

DIVORCE, WIDOWHOOD, AND SATISFACTION  
WITH HEALTH STATUS FOR MEN AND WOMEN

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In their lifetime divorce, separation, and widowhood will be experienced by a sizable number of Americans. While these alternative family forms were once more readily identified with a particular stage of life cycle, increased divorce rates are not limited to young adults. Divorce rates among middle age couples are increasing. For instance, Krishnan and Kayani (1974:74) report that from 1960 to 1969 increased rates of divorced women occurred in the over 30 age category. Moreover, if the predictions of Schoen and Nelson (1974) come true over 40 percent of all marriages in California will end in divorce and in the near future these women will spend about 6½ years in a divorced state. Similarly, widowhood intensifies the isolated existence of conjugal family members (Bock and Webber, 1972). While this disruptive experience occurs most often in later life, middle age couples experience rather high incidents of death. In fact, Berardo noted that 20 percent of those recently widowed were less than 45 years old (1968:199). Both Townsend (1968) and Gubrium (1974) found reported feelings of loneliness greater for the divorced and widowed than for single or married. Stressfulness has long been associated with change in marital status, and the fact that it can potentially generate a variety of ills affecting the individual (Croog, 1970). This research focused on marital change for males and females and on health status as an indicator of stress.

**RELATED RESEARCH.** Research on divorce trends, causes, and predicted consequences abound. Both the family structure and society are being altered by patterns of divorce (Schoen and Nelson, 1974). Recently Kunzel explained worldwide trends of increased divorce rates by the following: "Falling age of marriage, rise in life expectancy, decreasing number of children and the growing absorption of women by the labor market" (1974:379). For this coun-

try Glick and Norton (1973) predicted that about 30 percent of the women born during the 1940 and 1944 period would be divorced.

When studies have focused on divorce, sex, and general social status, women's roles are most often analyzed. Generally, women as family heads are less respected by friends and neighbors than men and yet are very dependent upon these social relationships (Andreas, 1971). Without the assistance of relatives and networks of friends, women felt "isolated, depressed, and worn out with struggle to maintain their families" (Bernard, 1964:37-38). Moreover, Spicer and Hampe (1975) found that divorcees maintain contact with in-laws and her own family much more often than males. Besides the matter of respect and relationships, research findings also indicate that women carry greater responsibilities after a divorce than men (Brandwein et al., 1974). Among other things this means the woman is usually given child custody by the court. Moreover, when a woman becomes a head through divorce, she is labeled a deviant by society. Traditionally, a stigma is attached especially to the separated and divorced women (Brandwein et al., 1974:498-499). Whether this stigma is related to probabilities of remarriage may be debated, but women do remarry less often than men (Scanzoni, 1972:58). Today about 6.6 million women are family heads (American Families: Trends and Pressures, 1973:4). Because of the responsibilities and obstacles women face, it was expected that if divorced or separated women expressed less satisfaction with the status of their health than men.

There is also a paucity of research measuring different reactions of sexes to widowhood. Divorce research is often categorized with research on widowhood. Both the divorced and widows who are the female heads often experience adverse poverty (Sweet, 1972). Women in these circumstances tend to marry less frequently than men (Berardo, 1968). Moreover, bereavement, loneliness, and isolation often follow marital dissolution by death or divorce. For example Gubrium (1974) found greater negative reaction to those "desolate" (widowed or divorced) than those

"nondesolate" (single or married). That women do reorient themselves with widowhood, and restructure their identities has been documented by Lopata (1973).

One body of literature originating from Durkheim's work on suicide contains comparison for men and women in widowhood. Suicide rates are higher for widowers than widows (Bock and Webber, 1972). The relationship of high incidents of suicide for widowers has been explained in the context of man's work orientations. Scanzoni (1972:48) and Bock and Webber (1972:29) reported that most relationships of men are established at work with co-workers and that occupational roles provided men with a sense of worth. According to them, the wife serves as a linkage between the husband and the community. Thus, Bock and Webber (1972) state that she more than he can find meaningful spouse substitutes in widowhood. These substitutes are informal and formal relationships with family, friends, and various associated members. According to this interpretation the man would experience greater isolation and stress through the death of his spouse than would the women. Therefore, the second tested hypothesis was that widowers expressed less satisfaction with the status of their health than widows.

**METHOD.** Two data sources were used for the study: (1) a national probability survey was conducted in 1972 and (2) again in 1973 by the National Opinion Research Center. These data were made available in computerized form by the Roper Public Opinion Research Center (#9009 and #9002). By combining these sources a larger sample for low count categories was obtained.

The question for marital status was "Are you currently married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married?". Throughout this analysis, respondents in the last category were excluded and those divorced were combined with those separated.

Health surveys have been used frequently by various agencies of the federal government (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1971; Harber, 1970). Recently Reynolds (et al., 1974) discussed the need for better empirical measures of health condi-

tions. While debate continues on the validity of the health opinion survey (Tousignant, et al., 1974), Maddox and Douglass in a longitudinal study of elderly people concluded "our data demonstrate that self assessment of health is not random but is persistently and positively related to objective evaluation of health status" (1974:92). Thus, the validity of self-assessed health status cannot be discounted. Furthermore, Palmore and Luikart (1972) found self-rated health as the predominate factor associated with satisfaction of life in general. An index of satisfaction with their health was measured by the question "Would you say your own health, in general, is excellent, good, fair, or poor?". Responses were recorded as excellent (1), good (2), fair (3), and poor (4). The t-test was used in evaluating the mean score of health satisfaction for each of the three marital categories.

Controls for the number of children under 18 years living in the household and age of the respondent were used due to the nature of the research. For male and female respondents now married, these two control variables should be of little comparative difference. However, it was predicted that the control variables for those with marital dissolution do differ by sex and that these factors, in turn, affect satisfaction with their health. For instance, women with change of marital status probably have more children and thus, more responsibilities than men, while men on the average probably experience widowhood later in the life cycle than do women. In order to test these ideas, an analysis of covariance was used in a factorial design. Age and number of dependent children were the covariates while sex and marital status (married, widowed, divorced) were cross classified with this design. If sufficient interaction occurs between the variables marital status and sex as predicted, then the Tuckey's least significant difference test will indicate the statistical significance of these differences (Jerome, 1964:265-270).

**RESULTS.** Analyzing the data in a factorial arrangement it was found that the variables sex and marital status

had high interaction. Thus, there was justification in computing those variables separately. These differences were also indicated by findings. The findings supported Hypothesis 1, that if divorced, women expressed less satisfaction with the status of their health than men. Table 1, Row 2 contains the mean score of satisfaction for the sexes (males 1.95, females 2.34,  $p < .01$ ).

TABLE 1: HEALTH SATISFACTION COMPARING SIMPLE MEANS WITH MEANS ADJUSTED FOR AGE AND DEPENDENT CHILDREN\*\*

Marital Status	N	Simple Mean	Adjusted Mean
Married men	1135	1.96	1.96
Married women	1101	2.04	2.10
Divorced men	77	1.95*	2.00
Divorced women	139	2.34	2.38
Widowed men	50	2.66*	2.28
Widowed women	212	2.46	2.14

\* $p < .01$ , t-test, simple means only.  
 \*\*Higher score: lower satisfaction.

TABLE 2: TUCKEY'S LEAST SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE IN MEAN HEALTH SATISFACTION WITH AGE AND NUMBER OF DEPENDENT CHILDREN, IN ANALYSIS OF COVARIANCE

Marital Status	(.00, decimal omitted)				
	6	5	4	3	2
Divorced women	1	42*	39*	29*	26* 11
Widowed men	2	31*	28*	18	15
Widowed women	3	17*	13		
Married women	4	13*	09		
Divorced men	5	03			

\*  $p < .05$

Hypothesis 2, that widowers expressed less satisfaction with the status of their health than widows, was also supported. In Table 1, Row 3 the mean health satisfaction score was higher for males (2.66) than for females (2.46). This difference was also statistically significant at the .01 level.

Row 1 in Table 1 presents for comparative purposes the health satisfaction

scores of the now married males and females. As seen in Table 1, score differences for sexes were not significantly different. Even with the large sample size that resulted from combining two national probability samples, the difference remained insignificant (1.96 versus 2.04). The control variables were used as covariates and the adjusted means are also seen in Table 1. The greatest change occurred in the widowhood variable. These adjusted scores were used in the computations of Tuckey's least significant difference test.

Table 2 shows the difference between mean health satisfaction scores with controls for age and number of dependent children. These mean differences were computed from those presented in Table 1. In presenting the findings this way, comparisons can be made for all combinations. For instance, female divorced should also be less satisfied with health than female married, and this is true as seen in Table 2. That difference appears even with the variables number of dependents and age are controlled. In fact, the divorcee is less satisfied with the status of her health than all other categories. A fact supported in the literature. Likewise, male widowers are less satisfied than other categories except the divorcee even with control for age. Female widows and married are both less satisfied with their health than the male married.

DISCUSSION. The results of the present study reinforced earlier research that sex role differentiation exist and that some measurable stress is produced by marital dissolution. It was found that if divorced, women expressed less satisfaction with the status of their health than men, and that widowers expressed less satisfaction with the status of their health than widows. Three important factors in interpreting these differences are sex roles, occupational roles, and the life cycle. On the one hand, it has been argued that men more than women are work oriented and thus, establish important relationships in that context. Before widowhood the man has often retired or is about to, so that with the death of a spouse he experiences stress on two

counts. First, his occupational role identity loses significance; and second, he is thrust into a home environment without spouse assistance. In contrast, the woman has already established and continues to maintain basic relationships in her home environment. Furthermore, many women maintain closer ties with the neighbors, club groups, and the community. They then are more able to withstand stress by means of these relationships. On the other hand, with divorce the woman, not the man, assumes greater responsibility for the children. This responsibility produces greater stress for her than him. The point being that with more people, especially children, there will be more work.

Interpreting the association between health satisfaction and marital dissolution by sex is possible only with controls. Thus, age and number of dependent children were handled in an analysis of covariance. Even with these controls, the female divorcee expressed much less satisfaction with her health than either the divorced male or married female. It is suggested that future research be directed toward other factors such as stigmatization. This variable appears often in the literature, but has little empirical documentation. As for age, obviously, with the control satisfaction score vary considerably. Interesting enough, however, even with control for age males still expressed less satisfaction with their health than females. In fact, they recorded the least satisfactory scores in all cross classification of sex and marital status with divorced female as the only exception. Again, the impact of loss of spouse for the sexes needs further elaboration. The social network in communities and attitudes toward loss of identity with job should also be examined.

For those who hold special interest in the analysis of health and marital relationships, the implications for future work are clear. Recently, Kunzel (1974) has analyzed factors related to shifting divorce trends. Others have examined the structural consequences and reestablishment of old or different relationship (Brandwein et al., 1974; Schoen and Nelson, 1974). But in the tradition of Gubrium (1974)

and Bock and Webber (1972), the present research focused on the impact of marital dissolution. Other differences may exist as well.

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