

Effect of Marital Status and Close Friendships on Depression of Older Adults

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Abstract

- Older adults are a growing population and millions of them experience depression.
- This study examined the effect of marital status, close friendships, and gender on depression of older adults.
- A secondary data analysis was conducted of Wave 5 of the Americans Changing Lives Study (N=1426).
- A series of one-way analysis of variance and multiple linear regression were conducted.
- Both higher quality relationships and higher level of communication were associated with fewer depressive symptoms for the study sample overall.
- As far as the various marital status groups and gender groups, level of communication was only associated with lower depressive symptoms for those who were married. Higher quality relationships were associated with lower depressive symptoms for all groups except those never married.
- Those who were married or widowed had higher quality relationships than those divorced or separated



Introduction

Significance of Study

- Of American adults age 50+, 4.7 % have had one major depressive episode in the past year (The National Institute of Mental Health, 2019) which applied to the 2017 population estimates comes to an estimated 5.37 million (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).
- Changes in marital status can lead to changes in depressive symptoms for older adults (Recksiedler & Stawski, 2019).
- The death of a spouse can lead to more older adults living alone (Vos et al., 2019).

Purpose

To learn if close friendships with non-relatives and extended family members (not parents, spouse, partner, or children) are positively or negatively associated with depression experienced by older adults in various marital status and gender groups.

Hypotheses

- Older adults who have never married, have married, or who are widowed will have more beneficial close friendships than those who are divorced or separated because of the possibility of a decrease in shared friends among divorced and separated older adults.
- Having beneficial close friendships will be negatively associated with the depression score of older adults.
- The relationship between beneficial close friendships and depression scores will differ among older adults with different marital status (i.e., never married, married, widowed, divorce or separated).
- The relationship between beneficial close friendships and depression scores will be different between older men and older women.

Literature Review

Quality of older adult marriages impact the level of depressive symptoms compared to other marital status groups (Mirowsky & Ross, 1992; Stokes & Moorman, 2018). When closeness improved between lost and newly gained confidants mental health improved (Schwartz & Litwin, 2017). Depression can lead to eliminating needed relationships because of decreased interested in socializing and irritability (Marver et al., 2017). As far as gender, results were mixed (Evans et al., 2019; Kim & Lee, 2015; Swartz & Litwin, 2017). This study will address gaps in existing research by incorporating multiple factors impacting depression (marital status, friendship, and gender) and utilizing a larger sample size with an older age range and that is more generalizable to Black and White Americans.

Methods

Research Design and Data Collection

- Secondary data analysis of Americans' Changing Lives (ACL)
- A cross-sectional analysis: Wave 5 ACL (Face to face and telephone reinterviews conducted in 2011)
- Variables utilized related to relationship quality, communication, depression, marital status, and demographics
- Gender and Race: Female (n=884), Male (n=542), Non-Hispanic White (64.2%), Non-Hispanic Black (28.1%), Non-Hispanic Other (2.2%), Hispanic (5.5%)

Sample and Sampling Measures

- Wave 1 respondents recruited through multi-stage probability sampling (Heeringa, 1990).
- Sample size: N = 1426 (Wave 5 minus 1 respondent excluded for uncertain data)

Measures

Marital Status

- Marital status: married, separated/divorced/marriage annulled, widowed, and never married

Close Relationships

- Quality of relationships (QR): four self-report items (5-point Likert scale) related to love, demands, listening, and criticalness of friends and relatives
- Communication level (CL): three self-report questions (6-point Likert scale) about frequency of communication (over the phone/Skype, through writing, and together in person)

Depression

- Depression was measured by an 11-item version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression scale.

Results

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Those were married had significantly different QR scores (M = 4.08, SD = 0.63) from participants who were separated/divorced (M = 3.88, SD = 0.72) and from those who never married (M = 3.88, SD = 0.69). Participants who were widowed (M = 4.08, SD = 0.67) were only significantly different from those who were separated/divorced (M = 3.88, SD = 0.72). For CL, only those who were married (M = 3.25, SD = 0.97) were significantly different when compared with widowed participants (M = 3.50, SD = 0.92).

Figure 1. Mean Score for Quality of Relationship

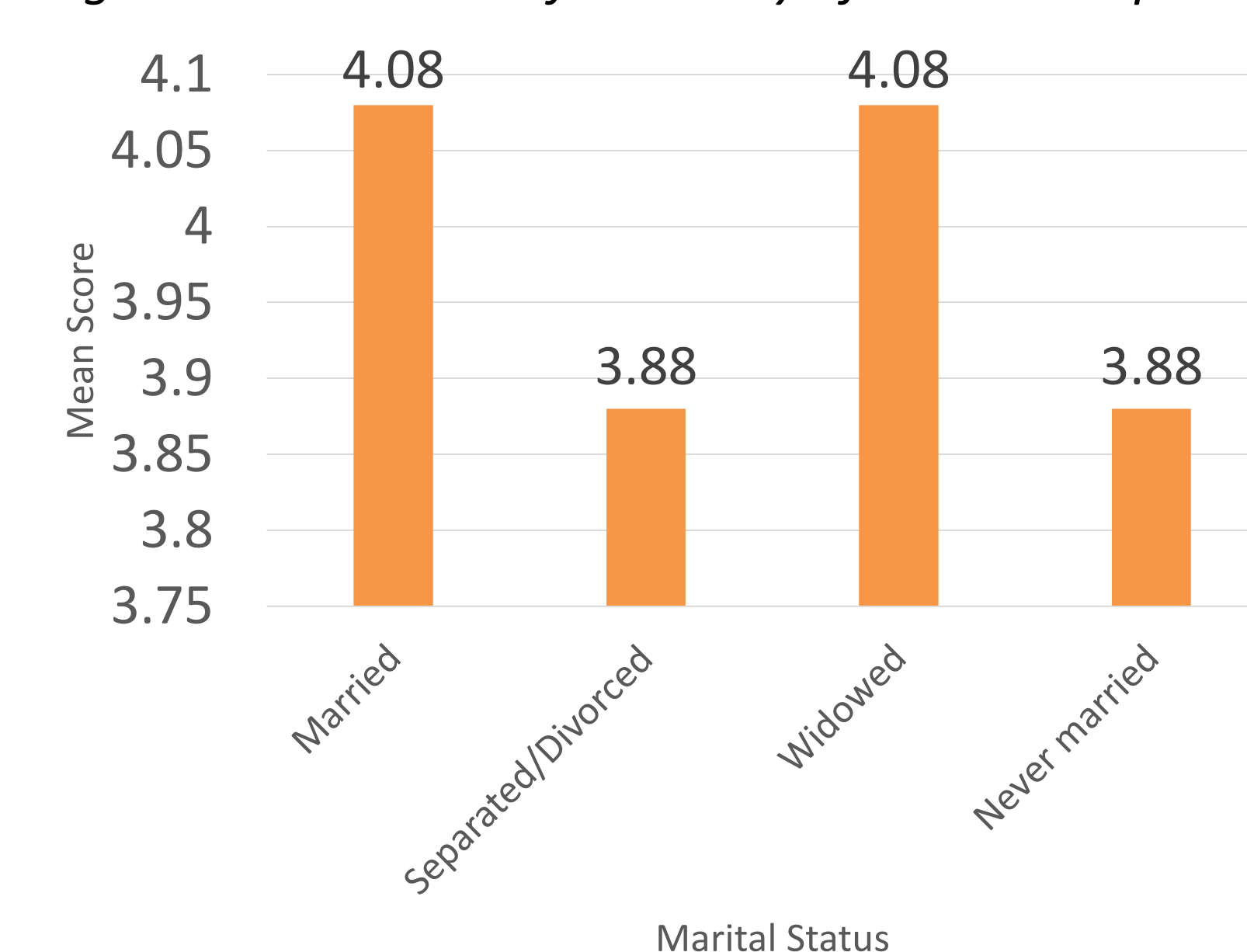
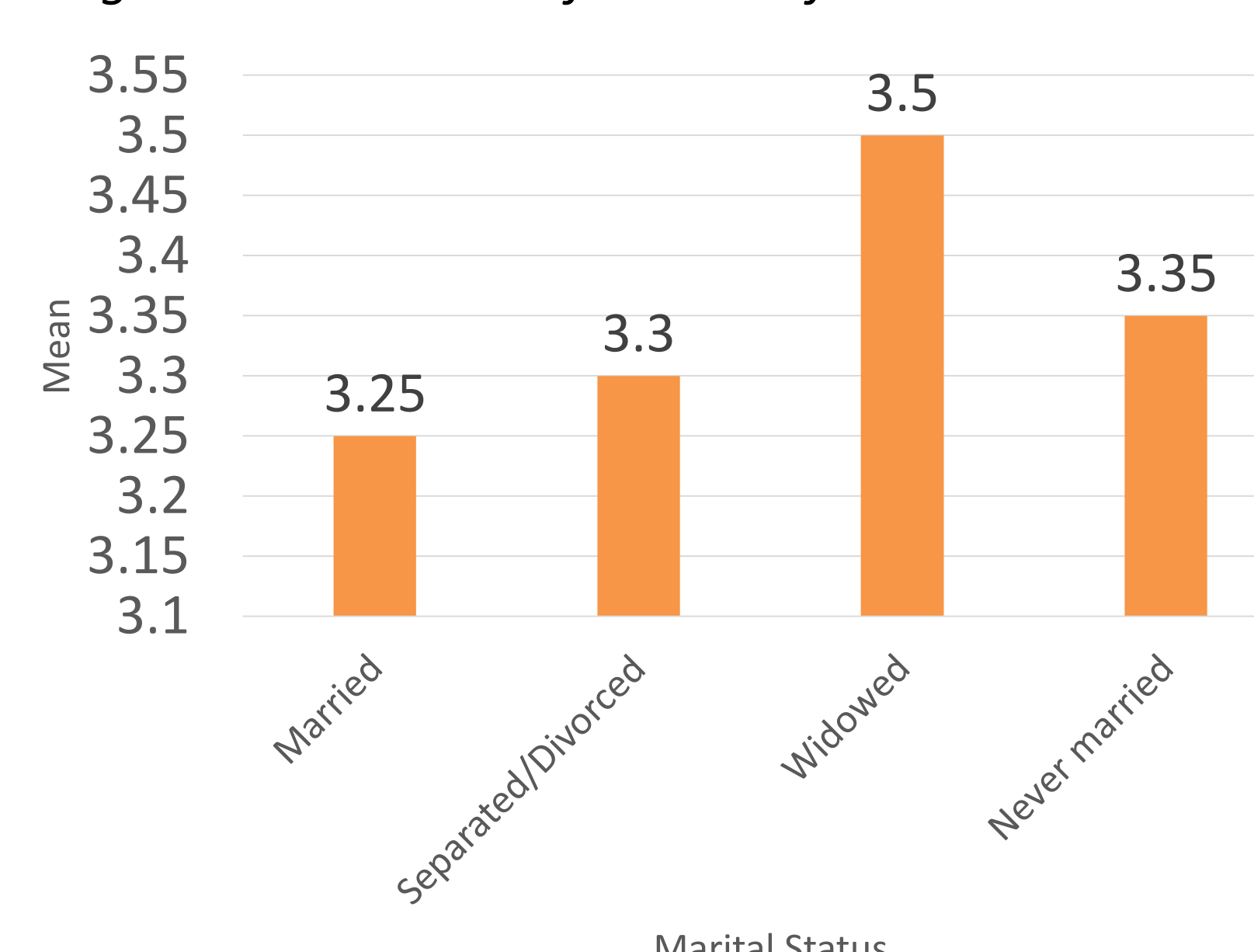


Figure 2. Mean Score for Level of Communication



Multiple Linear Regression

- This analysis was performed 7 times (overall sample, 4 marital status groups, and 2 genders)
- Significant negative association found between QR and depression for overall sample, married, separated/divorced, widowed, male, and female respondents

- Significant negative association found between CL and depression only for overall sample and married respondents
- Those never married were the only group for which QR and CL were not significant predictors of depressive symptoms

Table 1. Results of Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Depressive Symptoms Among Older Adults

Variable	ANOVA	R ²	B	SE	Beta	t	Sig.
Total Group	F(5, 976) = 39.97, p < .001	.17					
Constant			2.27	0.09	--	24.38	.000
Quality of Relationships			-0.20	0.02	-0.36	-12.27	.000
Level of Communication			-0.03	0.01	-0.07	-2.28	.023
Sex			-0.10	0.02	-0.14	-4.72	.000
Age			0.00	0.00	0.02	0.52	.600
Income			0.00	0.00	-0.11	-3.56	.000
Married	F(5, 528) = 18.13, p < .001	.15					
Constant			2.09	0.12	--	17.28	.000
Quality of Relationships			-0.18	0.02	-0.35	-8.48	.000
Level of Communication			-0.03	0.01	-0.10	-2.51	.013
Sex			-0.08	0.03	-0.13	-3.13	.002
Age			0.00	0.00	0.04	0.86	.390
Income			0.00	0.00	-0.08	-1.90	.058
Separated or Divorced	F(5, 201) = 13.85, p < .001	.26					
Constant			2.59	0.24	--	10.94	.000
Quality of Relationships			-0.24	0.04	-0.42	-6.67	.000
Level of Communication			-0.03	0.03	-0.07	-1.09	.276
Sex			-0.02	0.05	-0.02	-0.29	.776
Age			-0.00	0.00	-0.03	-0.43	.670
Income			-0.00	0.00	-0.19	-2.94	.004
Widowed	F(5, 143) = 11.33, p < .001	.28					
Constant			2.75	0.25	--	11.11	.000
Quality of Relationships			-0.13	0.05	-0.21	-2.77	.006
Level of Communication			0.02	0.03	0.05	0.66	.510
Sex			-0.04	0.08	-0.04	-0.53	.600
Age			-0.01	0.00	-0.26	-3.38	.001
Income			-0.01	0.00	-0.36	-4.85	.000
Never Married	F(5, 86) = 4.97, p < .001	.22					
Constant			2.25	0.31	--	7.27	.000
Quality of Relationships			-0.07	0.05	-0.14	-1.37	.175
Level of Communication			-0.07	0.04	-0.18	-1.78	.078
Sex			-0.08	0.07	-0.11	-1.12	.264
Age			-0.00	0.00	-0.08	-0.77	.442
Income			-0.00	0.00	-0.33	-3.37	.001

Discussion

- Hypotheses: 1 (partially supported), 2 & 3 (supported), 4 (not supported)
- Higher quality relationships was associated with fewer depressive symptoms
- Those married and widowed had higher quality relationships than divorced/separated but insignificant differences in communication levels
- No difference between men and women for the variables studied as predictors of depressive symptoms.

Limitations & Strengths

- Limitations: (1) the majority of study participants were married, (2) sample size of the marital status groups were not equal, (3) wide age range, (4) causality could not be established because of cross-sectional design
- Strengths: (1) large representative sample, (2) ability to look at multiple marital status groups despite needing to combine those divorced and separated

Implications & Further Research

- Focus on the quality of older clients' relationships rather than frequency of communication
- Help older adults on to improve current relationships or to reconnect with those who have been supportive previously to decrease depressive symptoms.
- Future research could focus on QR of participants but compare spouses & children with the friends & extended family highlighted in this study.