
Gendered experiences of widowhood and depression across Europe: The role of loneliness and financial resources

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«Mental health is an integral part of health; indeed, there is no health without mental health» (WHO 2016).

- High prevalence of depressive symptoms in Western countries
- Increase of depressive symptoms in light of population ageing?
 - Mixed evidence regarding age-related changes in depression prevalence (Prince et al. 1999; Castro-Costa et al. 2007; Buber & Engelhardt 2011)
 - Age-related risk factors for depression: Physical health declines, loss of independence, death of close persons...

Widowhood and mental health

- Partnership protective for physical and mental health (Brown & Wright 2017)
- Widowhood as a risk factor for mental health
 - More depressive symptoms and even manifest depression up to several years following partner loss (Brown & Wright 2017; Stroebe et al. 2007)
- **Mechanisms?**
 - Loss of one of the most important persons
 - Profound changes in daily life
 - (1) Changes in social network & loneliness → especially for men?
 - (2) Decreases in financial resources → especially for women?

Gendered patterns of adjustment

- 18 percent of the population aged 50+ were widowed, around 80 percent of widowed individuals were women (own calculations based on SHARE 2015)
- Do older women adopt more easily to widowhood relative to men?
- „psychosocial adjustment to widowhood is believed to reflect long-standing patterns of gender socialization and gendered practices of the life course“ (Perrig-Chiello et al. 2016).

Gendered patterns of adjustment

- 18 percent of the population aged 50+ were widowed, around 80 percent of widowed individuals were women (own calculations based on SHARE 2015)
- Do older women adopt more easily to widowhood relative to men?
- „psychosocial adjustment to widowhood is believed to reflect long-standing patterns of gender socialization and gendered practices of the life course“ (Perrig-Chiello et al. 2016).
- Empirical research provides no clear answer
 - More depressive symptoms in men (Förster et al. 2019)
 - More depressive symptoms in women (Lee & DeMaris 2007)
 - No gender differences (Schaan 2013)
- Different study samples and statistical modeling (often cross-sectional) (Carr & Brodnan-Deren 2009, Sasson & Umberson 2014)

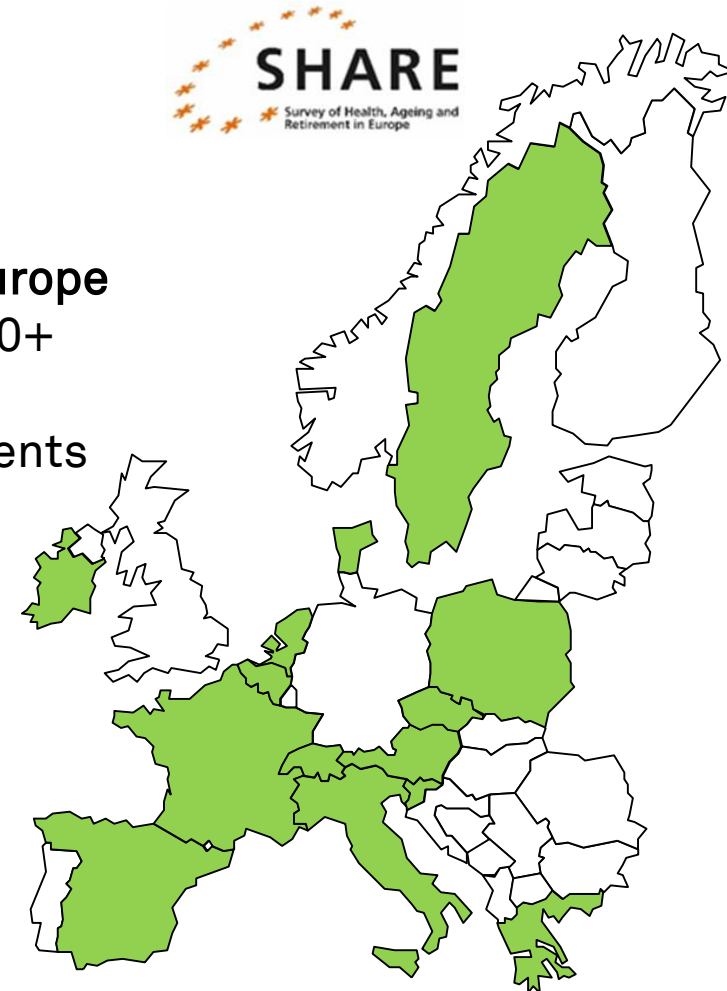
- Widowhood is not only an individual stressor, but also a social event
- Consequences are likely to vary depending on the macro-social context, as has been shown by cohort studies (Perrig-Chiello et al. 2016)
- National differences (Schaan 2013)
 - Strong family ties and the associated emotional and social support in Southern Europe as protective factor for widowed individuals?
 - Higher burden for women in countries with traditional gender roles where partner's pension are the main source of income?
- **Mental health consequences both gendered and context-specific**

Questions

- (1) Are there gender differences in the effect of widowhood on depressive symptoms?
- (2) To what extent do loneliness and decreased financial resources mediate the effect of widowhood on depressive symptoms?
- (3) Are there regional differences in the effect of widowhood on depressive symptoms?

Data and methods

- **Longitudinal analysis**
 - Fixed-Effects Models (FEM)
 - Individual changes over time
- **Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe**
 - Representative survey of the population 50+
 - Waves 5 (2013), 6 (2015) and 7 (2017/18)
 - 69.400 observations from 31.529 respondents
 - 797 persons became widowed (591 women, 206 men)



Dependent variable: Depressive symptoms

- EURO-D Scale: 12 items on depressive symptoms

- (1) Depressed mood
- (2) Pessimism
- (3) Wishing death
- (4) Guilt
- (5) Sleeping disorders
- (6) Loss of interest
- (7) Irritability
- (8) Loss of appetite
- (9) Fatigue
- (10) Concentration problems
- (11) Lack of enjoyment
- (12) Tearfulness

4+ symptoms: High probability of depression
(Prince et al. 1999)

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- Criterion validity and psychometric properties have been confirmed, also for international comparisons
(Prince et al. 2004; Castro-Costa et al. 2007; Ploubidis & Grundy 2009)

Measurement: Explanatory variables

- **Widowhood as the main variable of interest**
 - Analysis of gender differences by the inclusion of interaction terms

$$y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_{1it} \cdot \text{woman} + \beta_2 x_{2it} + \dots + \beta_k x_{kit} + \mu_{it}, \mu_{it} = \alpha_i + \varepsilon_{it}$$

- **Mechanisms**

- (1) **Financial problems**

„Thinking of your household’s total monthly income, would you say that your household is able to make ends meet..?“

0 = easy / fairly easy, 1 = with some / great difficulty

- (2) **Loneliness**

„How much of the time do you feel lonely?“ 0 = rarely / never, 1 = sometimes / often

- **Control variables:** chronic diseases, age, wave of SHARE

Descriptive results

- Increase of depressive symptoms, women exceed threshold of 4 symptoms
- Little changes in financial situation in both genders
- Sharp increase of loneliness in both genders

	Women		Men	
	Married at baseline	Widowed at follow-up	Married at baseline	Widowed at follow-up
Depressive symptoms	3.4	4.3	2.2	3.3
Some / great financial problems	42.6	43.0	31.6	27.7
Loneliness some or most of the time	25.6	64.6	22.8	68.9

Source: SHARE, own calculations.

Depressive symptoms following widowhood

- No gender differences in every of the European regions

→ **Widowhood as a risk factor for mental health for both women and men!**

	Total	Northern Europe	Eastern Europe	Southern Europe	Western Europe
	β	β	β	β	β
Widowed	0.816** (0.161)	0.521* (0,241)	0.586* (0.336)	1.344* (0.456)	0.704* (0.219)
Widowed x Woman	0.047 (0.196)	0.008 (0.364)	0.093 (0.407)	-0.105 (0.511)	0.086 (0.282)
R ² (within)	0.016	0.013	0.012	0.032	0.011
Observations	69,400	10,908	15,078	16,724	26,690

Source: SHARE, own calculations.

The role of financial problems and loneliness

- Increases in financial problems do not affect main effect of widowhood
- Individuals who experience reduced financial resources are not more depressed than those who do not report changes in financial situation!

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	β	β	β	β
Widowed	0.850** (0.093)	0.752** (0.108)	0.242† (0.123)	0.177 (0.130)
Increase of financial problems		0.205** (0.027)		0.189** (0.027)
Widowed x Increase of financial problems		0.255 (0.191)		0.203 (0.187)
Increase of loneliness			0.761** (0.032)	0,757** (0.032)
Widowed x Increase of loneliness			0.484* (-0.167)	0.466* (0.168)
R ² (within)	0.016	0.018	0.040	0.042

The role of financial problems and loneliness

- Increases in loneliness reduce the main effect of widowhood
- Individuals who experience increases in loneliness are more depressed relative to their counterparts who are not affected by loneliness!

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Regional differences in depressive symptoms

- Widowed individuals are more depressed in Southern Europe als compared to the other regions
- Regional differences diminished when controlling for financial resources and loneliness

	Model 1	Model 2
	β	β
Widowed	0.608*	0.111
	(0.199)	(0.208)
Northern Europe (Reference)		
Widowed x Eastern Europe	-0.005	-0.225
	(0.279)	(0.287)
Widowed x Southern Europe	0.645*	0.412
	(0.288)	(0.297)
Widowed x Western Europe	0.176	0.105
	(0.242)	(0.237)
Adjusted for loneliness and financial problems	no	yes
R ² (within)	0.016	0.042

Summary and conclusions

- **Gender differences?**
 - Widowhood increases depressive symptoms irrespective of gender
 - Due to high depression scores even before widowhood, a larger proportion of women reach the threshold for manifest depression.

- **Underlying mechanisms of depressive symptoms?**
 - Loneliness explains a substantial part of the increase in depression.
 - Financial problems, on the other hand, are not relevant.
 - Older people whose social life is strongly focused on their partner could be particularly vulnerable.

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 - Financial problems, on the other hand, are not relevant.
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- **Regional differences?**
 - Widowhood more burdensome in Southern Europe.
 - This can be traced back to a pronounced increase in loneliness.

Summary and conclusions

- **Limitations**
 - Comparison of two points of measurement (2 years)
 - Gender/ national differences in reporting behaviours, but existing studies based on SHARE suggest that inequalities in mental health are not attributable to differences in reporting styles (e.g., Kok et al. 2012)

- **Future studies needed!**
 - Gender-appropriate measurement of depressive symptoms?
 - Loneliness as a mechanism: Can social networks buffer the negative effect of widowhood on mental health?
 - Country-specific differences and macro-indicators?

Thank you for your attention!

Publication:

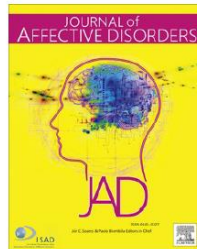
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Research paper

Gendered experiences of widowhood and depression across Europe The role of loneliness and financial resources from a longitudinal perspective

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