

# May–December: Canadians in age-discrepant relationships

by **Monica Boyd and Anne Li**

**N**orth Americans often assume that most married or common-law partners are close in age to each other and this, in fact, tends to be the case most of the time. There are, however, exceptions, couples with substantial age gaps between them. Although the typical pattern for age-discrepant marriages is the so-called “May–December” relationship, in which the woman is much younger than the man, the reverse also may hold.

Until recently, much of the attention given to age-discrepant unions was negative. Textbooks of the 1960s and 1970s interpreted couples with large age differences as having father–daughter or mother–son emotional needs. Research portrayed these unions as fraught with problems and pointed to issues of power imbalances and clashing values as a result of being born and raised in different times. Age-discrepant couples were also viewed as having higher levels of marital dissatisfaction and being more prone to marital dissolution.<sup>1</sup>

## CST What you should know about this study

This article uses data from the 2001 Census of Population.

**Census family:** Refers to a married couple (with or without children of either or both spouses), a couple living common-law (with or without children of either or both partners) or a lone parent of any marital status, with at least one child living in the same dwelling.

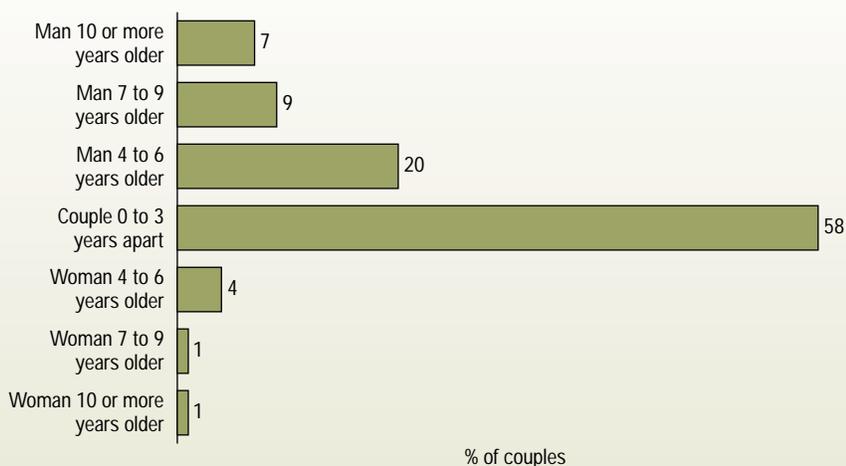
**Economic family:** Refers to a group of two or more persons who live in the same dwelling and are related to each other by blood, marriage, common-law or adoption.

The relatively small number of same-sex unions reported on the Census does not allow a detailed analysis of the characteristics of these couples in age-discrepant unions. Therefore, this article can only describe the characteristics of those in male-female relationships. However, male same-sex couples are the most likely to be in age-discrepant unions. Compared to 42% of male-female couples and 59% of female same-sex couples, 64% of men who reported being in same-sex relationships are in unions where the age gap is 4 or more years. One-quarter (26%) of men in male same-sex couples are in relationships where the age gap between partners is 10 or more years, compared with 18% of women in female same-sex unions and 8% of women and men in male-female unions.

Today, many of these views are discarded, debated or reversed. It is recognized that instead of reflecting the influence of age discrepancy, some issues are associated with other characteristics such as poverty or ethnic differences between partners.

1. Berardo, F.M., J. Appel and D. Berardo. 1993. “Age dissimilar marriages: Review and assessment.” *Journal of Aging Studies* 7, 1: 93-106; Vera, H., D. Berardo and F.M. Berardo. 1985. “Age heterogamy in marriage.” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 47, 3: 553-566.

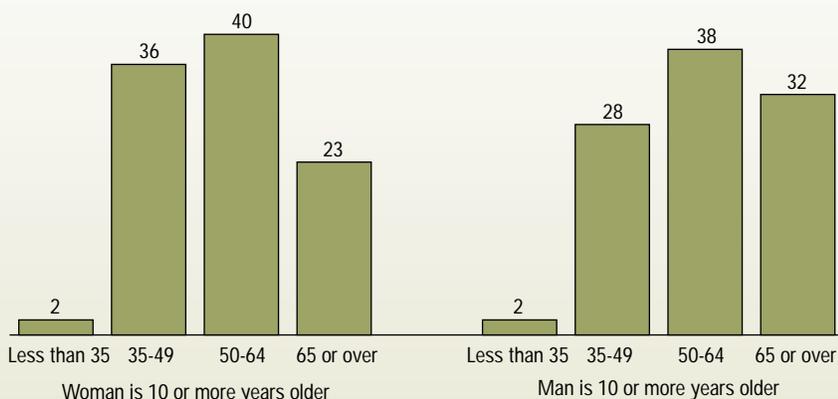
**CST** Over 40% of couples are 4 or more years apart in age



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001.

**CST** Among older partners, men are more likely than women to be 65 years or over

% of older partner in age category



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001.

Studies that take these characteristics into account find that age differences have no impact on levels of marital dissatisfaction.<sup>2</sup> And while some studies do find that marriages between partners who are substantially different in age are more prone to divorce, others do not support this conclusion.<sup>3</sup> Recent research has focused on messages such as “older wives, better lives” and “younger wives, longer lives.” The first claims that older

women with younger men tend to live in more balanced and equal relationships, and the second that older men with younger women live longer than expected.<sup>4</sup>

To what extent are couples in Canada involved in age-discrepant relationships? What are the characteristics of these men and women, and do they differ from couples who are close in age to each other? Using data from the 2001 Census, this article

addresses these questions by examining the demographic, social and economic differences that exist between couples who are far apart and those who are close together in age.

**Departing from the usual**

Of the 3.5 million couples living in a census family in 2001, most consist of partners quite close in age to each other. Nearly 6 out of 10 couples (58%) are no more than 3 years older or younger than each other, reflecting societal beliefs and expectations about appropriate age gaps.

Although those who are close in age are the majority, about 2.9 million couples, or approximately 5.8 million individuals, have partners who are 4 or more years younger or older than themselves. According to the 2001 Census, men were 4 to 6 years older than women in 20% of unions, 7 to 9 years older in 9%, and 10 or more years older in 7%. It is this pattern of “older man–younger woman” that dominates among couples with large age gaps. Although relationships do, of course, exist where women are older than men, their numbers are substantially lower. For example, the percentage of couples where women were at least 10 years older than their partners was 1% in 2001.

The higher proportions of older man–younger woman unions reflect the notion that if one of the partners is older, it should be the man. This expectation is a legacy of an earlier time, when marriage occurred only

2. Vera, Berardo and Berardo. 1985.  
 3. Berardo, Appel and Berardo. 1993; Gentleman, J.F. and E. Park. 1994. “Age differences of married and divorcing couples.” *Health Reports* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 82-003-XPB) 6, 2: 225-240.  
 4. Fischman, J. September 1984. “The sexes: Crosstalk.” *Psychology Today*: 12-13; Gentleman and Park. 1994.

after a man had economically established himself enough to support a family. In such circumstances, it would not be unusual for men to be older than their partners and gradually the older man-younger woman pattern came to be viewed as the acceptable "norm." Researchers also suggest that the expectation of men being older than their partners is part of a double standard where the value and acceptability of aging men is higher than that of aging women.<sup>5</sup>

Among couples with substantial age differences, men have an older age profile than women. For example, about 32% of men who are at least 10 years older than their partners are aged 65 or over. In comparison, 23% of women 10 or more years ahead of their spouses in age are 65 years or over. Conversely, a larger proportion of women are in younger age groups; 36% of women in these relationships are between the ages of 35 and 49 compared with 28% of men.

Although the age profiles of male and female spouses who are at least 10 or more years older are different, the age gap between partners is quite similar: 14 years on average regardless of whether the man or the woman is older. Couples with very large age differences are rare. Among those with at least a 10-year gap, and where the man is 65 years or older, only 1% include a female partner who is 35 years or younger; where the man is 50 to 64 years old, 7% include a woman aged 35 or younger.<sup>6</sup>

### Age gaps and other differences

Researchers suggest that individuals who depart from the expected age profile of couples are likely to diverge from other societal norms as well, whether it be the legal nature of the union<sup>7</sup> or the racial or birthplace backgrounds of the partners.

For example, people in age-discrepant unions are far more likely to be in common-law relationships



## Relationships in which men are at least 7 years older than their spouse are most likely to include partners who are both foreign-born

	Man is older than woman by			Age gap is	Woman is older than man by		
	10 or more years	7 to 9 years	4 to 6 years		0 to 3 years	4 to 9 years	7 to 9 years
	'000						
Number of couples	506	617	1,396	4,076	263	97	71
	%						
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Both partners foreign-born	27	27	22	17	16	14	15
Man foreign-born, woman not	9	7	6	5	6	7	7
Woman foreign-born, man not	6	5	4	5	8	9	9
Neither foreign-born	58	61	67	73	70	71	68

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding.  
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001.

than those who are close together in age. In fact, as the age gap between partners grows, so does the likelihood of living common-law. And age-discrepant couples where women are older are much more likely to live in common-law unions than where men are older. For example, common-law relationships characterize nearly 4 out of 10 (39%) couples where women are at least 10 years older than their partners compared with just less than one-quarter (24%) of those where men are 10 or more years older.

Compared to age-homogenous unions, age-discrepant couples are also more likely to include one partner who is a member of a visible minority group and one who is not. Although percentages are not large, this situation tends to occur most frequently in relationships where men and women are at least 10 years older than their spouse. A similar pattern exists for unions that include one foreign-born and one Canadian-born partner. As the age gap increases, the percentage of couples with one

Canadian-born and one foreign-born member increases, and peaks when one partner is 10 or more years older than the other. Researchers observe that the absence of potential partners within a particular age range can cause people to enlarge the pool of potential partners with respect to age, race and other characteristics.<sup>8</sup>

Unions in which men are substantially older than their partners

5. Cowan, G. 1984. "The double standard in age-discrepant relationships." *Sex Roles* 11, 1-2: 17-23; Vera, Berardo and Berardo. 1985.

6. The number of relationships where women aged 50 and over have spouses who are 35 years or younger is too small to provide reliable estimates.

7. Wu, Z., K.H. Burch, R. Hart and J.E. Veivers. 2000. "Age-heterogamy and Canadian unions." *Social Biology* 47, 3-4: 277-293.

8. Shehan, C.L., F.M. Berardo, H. Vera and S.M. Carley. 1991. "Women in age-discrepant marriages." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53, 4: 928-940.

	Man is older than woman by			Age gap is	Woman is older than man by		
	10 or more years	7 to 9 years	4 to 6 years		0 to 3 years	4 to 9 years	7 to 9 years
<b>Common-law couples</b>	'000						
<b>Total number</b>	123	110	200	562	69	33	28
<b>Current legal marital status</b>	%						
<b>Men</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Never-married	34	53	67	69	68	68	74
Married, legally separated	12	8	6	6	6	6	5
Divorced	48	36	25	24	25	24	20
Widowed	6	3	2	2	2	2	1
<b>Women</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Never married	64	68	73	39	46	35	25
Married, legally separated	6	5	4	9	8	10	12
Divorced	27	24	20	44	40	48	52
Widowed	4	4	3	8	6	7	11

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.  
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001.

contain the highest proportion of individuals who are both members of visible minority groups (this is less likely to be the case when women are substantially older than their partners). Both partners were members of visible minority groups in 16% of unions where the man was older by 10 or more years compared with 9% of relationships where partners were the same age or where women were at least 10 years older. Relationships in which men are substantially older are also more likely than other unions to include partners who are both foreign-born. Likewise, the home use of languages other than English or French also increases with the age gap for couples where men are older. Marriages where men are much older may in these cases reflect the norms and practices found in these individuals' countries of origin.

### Older partners have often been married before

Couples who are far apart in age were born in different time periods and had experienced life course events earlier (or later) than their partner.<sup>9</sup> Age-discrepant unions that are reconstituted from previous marriages will experience this time warp with respect to events such as dates of marriage and births of children.

According to the General Social Survey, age-discrepant unions often include at least one partner who was previously married to someone else. The census does not ask legally married couples about earlier marriages, but available information about the marital status of persons in common-law unions suggests that many older partners had indeed been previously married. Among men in common-law unions, nearly 7 in 10 (66%) of those

who are at least 10 years older than their partners are divorced, widowed or currently married but separated, compared with 2 in 10 of those who are within 3 years of the age of their partners. The comparable statistics for women who are at least 10 years older than their partners are nearly 8 in 10 (75%) versus 1 in 4 for those who are close in age. Partly because they are younger, many of the partners for these older men and women have not yet been legally married.

Because, in many cases, family building would have occurred earlier, age-discrepant couples are less likely to have children in the home than those within 3 years of each other. In some cases, younger women married to older men still may be in the family building stages, but not all such unions will have children present,<sup>11</sup> particularly if children from an earlier partner are not living with the couple. In unions where women are at least 10 years older, the co-residence of children is low: just slightly more than one-third (34%) of these couples reported at least one child present. In addition to children opting out of a blended family arrangement,<sup>12</sup> the lower percentage could also reflect the fact that many of these women are nearing the end of, or in some cases are beyond, their reproductive period.

### For richer or for poorer?

Tabloids and newspaper stories on Hollywood couples help create the image that many age-discrepant couples are financially well-off. There also is a belief that age-discrepant unions

9. Vera, Berardo and Berardo. 1985.

10. Wu, Burch, Hart and Veevers. 2000.

11. Discussions of children at home refer to children who have never been married.

12. Boyd, M. and D. Norris. Autumn 1995. "Leaving the nest: The impact of family structure." *Canadian Social Trends* p. 14-17.

% of couples in families below low income cut-offs



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001.

are more likely to occur among better educated partners or between those who are in the upper middle classes. This view rests on two additional beliefs: first, that persons who obtain high levels of education delay marriage and then may have difficulty finding partners close in age; and second, that the upper-middle classes are more willing to engage in less conventional behaviours.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, for the most part, such images and beliefs are unfounded. Media stars and public persons are few in number and do not have the same experiences as most people. According to the 2001 Census, age-discrepant couples are more likely than others to have at least one partner with less than grade 11 education. Where men are 10 or more years older than women, nearly 3 out of 10 (27%) have less than grade 11 education, as do 1 in 5 of the women in these unions. In couples where women are at least 10 years older than their partners, one-quarter (25%) of women and 1 in 5 (21%) men have less than grade 11 education.

Similarly, according to Census data, rather than being wealthy, most couples in age-discrepant relationships have lower combined incomes than do couples who are similar in age. The

average combined incomes of couples within 3 years of each other are about 5% higher than the average for all unions. Couples where men are at least 10 years older have combined incomes that are about 91% of the overall average for all couples. Unions in which women are substantially older than their partners fare the least well, with average combined incomes at 83% of the overall average.

Age-discrepant couples are also more likely than others to be below the low income cut-offs. The proportion of couples (in economic families) below the low income cut-offs is highest for those with an age gap of at least 10 years, particularly if there is at least one child present in the union. In these relationships, about 1 in 7 of both men-older and women-older couples are in families below the low income cut-offs compared with approximately 1 in 12 of couples within three years of age to each other who have at least one child.

### Summary

Although most married spouses and common-law partners in Canada are close in age to each other, some are substantially younger or older than their mates. Among couples with large

age gaps, men are much more likely than women to be the older partner, a situation that reflects society's expectations of appropriate age differences. People in age-discrepant unions are more likely to live common-law, particularly when the woman is substantially older. Unions in which men are at least 10 years older than their partners contain the highest proportion of individuals who both belong to visible minority groups.

The phenomenon of age-discrepant couples has existed throughout the world for centuries. However, in recent years, this phenomenon has attracted renewed attention, despite only small growth in the share of these relationships since the 1980s. Current focus is part of the larger interest in changing and evolving family forms. Today, Canadian families differ in size and composition. First marriages are occurring later in life, remarriages are not unusual, and many unions are common-law. Age difference between couples is yet one more indicator of the complexity and diversity of family life.

13. Shehan, Berardo, Vera and Carley. 1991; Vera, Berardo and Berardo. 1985; Wu, Burch, Hart and Veevers. 2000.

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