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**GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE CONSEQUENCES
OF WIDOWHOOD: THE CASE OF DEPRESSION**

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Abstract

Objectives: The intent of this study is to document the stronger adverse effect of widowhood on the psychological well-being of men than women, and to explain why this gender difference in the effect of widowhood exists.

Methods: Data come from the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households. Married and widowed people age 65 and over are selected (N=1,686). The dependent variable is the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D).

Results: Widowhood is indeed more depressing for men than women. However, this is due primarily to the fact that married men are much less depressed than married women; widowed men and women are comparably depressed. Other contributors to the stronger effect of widowhood for men include men's shorter average time since widowhood, lower frequency of church attendance, stronger dislike of domestic labor, and lessened ability to assist their children.

Conclusions: Although widowhood has a strong effect on depression for older men, its effect for women is nonsignificant, and it explains a small proportion of the variation in depression. This suggests that most people, particularly women, adapt relatively well in the long run.

Introduction

Many studies show that widowed persons score lower than the married on measures of psychological well-being (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990; Gove & Shinn, 1989; Lee, Willets, & Seccombe, 1998; Mastekaasa, 1994; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987, 1993; Umberson, Wortman, & Kessler, 1992). The fact that widowhood is a distressing experience is no mystery. The involuntary loss of a spouse through death, preceded either by serious illness or unanticipated accident, must be at least somewhat traumatic. Most open questions regarding the psychological consequences of widowhood involve what happens in the longer run.

Widowhood is, of course, a much more common experience among women than men. Studies that have compared men and women are somewhat inconsistent. Several report no gender differences in the psychological consequences of widowhood (Faletti et al., 1989; Gerstel, Riessman, & Rosenfeld, 1985; Lieberman, 1996; Lund, Caserta, & Dimond, 1986, 1989; Van Zandt, Mou, & Abbott, 1989; Zisook & Schuchter, 1991). Others (Farnsworth, Pett, & Lund, 1989; Gallagher et al., 1983; Schuster & Butler, 1989; Thompson et al., 1989) find widowed women to be more distressed than widowed men. The usual explanation for this is that widowhood is more likely to cause financial difficulties for women than men, and financial strain reduces psychological well-being (Ross, Mirowsky, & Goldsteen, 1991; Umberson et al., 1992).

However, most studies have found widowhood to have a more adverse effect on men than women (Bowling, 1988; Lee et al., 1998; Mastekaasa, 1994; Mendes de Leon, Kasl, & Jacobs, 1994; Peters & Liefbroer, 1998; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1983, 1987, 1993; Umberson et al., 1992). While the preponderance of the evidence favors this pattern, neither the contrary findings of some studies nor the causal processes that may produce a stronger effect for men have been satisfactorily explained. There are at least six reasons why widowhood may be more strongly associated with poor psychological well-being for men than women, particularly in the long run. The first two of these causes may operate to produce differences in averages by gender, but not

in the experiences of individuals. The remaining possible causes may be connected to traditional gender roles.

First, men are approximately five times more likely to remarry after widowhood than are women (Mastekaasa, 1994; Peters & Liefbroer, 1997). Remarriage is likely to be selective of those with the highest levels of well-being, thus lowering the average of those remaining in the widowed population. However, although more common among men than women, remarriage is still a very infrequent occurrence among widowers, particularly those who were older when their wives died. Because it is rare, the influence of remarriage is likely to be small.

Widowhood also elevates the risk of mortality more for men than women (Kaprio et al., 1987). Mortality is probably selective of those who are lowest on well-being (Mastekaasa, 1994), counterbalancing the effect of remarriage and increasing the average well-being of those remaining in the population of widowers.

Second, the effects of widowhood are moderated by time (Lee et al., 1998; Mastekaasa, 1994; Mendes de Leon et al., 1994; Peters & Liefbroer, 1997; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987; Umberson et al., 1992). Average length of widowhood is shorter for men than women due to the selection of men out of the status of widower by remarriage and mortality. Therefore, at any given time a higher proportion of widowers than widows is recently widowed, and the recently widowed tend to have lower psychological well-being.

Third, widowhood may be more problematic for men because they have more to lose. Bernard (1973) suggested that marriage is more beneficial for men than for women, at least in psychological terms. Although wives benefit more from marriage financially (Marini, 1989), husbands receive more emotional support from their spouses (Gove, 1984; Gove, Hughes, & Style, 1983; Lee, 1988; Lieberman, 1996; Peters & Liefbroer, 1997; Umberson et al., 1992). If men benefit emotionally from marriage more than do women, then men have more to lose by its involuntary termination.

Fourth, widowhood appears to be associated with subsequent declines in health more strongly for men than women (Bengtson et al., 1990; Lee et al., 1998; Mastekaasa, 1994; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987). The reasons for this may involve poorer nutrition for widowed men (Umberson et al., 1992) or higher frequencies of unhealthy behaviors such as smoking and drinking among men (Zisook, Shuchter, & Mulvihill, 1990). All relevant studies show a positive relation between health and psychological well-being.

Fifth, many authors have suggested that widowed men are distressed by the need to assume domestic tasks (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Gove & Shinn, 1989; Lee et al., 1998; Lopata, 1996; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987). Umberson et al. (1992) found that, after widowhood, women's hours of domestic labor decrease but men's hours increase. Further, hours spent on housework increased depression for men but not women. Widowed men, particularly those from older cohorts, may be unprepared by socialization or experience for domestic tasks, and find the necessity of performing them daunting.

Sixth, widowed women interact more with, and/or receive more support from, kin and friends than do widowed men (Antonucci, 1990; Peters & Liefbroer, 1997; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987; Wortman, Silver, & Kessler, 1993). Silverstein and Bengtson (1994) find that support from children moderates the decline in well-being associated with widowhood. Although widowhood may reduce interaction with and support from married friends, it tends to increase interaction with other widows (Schuster & Butler, 1989). This may reduce depression for widowed women.

In this study we employ cross-sectional data from the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households to test five of these possible explanations for why widowhood is more distressing for men than for women. The cross-sectional data allow us to maximize the range of time since widowhood; this is a fairly crucial advantage because, as noted above, the speed and trajectory of adjustment to widowhood may vary by gender. One disadvantage of

cross-sectional data is that we cannot assess the effects of the differential probabilities of remarriage and mortality by gender on the effects of widowhood.

We hypothesize that widowhood is more depressing for men than women because: (a) men have been widowed for a shorter period of time; (b) widowhood is more strongly associated with poor health for men; (c) widowed men find domestic tasks more distressing; (d) widowhood reduces social interaction and support more for men; and (e) married men are less depressed than married women, so the difference in depression between the married and the widowed should be greater for men. However, widowed women's depression may be exacerbated by their greater financial difficulties.

Methods

Sample

The data are from the 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988), a multistage area probability sample of 13,008 adults aged 19 and over. We select a subsample consisting of respondents who are either married or widowed. To ensure that these categories are comparable, we restrict our analyses to those 65 and over. After adjustments for missing data, our final sample size is 1,686. The sample is comprised of 355 married women, 729 widowed women, 449 married men, and 153 widowed men.

Measures

The dependent variable is depression, measured by the twelve-item Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D). The item stem asks how many days in the past week the respondent felt, for example, "depressed," "fearful," and "that everything you did was an effort." Respondents who answered less than nine items ($n=17$) were dropped from the analysis. For those who answered nine to eleven of the items ($n=42$), the mean score for the items they answered was substituted for the missing items. The reliability of the scale (Cronbach's alpha) is .91.

Gender (male = 1) and marital status (widowed = 1) are dummy variables. For widowed persons, length of widowhood is calculated in years. Married persons were assigned the mean length of widowhood; this insures that the coefficient for length of widowhood applies only to the widowed.

Physical health is measured in two ways. First, respondents were asked to compare their health to others of their own age on a scale ranging from (1) very poor to (5) excellent. Second, a measure of functional limitations asks whether the respondent has any physical or mental condition that limits his/her ability to perform six tasks such as caring for personal needs, climbing stairs, and doing household tasks. One point was assigned for each affirmative response.

There are several measures of social relations. Respondents were asked whether they gave help to or received help from their children in five areas (babysitting, transportation, repairs to homes or cars, other kinds of work around the house, and advice or emotional support). One point was assigned for each affirmative answer; respondents without children were assigned zeroes on these indices.

Our measure of sociability is comprised of seven items. The first four have a common stem, which asks how often, on a scale ranging from (0) never to (4) several times a week, the respondent spends a social evening with (a) relatives; (b) a neighbor; (c) people he/she works with; and (d) friends who live outside the neighborhood. In addition, respondents were asked how often they (a) attend a social event at their church or synagogue; (b) go to a bar or tavern; and (c) participate in a group recreational activity such as bowling, golf, square dancing, etc. These seven items were summed to create an index of sociability ranging from 0 to 28; the reliability of the scale (alpha) is .57.

A rough measure of the absence of a support network was created from three items asking to whom the respondent would turn for assistance in the event of (a) an emergency in the

middle of the night; (b) a need to borrow \$200 for an emergency; and (c) a need for advice with a problem. The score is the number of times the respondent answered “no one.”

Respondents were asked how often they participated in fifteen different types of voluntary associations, on a scale ranging from (0) never to (4) several times a week. Frequency of church attendance was measured as the average number of times per week the respondent attended church.

Two dimensions of domestic labor are included. One is total number of hours per week devoted to each of nine domestic tasks. The second is attitude toward housework, measured by a 6-item semantic differential scale. The items, scored 0 to 7, were interesting-boring, appreciated-unappreciated, overwhelming-manageable, complicated-simple, lonely-sociable, and poorly done-well done. Scores were coded so that high scores reflect negative evaluations of housework ($\alpha = .67$).

Age and education are indexed in years. Race is a dummy variable (non-white = 1). The measure of income was obtained from the appropriate total income indicator for either the individual respondent (for the widowed) or the couple (for married persons). Assets were calculated by subtracting the amount owed from the estimated value for homes, other real estate, businesses or farms, and vehicles. For both income and assets, missing values were replaced by the means for the respondent's gender/marital status category.

Analysis

We begin by examining mean differences in all variables by gender and marital status, to ascertain how married and widowed men and women differ on depression and its hypothesized antecedents. Following this, we report a regression analysis in which the predictors of depression include gender, marital status, and their multiplicative interaction term. If this term is significant, it means that widowhood has different effects for men and women. We then add blocks of possible antecedent and intervening variables to the equation to ascertain whether they explain this interaction effect. Like any other covariate, a crossproduct term can be confounded

with other covariates that also predict the response variable. The interaction effect can then be explained by the association of the crossproduct term with these covariates.

Inspection of the correlation matrix and the variance inflation factors yielded no evidence of multicollinearity.

Results

Table 1 shows means for all variables by gender and marital status. As expected, widowed men are substantially more depressed than married men, while the difference between married and widowed women is in the expected direction but not significant. However, widowhood affects men more strongly than women largely because married men are much less depressed than anyone else. Married men are significantly less depressed than married women, but widowed men and women do not differ. As hypothesized, men appear to lose more when they are widowed. Most differences on other dimensions are in accord with expectations.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 reports a series of regression models. Model 1 includes only marital status and gender, showing that widowed persons and women are more depressed. Model 2 adds the interaction term for gender by widowhood, which is significant, indicating that widowhood increases depression by 4.29 points more for men than women.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Model 3 adds demographic and economic characteristics. Number of years widowed is associated with lower depression, as predicted. Because men have been widowed for fewer years than women on average (see Table 1), length of widowhood appears to be part of the

explanation for widowed men's greater depression. Age and education are related to depression but not to gender (see Table 1). Neither income nor assets is related to depression, contrary to expectations. Thus, although widowed women have fewer resources than others, their depression is not thereby increased. With these variables in the model, only the coefficient for gender retains its significance (meaning that married men are less depressed than married women); the coefficient for widowhood approaches zero (meaning that widowed women are no more depressed than married women); and the interaction term is significant only at $p < .10$.

Model 4 adds health indicators to gender and marital status. Those with better self-reported health and fewer functional limitations are less depressed. The interaction term regains significance. The health measures explain little of the interaction because differences in health by gender and marital status are minimal (see Table 1).

Model 5 adds measures of social support to gender and marital status. Having someone to turn to in emergencies (support) is unrelated to depression, as is voluntary association participation. However, receiving help from children is depressing and giving help to children reduces depression. Church attendance is negatively related to depression. Inclusion of these variables reduces the cross-product term, but it remains significant.

Model 6 adds the domestic labor variables. Hours of housework are negatively related to depression; those who do more are less depressed. But disliking housework is strongly and positively related to depression. As shown in Table 1, widowed men reported more dislike of housework than either married men or widowed women. In this model the interaction term is only marginally significant ($p < .10$).

Model 7 includes all variables, thus showing direct effects. The significant effect for gender indicates that married males are significantly less depressed than married females. Length of widowhood retains its negative effect, as do both indicators of health. Those who help their children are less depressed, as are those who attend church more often. Time spent in housework has no direct effect, but disliking housework is positively related to depression.

More importantly, the gender gap in the widowhood effect, represented by the interaction of widowhood with gender, is no longer significant. It has been reduced by 46% from its initial value of 4.29 in Model 2 to 2.33 in the complete model. This reduction is significant ($t = 4.04$, $df = 1666$, $p < .001$; see Clogg, Petkova, & Haritou, 1995 for the test). This suggests that the gender gap is partially due to the facts that, compared to widowed women, widowed men have been widowed for a shorter time; provide less assistance to their children; attend church less often; and have a greater dislike of housework. Health does not help to explain the interaction effect because it is not related to gender or marital status in the appropriate directions.

Additional models were run incorporating (a) all possible two-way interactions by gender; (b) all possible two-way interactions by marital status; and (c) all possible three-way interactions by gender and marital status. None of the interaction terms was significant, meaning that the antecedents of depression do not vary by gender or marital status.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to explain why widowhood appears to be a more depressing experience for men than for women. One clear answer to this question is that marriage is a stronger barrier to depression for men. Married men are the least depressed of any gender/marital status category, and they retain this advantage over married women in all of our models. Widowed men and widowed women have similar average depression scores across all models. The widowhood "effect" is greater for men largely because married men are less depressed than married women (Lee et al., 1998).

Widowhood also has a stronger effect for men in part because their experience of widowhood is more recent (Mastekaasa, 1994). Those widowed longer are less depressed, and men have been widowed for an average of nearly five years less than women. In addition, widowhood elevates depression more for men than women because it decreases their church

attendance and their provision of assistance to children. Other dimensions of sociability are unrelated to depression.

There is some support in these data for the hypothesis that widowed men find domestic tasks more daunting and therefore depressing (Umberson et al., 1992). Time spent in housework is not the critical variable here, partly because married and widowed men do not differ on it, and partly because, at least without other controls, time spent in housework is *negatively* related to depression. However, those who most dislike housework are most depressed, and widowed men dislike housework more than anyone else. It is, of course, hazardous to attempt to explain one state of mind with another state of mind; widowed men may dislike housework more than others because they are more depressed. However, it may also be that the burden of domestic labor, or their self-perceived failure to shoulder this burden adequately, is depressing for men who may have little experience with it.

This study supports previous research showing that widowhood is more depressing for men than women. Unlike prior studies, this analysis shows that the stronger effect of widowhood for men is due largely to the comparatively low depression levels of married men. Widowed men and women are comparably depressed. However, it is also important to point out that, for most people, widowhood does not appear to be a psychologically devastating event in the long run. Our model including widowhood and gender explains only 2% of the variation in depression. Widowhood appears to have a lasting effect on depression, particularly for men, but most widowed persons adjust quite well over time.

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Table 1: Means for All Variables by Sex and Marital Status, National Survey of Families and Households (Wave 1), Married and Widowed Persons Age 65 and Over

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Men</u>		<u>Women</u>		<u>Notes</u>
	<u>Married</u>	<u>Widowed</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Widowed</u>	
Depression	11.15	17.37	15.29	17.22	a,c
Yrs.Widowed	-----	8.44	-----	13.26	b
Non-White	0.12	0.27	0.14	0.19	b,c,d
Age	71.95	75.55	71.23	75.59	c,d
Education	10.83	9.84	11.22	9.94	c,d
Income	28.52	14.70	26.28	9.12	b,c,d
Assets	150.16	61.05	85.95	41.47	a,b,c,d
Health	3.75	3.57	3.67	3.61	c
Limitations	0.78	0.85	0.65	1.23	b,d
Help to Kids	0.86	0.42	0.69	0.49	a,c,d
Help from Kids	0.48	0.55	0.59	0.92	b,d
Support	0.46	0.40	0.38	0.27	b,d
Sociability	6.29	6.35	5.96	6.53	d
Vol.Assoc.	2.98	2.26	2.52	2.20	c
Church Attend.	0.91	0.60	0.95	0.92	b,c
Housework Hrs.	23.04	25.36	38.84	28.38	a,b,d
Dislike Hswrk.	15.80	18.46	16.19	16.87	b,c
N	(449)	(153)	(355)	(729)	

a. Married men and married women differ, $p < .05$.

b. Widowed men and widowed women differ, $p < .05$.

c. Married and widowed men differ, $p < .05$.

d. Married and widowed women differ, $p < .05$.

Table 2: Regression Analysis of Depression, National Survey of Families and Households (Wave 1), Married and Widowed Persons Age 65 and Over

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
(Constant)	14.36***	15.28***	11.84*	29.69***	18.49***	3.68*	15.92**
Widow	3.32***	1.93+	0.58	0.55	1.23	0.79	-0.23
Male	-2.47**	-4.14***	-4.30***	-4.09***	-3.58**	-4.67***	-3.70**
Widow * Male		4.29*	3.65+	4.82**	3.84*	3.32+	2.33
Years Widowed			-0.17**	-	-	-	-0.15**
Non-White			0.64	-	-	-	0.68
Age			0.15*	-	-	-	0.05
Education			-0.43***	-	-	-	-0.14
Income			-0.01	-	-	-	0.00
Assets			-0.00	-	-	-	-0.00
Self-Rated Health				-4.27***	-	-	-3.10***
Functional Limitations				1.95***	-	-	1.49***
Help to Kids					-1.55***	-	-0.89*
Help from Kids					1.41***	-	0.40

Table 2 (continued)

Support						-0.04	-	-0.15
Sociability						-0.28**	-	-0.02
Vol. Assoc.						-0.19	-	-0.01
Church Attend.						-0.85*	-	-0.68*
Housework Hours							-0.05*	-0.00
Dislike Housework							0.85***	0.68***
F (change)	16.57	4.89	4.83	110.64	7.82	97.37	22.22	
p (change)	.000	.027	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
R ²	.019	.022	.039	.136	.049	.124	.202	
Adjusted R ²	.018	.020	.034	.133	.044	.121	.193	

+ p < .10

* p < .05

** p < .01

*** p < .001