Understanding the Differences of Stress, Loneliness, and Depression between Married & Unmarried Elderly Women in Malaysia

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Marriage as “a union between a man & a woman such that children born to the woman are the recognized legitimate offspring of both partners”.

Aging is ~

• natural & programmed into the body
• a result of damage which is accumulated over time
• a complex interaction of genetics, chemistry, physiology & behavior
Stress

Old age is characterized by various losses:

- Physiological losses may be due to sickness & functional disabilities.
- Sociological losses include retirement from work, loss of social & family networks;
- Personal losses related to personality components, a reduced sense of control over one’s life, diminished self-esteem & self image, & increased difficulty when coping with stress & crisis situations (Jorm, 1995; Lovestone & Howard, 1997).
Loneliness

• Loneliness ~ as ‘perceived absence of satisfying social relationships, accompanied by symptoms of psychological distress that are related to the perceived absence’ (Young, 1982).

• Those without partners score significantly higher on loneliness scales than do those who are married or living in a consensual union (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 1995; Pinquart, 2003).

• For the oldest adults loneliness is more common: About 50% of adults aged 80 & above often feel lonely (Smith & Baltes, 1993).
Depression

- Nolen-Hoeksema (1987) ~ depression is a major health problem among women across the lifespan.
- The role of depression is found to be influenced by the sense of self in four dimensions ~ negative relations, weak personal growth, poor purpose in life, & dependence.
Numerous empirical studies provided evidence for the protective effects of marriage on health:

- married individuals are more likely to be healthier than are widowed, divorced, separated, or never-married individuals (Manzoli et al., 2007; Turner et al., 1999; Williams, 2004).

- married individuals live longer than do unmarried individuals ~ this protective effect cannot be entirely explained by the selection of healthy individuals into marriage (Lillard & Panis, 1996).
• The benefits of marriage extend to factors other than survival ~ married individuals reportedly experience lower rates of depression (Afifi et al., 2006; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2008; Inaba et al., 2005; Williams, 2004).
• In almost all investigations industrialized countries ~ married persons enjoy better health, make fewer demands on the health care system, & experience lower death rates than single, widowed & divorced persons (Hu et al., 2003).
Marriage protection ~ a complex set of causal mechanisms consisting of environmental, social & psychological factors that make the married state a healthier one than the unmarried one.

Marital selection ~ is one in which marriage & remarriage select physically & psychologically healthier persons on average, as well as persons of higher socio-economic status.
Research evidence concerning health differences between married women & unmarried women:

- Married women are generally healthier than unmarried women.

- Analyses of prospective data suggest that 3 types of effects contribute to the association between marital status & health: (Burman & Margolin, 1992; Fu & Goldman, 1996; Waldron et al., 1996).
• Data indicate ~ in general ~ being married has beneficial effects on women's health (Burman & Margolin, 1992; Smith & Waitzman, 1994; Waldron et al., 1996).

• It appears that the beneficial health effects of marriage are due, at least in part, to greater financial & material resources, greater social support, & better health-related behavior ~ all of which contribute to better health for married women (Goldman et al., 1995; Young, 1996; Umberson, 1992; Waldron et al., 1996; Wyke & Ford, 1992).
• For some women ~ poor health may reduce the probability of marriage & increase the probability of divorce, & these selection effects contribute to better health for married women (Pless et al., 1989; Waldron et al., 1996).

• Married women had smaller increases in health problems than unmarried women.
The loss of one’s spouse is often associated with increased risk of depression due to loss of financial, emotional, physical, & instrumental support (Levenson et al., 1993; Mineau et al., 2002; Ross, et al., 1990; Umberson et al., 1992).
• Nagata et al., (2003) suggested ~ widowhood does not have an important effect on the mental health of elders because the normative nature of losing one’s spouse at an advanced age might lessen the consequences of widowhood on mental health.

• Older women ~ widowhood may represent freedom from the care-giving role, an opportunity to develop closeness with children by living with them (Carr, 2004; Lee et al., 2001).
• Some researches state ~ when their spouses die, women are likely to experience financial hardships (Umberson et al., 1992). Women may be more likely than men to rely on adult children as their sole source of income (Gu & Liang, 2000).

• Financial dependency may increase strain & women’s difficulties in adjusting to widowhood (Krause & Liang, 1993) & associated with increases in depressive symptoms for women (Chou & Chi, 2000).

• Never-married persons appear to fare better with regard to health outcomes than formerly married persons.
An analysis of prospective morbidity data for women aged 70 or older assessed increase in disability & found that married women, divorced & separated women had similar health trends ~ whereas never married women had better health trends (Goldman et al., 1995).

In contrast ~ analyses of prospective mortality data have not shown an increased risk for divorced, separated women, & never married women.
A significant difference was seen between those women who living alone with frequent support from family & friends vs. those without support from family or friends.

A prospective study in a rural area of Japan found that women who lived alone had a lower mortality risk compared to those in multi-generation households (Murata et al., 2005).

A prospective study of 5085 elderly in the US found that living alone had no adverse effect on survival in women (Davis et al., 1997).
In Malaysia ~ a growing proportion of women reach older age without having married or having children.

Assumptions that these older women are lonely, impoverished, and high users of social & health services are based on little evidence.

The most striking characteristic of this group is their high levels of education ~ which are associated with fewer reported financial difficulties & higher rates of private health insurance.
Objective

To examine the differences of stress, loneliness & depression between married and unmarried elderly women in Malaysia
Hypothesis 1
• There is significant differences of stress between married & unmarried elderly women

Hypothesis 2
• There is significant differences of depression between married & unmarried elderly women

Hypothesis 3
• There is significant differences of loneliness between married & unmarried elderly women
Methodology

Sample:
• A total of 300 elderly women ~ 2 categories ~ married & unmarried

Study area:
• Free-living elderly women in Peninsular Malaysia

Sample size:
• Elderly women age 65 years & above
Result

A total of 296 elderly women ~ 2 categories:
• Married - 152
• Unmarried - 144

Married ~ 2 categories:
• Married - 87
• Widow - 65
There is no significant differences of stress, loneliness & depression between married & unmarried elderly women [p > 0.05].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Married (mean)</th>
<th>Unmarried (mean)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>105.11</td>
<td>122.58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>111.45</td>
<td>118.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>107.12</td>
<td>121.36</td>
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There is a **significant difference** of **loneliness** between unmarried & widow [z= -2.14, p = 0.03].

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<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Unmarried (mean)</th>
<th>Widow (mean)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>105.17</td>
<td>104.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>111.00</td>
<td>91.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>101.16</td>
<td>113.51</td>
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There is a **significant difference of depression** between married & widow \([z = -2.77, p = 0.01]\).

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<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Married (mean)</th>
<th>Widow (mean)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>72.01</td>
<td>82.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>70.27</td>
<td>71.45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>68.02</td>
<td>87.85</td>
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Discussion

- Single women show considerable adaptability & well-being in old age (Wolf et al., 2002).

- Suggest ~ never married women, like the currently married, tend to have better adjustment in old age ~ data from several countries (eg. Koropecsyj-Cox, 1998; Zhang & Hayward, 2001)
• According to the Advancing the Economic Security of Unmarried Women by Weiss & Gardner (2010) ~ despite the economic disparities unmarried women face ~ they make major contributions to the economy & their communities.

• Therefore ~ they would have a stable income & would be able to support themselves quite well.
• Based on research ~ everyone would feel loneliness sometime in their life ~ regardless of their marital status.

• Tornstam (1992) ~ 40% of the married experienced loneliness sometimes or often.

• Although the elderly unmarried women may not have a spouse ~ they still have constant contact with relative children, siblings, friends, & neighbours ~ hence, unmarried elderly women are in no worse condition than the married elderly women.
• Hierarchical compensatory model of support ~ the key factor that determines the use of support is the power of the relationship (Cantor, 1979).

• For married person ~ spouses are the primary source of support, followed by adult children, other close relatives, friends, & others.

• In marriage ~ the spouse fulfils most needs for intimacy, attachment, & emotional support (Beach, Fincham, Katz & Bradbury, 1996; Rokach, 1998).
The frequency and/or quality of contact with adult children, siblings, friends, & neighbours may prevent & reduce loneliness in the married & unmarried older adults.
Thank You