hotmail.com](mailto:sue.malta@hotmail.com) Let me know when you have your new sign in name and I can add you in my contact list.

Let me know if you have any problems. It should be very easy and shouldn't take very long.

Good luck!

Sue Malta

[smalta@swin.edu.au](mailto:smalta@swin.edu.au)

## Appendix 8. Ethics Clearance

(23/11/2006) Sharman Feinberg - SUHREC Project 0607/081 Ethics Clearance of Amended Project

Page 1

### Appendix 8. Ethics Clearance

**From:** Sharman Feinberg  
**To:** kfarquharson@swin.edu.au  
**Date:** 23/11/2006 1:58 pm  
**Subject:** SUHREC Project 0607/081 Ethics Clearance of Amended Project

**CC:** Ethics Sub-Committee; Wilkins, Keith  
 Dear Karen

**SUHREC Project 0607/081 Older Adults and their Intimate Relationships: Online and Offline**  
 Approved Duration To 9/9/2007

Ethical review of the above project was carried out on behalf of Swinburne's Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC) by a SUHREC SubCommittee (SHESC3) on Friday 10 November 2006.

I am pleased to advise that Ethics Clearance has been given for the project as submitted in line with standard conditions here outlined:

- All human research activity undertaken under Swinburne auspices must conform to Swinburne and external regulatory standards, including the current National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans and with respect to secure data use, retention and disposal.

- The named Swinburne Chief Investigator/Supervisor remains responsible for any personnel appointed to or associated with the project being made aware of ethics clearance conditions, including research and consent procedures or instruments approved. Any change in chief investigator/supervisor requires timely notification and SUHREC endorsement.

- The above project has been approved as submitted for ethical review by or on behalf of SUHREC. Amendments to approved procedures or instruments ordinarily require prior ethical appraisal/ clearance. SUHREC must be notified immediately or as soon as possible thereafter of (a) any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants and any redress measures; (b) proposed changes in protocols; and (c) unforeseen events which might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

- At a minimum, an annual report on the progress of the project is required as well as at the conclusion (or abandonment) of the project.

- A duly authorised external or internal audit of the project can be undertaken at any time.

Please contact me if you have any queries or concerns about on-going ethics clearance. The SUHREC project number should be cited in communication.

Kind regards  
 Sharman Feinberg  
 Secretary  
 SHESC3

Sharman Feinberg  
 Research Administrator  
 Faculty of Business and Enterprise  
 Swinburne University  
 Phone: (03) 9214 8605



**SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY  
DISCLOSURE & CONSENT FORM  
[Online Cohort]**

**Older Adults and their Romantic Relationships:  
Online and Offline**

**Appendix 9. Disclosure & Consent Form [Online]**

My name is Sue Malta and I am a mature aged PhD student in the Faculty of Life and Social Sciences at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne. I am doing research on older adults and their romantic relationships: those that develop through the Internet (online) and those that develop face-to-face (offline). If you are reading this form it is because (1) you are 60 years of age or older and (2) you are currently in or have recently been involved in a romantic relationship that began online, and (3) you have agreed to talk to me about your experiences in regards to establishing and building online romantic relationships in older years.

The interview will ask questions about your involvement in the Internet and whether you were actively seeking a new relationship or whether it happened as a consequence of your Internet activity. I am interested in how Internet relationships develop into romance and whether they always progress to offline relationships. Some questions will explore the themes of love and intimacy. You will be asked whether your current or past relationship(s) were of a sexual nature. I feel that this is an area that is much neglected by previous research. Your contribution will be helpful in gaining insights into older adults and their romantic relationships.

The interview will take place online, using instant messaging software (either MSN, Yahoo or AOL, or any other that you would prefer), at a time that is convenient for you. I will keep a copy of the interview for future use and the results may be published sometime in the future. The interview should last about 1 hour.

It **will not** be possible for you to be personally identifiable in any report of this work. All screen names and identifying information will be changed, and a pseudonym will be assigned to you to protect your privacy.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to refuse to take part, or to withdraw your participation at any stage during the interview – even after it has been completed. If there is any particular question that you'd rather not answer, just say so and we will move on. As explained previously, your responses will be treated as confidential.

Please retain this sheet for your information.

If you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me at [smalta@swin.edu.au](mailto:smalta@swin.edu.au) or you may contact my supervisor, Dr Karen Farquharson at [kfarquharson@swin.edu.au](mailto:kfarquharson@swin.edu.au)

Yours Sincerely, Sue Malta

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research project, you can contact: The Research Ethics Officer, Office of Research & Graduate Studies (H68), Swinburne University of Technology, PO Box 218, Hawthorn, Victoria 3122 or Telephone 03.9214.5218.