

Heterogeneities in the association between marital dissolution and late-life cognitive functioning in Europe: Do gender and work status matter?

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Background

Labour market participation provides adults with opportunities to engage in cognitively stimulating tasks, which are built up as cognitive reserve in old age. In this sense, traditional gendered scripts of work allocation among married couples, in which husbands take on the role of the family's primary breadwinner and wives prioritize homemaking and childrearing over labour market activities, may matter greatly for the maintenance of cognitive well-being. In the later stages of the life course, gender inequalities in cognitive reserve accumulation may play a critical role in reinforcing cognitive functioning heterogeneities between adults who still benefit from the spousal safety net of support versus those who experience the loss of such support through marital dissolution.

Objectives

We assess how marital dissolution, caused by the death of a spouse/partner, is associated with cognitive functioning in a sample of European adults aged 50+. We contribute to the literature on the cognitive health consequences of marital dissolution by examining work status as a potential source of heterogeneity, accounting for educational and gender differences.

Method

Drawing on six waves of the Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), we estimate fixed-effects panel regression models to assess the role of work status in the association between marital dissolution and two measures of cognitive functioning: episodic memory and verbal fluency.

Results

Marital dissolution is significantly associated with verbal fluency, with widowed men performing poorly in these tasks. The negative association between widowhood and verbal fluency is more pronounced among men with low education. Work status significantly interacts with widowhood to be associated with cognitive functioning, but only for men. In general, retired widowers perform better in the fluency task. Among the low educated, widowers who were homemakers have poorer verbal fluency.

Conclusion

Widowhood has negative implications for late-life cognitive functioning. This association, however, is marked by important heterogeneities. Work status and education emerge as critical characteristics, particularly among widowers.

Keywords: Ageing, marital dissolution; work status; cognitive functioning

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