

Ching-yi A. Shieh
Department of Sociology
Fayetteville State University

Widowhood and Hispanic Elder's Mortality: An Appraisal of the Gender Effect

Background

Death of a spouse is a common life course experience for older citizens. Many studies examine the relationship between widowhood and an individual's economic wellbeing, and generally conclude that the effect tends to be detrimental. However, relatively little attention has been given to the assessment of how widowhood influences elders' health, and investigations that focus on the Hispanic population are even less adequate.

Although not targeted at the older Hispanic's population, some empirical studies indicate that widowhood has a negative impact on psychological well-being (DeGarmo and Kitson, 1996; Umberson, Wortman, and Kessler, 1992). Levels of depression and stress are much higher around the time of spouse's death (Barrett, 2000; Wade and Pevalin, 2004). As for physical health, Lillard and Waite (1995) show that widowed men and women have higher risks of dying than married people. Nevertheless, holding household income constant, if a widowed woman remains at the same income status after the death of her husband, her risk of dying does not significantly increase. Thierry (2000) finds that mortality rises sharply in the first year after one loses his or her spouses, and the effect is stronger among men. In a similar way, Williams and Umberson (2004) find a significant decline in the probability of reporting excellent or very good health among male widowers but not females. Overall, these studies suggest that men and women may have different health outcomes after losing their spouses. This paper aims to address how the transition to widowhood influences Hispanic American elders' mortality with special attention paid to gender differences.

Research Methods

Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that due to the shared family resources and living environment, the mortality of a married couple tends to be correlated. Death of the spouse is associated with a change in family resources and various adjustments. Therefore, it is expected that transition to widowhood will increase the risk of dying of the surviving spouse. Based on the literature, I also hypothesize that widowers have a greater likelihood of dying than widows.

Data

The Hispanic Established Populations for the Epidemiologic Studies of the Elderly (Hispanic EPESE) data is used to conduct the analysis. The baseline data of the Hispanic EPESE was collected between September 1993 and June 1994. It comprises a representative sample of 3050 non-institutionalized Hispanic American elderly, aged 65 years and older, residing in the five southwestern states of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. The second, third, and fourth wave of surveys were conducted between 1995-96, 1998-99, and 2000-01, respectively. For this study, all four waves of data are used to examine the mortality of the elders over the eight years interval. The research excludes never married elders at the first wave of survey. The finalized sample size is 2510.

Variables

The explanatory variables of this project include whether elder experienced widowhood, and elder's gender. Since very few individuals remarried after their spouses died, this study does not consider the remarriage effect in the analysis. The statistical models also control for following factors (all at the first wave of survey):

1. Elder's socioeconomic status: Including years of schooling, and household income (less than \$9,999, between \$10,000-\$19,999, and \$20,000 and above. Less than \$9,999 is omitted from the models as the reference category).
2. Self-rated health status.
3. Whether have someone to count on when need help.
4. Demographics: Including age, whether immigrant, Mexican origin, and Size of the household.

Analytical strategy

This project uses discrete hazard model to perform the statistical analysis. Elder's hazard of dying after the death of spouse is estimated over the eight years interval (from July 1993 to July 2001). Sub-sample comparisons by gender and other types of marital disruption (divorced and separated) are also performed.

Preliminary findings

The preliminary analysis shows that transition to widowhood between 1993 and 2001 has a significant effect on individual elder's mortality. All else being equal, becoming a widow or widower is associated with a 27% increase in risk of dying ($p \leq .01$). Although experiencing widowhood has a detrimental impact on both men and women's mortality, it affects men more than women. Moreover, there is an indication that longer years of widowhood are related to a lower likelihood of dying. When including elders who were already widowed before 1993, the hazard ratios for the mortality estimate decrease.

The examination of elder's socioeconomic status provides limited explanatory power for the mortality outcome. As expected, the hazard of mortality is significantly affected by individual's age and self-rated health ($p \leq .001$ and $p \leq .01$, respectively). However, the social support and immigrant variables do not demonstrate a statistical significant effect. More sub-group comparisons will be provided in the final draft of the paper.

Reference

- Barrett, Anne E. 2000. "Marital Trajectories and Mental Health." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 41 (4): 451-464.
- DeGarmo, David S. and Gay C. Kitson. 1996. "Identity Relevance and Disruption as Predictors of Psychological Distress for Widowed and Divorced Women." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 58 (4): 983-997.
- Lillard, Lee A. and Kinda J. Waite. 1995. "Till Death Do US Part: Marital Disruption and Mortality." *The American Journal of Sociology* 100 (5): 1131-1156.
- Thierry, Xavier. 2000. "Risks of Mortality and Excess Mortality during the First Ten Years of Widowhood". *Population: An English Selection* 12: 81-109.
- Umberson, Debra, Camille B. Wortman, and Ronald C. Kessler. 1992. "Widowhood and Depression: Explaining Long-Term Gender Differences in Vulnerability." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 33 (1): 10-24.
- Wade, Terrance J. and David J. Pevalin. 2004. "Marital Transitions and Mental Health." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 45 (2): 155-170.
- Williams, Kristi, and Debra Umberson. 2004. "Marital Status, Marital Transitions, and Health: A Gendered Life Course Perspective." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 45 (1): 81-98.