

Marital Biography and Mental Health in Later Life

Anna M. Hammersmith (hammera@bgsu.edu)

Department of Sociology
Bowling Green State University

BGSU Center for Family and Demographic Research
BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Background

- Marital complexity later in life is on the rise
 - In the past, most people stayed married until one spouse's death (Cherlin, 2009)
 - Widowhood is still common, but divorce among older people is increasingly prevalent (Brown & Lin, 2012; Manning & Brown, 2011)
 - In 2015, 30% of married people over 50 were in remarriages (Lin et al., in press)
- Marital biography has been linked to health later in life (Hughes & Waite, 2009)

Theoretical Background

- Marital Resource Model (Umberson, 1992; Zhang et al., 2016)
 - Marriage provides financial, emotional, and social resources
- Stress Process Model (Hughes & Waite, 2009, Williams & Umberson, 2004)
 - Divorce or widowhood linked to many stressors
- Cumulative Advantage/Disadvantage Perspective (Zhang et al., 2016)
 - Marital resources and stress of disruption may accumulate over time

Marital Biography and Health

- Remarriage and disruption
 - Widowhood, divorce, and multiple disruptions result in poorer health, but widowed may be advantaged comparatively (Dupre & Meadows, 2007; Williams & Umberson, 2004)
 - Remarrying offsets costs of disruption (Barrett, 2000; Dupre & Meadows, 2007; McFarland et al., 2013; Reczek et al., 2016)
- Duration
 - Years remarried may provide health advantages compared to being unmarried (Barrett, 2000)

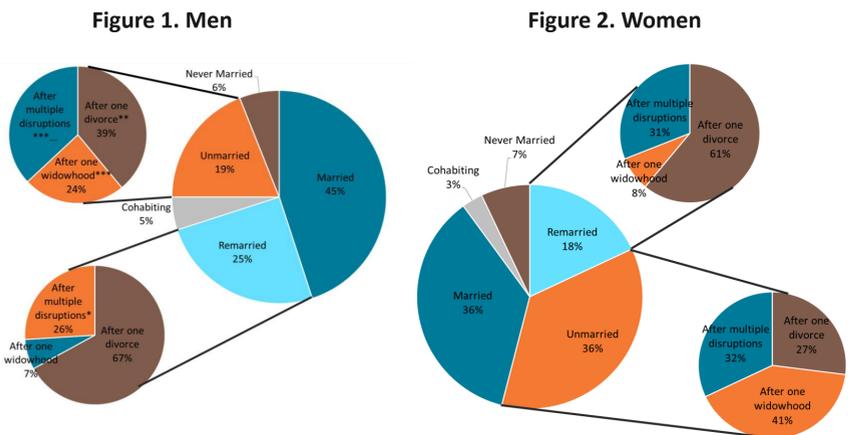
Research Questions

- Among those who experience marital disruption, can remarriage offset the costs of disruption?
- Does duration remarried or unmarried after disruption ameliorate or exacerbate costs of dissolution?
- Are there gender differences?

Data

- Health and Retirement Study, 1992-2014
- Sample includes noninstitutionalized people 50 years or older who provide marital information
 - Final sample includes 7,127 men and 9,933 women

Sample Distribution

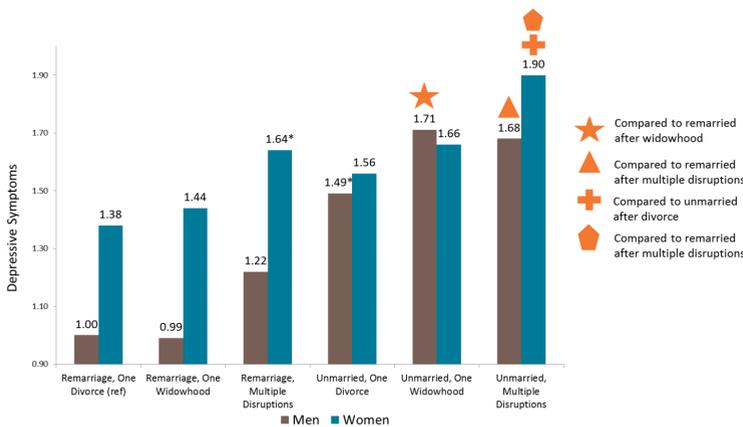


Measures and Analysis

- Dependent variables
 - Depressive symptoms (sum of 8 items)
- Independent variables
 - Marital status: Married, Remarried, Cohabiting, Divorced, Widowed, and Never Married
 - Disruption: Remarried or Unmarried after Divorce, Widowhood, or Multiple Disruptions
 - Duration: Remarried or Unmarried after Disruption
- Weighted OLS regression models for men and women

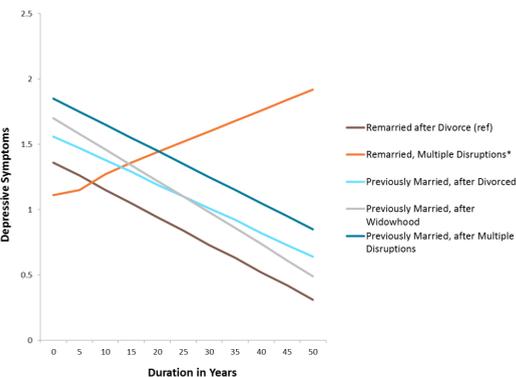
Predicted Probabilities

Figure 3. Depressive Symptoms by Remarriage and Disruption for Men and Women



Predicted Probabilities

Figure 4. Depressive Symptoms by Remarriage, Disruption, and Duration for Men



Conclusions

- Remarrying offsets health costs of disruption, yet cannot completely ameliorate health consequences
- Disruption pathway matters
 - Multiple disruptions are particularly problematic for late-life health
- Duration remarried may not offset the costs of particular disruption pathways
 - Duration remarried after multiple disruptions increases depressive symptoms relative to those with one divorce
- Few gender differences

Future Directions

- If data permit, researchers should investigate the role of cohabitation history when considering late-life health
- Account for early life characteristics that may be influential for overall health