

# **Gender Differences in Social Contact after Spousal Loss**

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## **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

### **Background and Research Questions**

Maintaining close relationships with others is considered one of the key components of successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1997). Social networks of families, friends, and neighbors provide important emotional, instrumental, and material support for older adults (Antonucci, 1990). However, the quality and the quantity of social contact that older adults maintain may vary depending on one's sociodemographic characteristics, such as gender and marital status.

Previous research findings indicate that men are more likely than women to experience social isolation in old age, especially after they lose their spouse (Berardo, 1968, 1970; Campbell, 1996). Men have smaller number of friends (Fischer & Oliner, 1983) and experience greater difficulty in making transitions and adjusting to the social status of a widowed person (Bock & Webber, 1972). Scholars have accounted for this gender disparity in several ways. Life course scholars attribute this gender gap to the different experiences of social networking between men and women throughout the life course (Hatch, 2000; Moore, 1990). Women often take the role of kin keeping in the marital union, and thus are in better position to keep the relationships even after widowhood. On the other hand, widowers, who were connected with kin previously through their deceased spouses, may lose close contact with kin upon spousal loss (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Men also tend to depend primarily on their spouse for emotional support and thus, upon spousal death, may have more difficulty in establishing close relationships than women (Bock & Webber, 1972). Scholars also note that men's lower life expectancy contributes to the reduction in the size of social network among older men (Stroebe, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001). These explanations underscore the significance of one's life history and social circumstances in predicting one's social integration following widowhood.

However, as opposed to the social factors (e.g., socialization within the marital union and the demographic composition within the elderly population) emphasized in previous studies, few empirical studies have examined individual-level factors that might mediate the relationship between gender and social contact. The life course perspective suggests that one's decision or behavior depends not only on one's life history or social circumstances as previous research points out, but also on the choices that one makes and that it is influenced by other people who are linked to their lives (Elder, 1998). Thus, this paper examines (1) the relationship between gender and social contact in late-life widowhood, and investigates (2) whether the person's interest in social contacts and other

people's increased attention to the widowed person have mediating effect on this relationship. Examining these questions is particularly important for understanding the social relationships among widowed men, which are often overlooked in previous literature.

## Methods

### *Sample*

The analyses are based on data from the Changing Lives of the Older Couples (CLOC), a prospective study of a two-stage area probability sample of 1,532 married men and women aged 65 or older. After baseline interviews, those who lost their spouse were re-interviewed at 6 months (wave 1), 18 months (wave 2), and 24 months (wave 3) after spousal death. Controls from the original sample were selected to match the widowed persons along the dimensions of age, race, and sex, and were interviewed at roughly the same time as the corresponding widowed person. The current paper uses data from the first two waves of the interview conducted with the widowed sample. The analytic sample includes 211 widowed persons (59 men and 152 women).

### *Measures*

Dependent variable. *Frequency of contact with friends and relatives* is a composite variable of two items. Survey questions asked, "How often do you get together with friends, neighbors or relatives and do things like go out together or visit in each other's home?" and "In a typical week, about how many times do you talk on the telephone with friends, neighbors or relatives?" Response categories were "more than once a week, about once a week, one to three times a month, less than once a month, and never" for the first question, and "once a day, two or three times a week, about once a week, less than once a week, and never or no phone" for the second question.

Independent variables. *Gender* is the main independent variable, where 1 indicates female. Two mediating factors are considered. *Respondent's interest in social contact* is assessed with the question, "Compared to when your (husband/wife) was alive, do you have more interest, less interest, or about the same amount of interest in having contact with relatives and friends?" *Friends' interest in contacting the respondent after widowhood* is assessed with the question, "Do your relatives and friends show more interest, less interest, or about the same amount of interest in having contact with you?" For both variables, response categories were more, same, less. Dummy variables are constructed, where 1 indicates that the respondent/friends had more interest.

The analysis controls for demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the respondent (e.g., *age, education, income*), *baseline levels of social contact*, and respondents' *functional health status*.

### *Analytic Plan*

The analysis uses Ordinary Least Squares regression models in order to examine gender differences in older adults' social contact six months after widowhood, and the mediating effects of the respondents' interest in social contact and friends' interest in

contacting widowed respondents. Sobel tests of mediating effects will also be conducted in order to examine the proposed mediating effects.

### **Preliminary Results**

A descriptive analysis of the CLOC data reveals that compared to widows, widowers report significantly lower levels of social contact with friends and relatives six months after spousal death. A lower percentage of men show an increased interest in the contact with friends and relatives since becoming widowed, but the chi-square statistics is not significant. The percentage of people reporting that their friends and relatives have more interest in contacting them after spousal loss is also lower among men, suggesting that men get less support from their social networks than women.

A multivariate regression also predicts lower social contact scores for men. The main effect of gender persists when the two mediating factors are entered into the regression equation. However, the size of the coefficient is reduced when each mediator is entered, suggesting that men's lower levels of involvement in social networks is not only due to less resources and support from others, but also due to men's own preference for reducing contact.

### **Significance of the Proposed Research**

Because widowhood is a disproportionately women's experience, there has been little research on widowers. However, little existing research suggests that widowers are one of the most vulnerable groups that need social attention (Campbell & Silverman, 1987). Studying the extent to which the frequency of older adults' social contact differ by gender and how this relationship is mediated by individual preference and attention from social networks will help researchers and practitioners better understand this often-ignored group of population.

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