

Finding Love after Loss: Remarriage in Later Life

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Abstract

Although a number of scholars argue that the benefits to marriage may tend to change over the life course, remarkably little is known about patterns of remarriage in later life. This study will take advantage of three waves of data from the National Survey of Families and Households to examine patterns of remarriage in the later life course. First, we plan to document patterns of remarriage for individuals over age 45. Next, we will use Cox proportional hazard models to examine the determinants of remarriage. Throughout the analysis, particular attention will be paid to potential variation in the process of remarriage by gender and by route into later-life singlehood (divorce vs. widowhood).

Background

Relatively little is known about the formation of remarriage and other romantic partnerships in the later life course (e.g. Brown, Lee, & Bulanda, 2006; Cooney & Dunne, 2004). There are a number of reasons, however, to expect romantic relationships to be especially important in later life. For example, many widows and widowers express feelings of loneliness, concerns about financial security, and the need for personal care (Davidson, 2001). Despite the fact that remarriage may help ameliorate some of these concerns, rates of remarriage after widowhood and in later life in general are actually quite low (Lee et al, 2001; Smith et al, 1991). Recent estimates suggest that 12.3% of men and 4.8% of women will remarry after widowhood (Schoen & Standish, 2001). Many social scientists turn to sex ratio imbalances to explain low rates of remarriage in later life, yet remarriage rates are low both among men and women after widowhood, even though men face quite favorable sex ratios in later life.

A number of scholars argue that the social and economic context of marriage tends to change over the later life course. This may be because older adults tend to see fewer gains to marriage associated with childrearing or a sex-based division of labor than do relatively younger adults, feel less pressure to marry from family and friends, are hesitant to leave a long-time residence, or are uniquely affected by economic factors such as social security, pension benefits, or concerns about inheritance (Brien, Dickert-Conlin, & Weaver, 2004; Carr, 2004; King & Scott, 2005). These life course differences in the context of marriage may help explain why the association between remarriage and improved well-being is less clear in the later life course than among relatively younger adults (Williams & Umberson, 2004). It is important to keep in mind, however, that like

remarriage, rates of cohabitation and other nonmarital relationships in later life are also relatively low (Brown et al., 2006; Moorman, Booth, & Fingerman, 2006).

Other work points to potential gender differences in preferences for remarriage. For example, attitudinal evidence suggests that women may hesitate to enter into new relationships because they fear losing their new found independence from taking care of someone (Davidson, 2001; Davidson 2002). Men, on the other hand, may desire someone to help provide care, but often feel that their poor health or old age prevents them from forming new relationships (Davidson, 2001; Davidson, 2002). Relatively little is known, however, about whether and how the correlates of remarriage may tend to differ by sex for recent cohorts of older adults.

The Current Research

While a growing body of work investigates remarriage in the early and middle adult life course (see Ganong & Coleman, 2004, for a recent review), we know much less about patterns of remarriage in later life. Thus, the first aim of this paper is to document recent patterns of remarriage among individuals over age 45 in the United States who had previously experienced divorce or widowhood. Next, we will use survival analysis techniques to investigate characteristics associated with remarrying in later life. Throughout the analysis, we will pay particular attention to whether there are gender differences in patterns and correlates of remarriage or differences associated with varying routes into in later life singlehood.

Methods

Sample

This study uses data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The NSFH is a national probability sample of 13,017 respondents. The research design of the NSFH includes a main sample of 9,643 households and an oversampling of Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, single-parent families, families with stepchildren, cohabiting couples, and recently married people. Information on the primary respondent and their spouse or partner was collected in 1987-1988, 1992-1994, and most recently in 2001-2002. The analysis will primarily focus on transitions to remarriage made between the second and third waves of data. Thus our analytic sample will be limited to those 7,277 men and women who responded to the third interview wave (2001-02)¹ and the analytical sample will be further restricted to individuals who were previously married, but not currently married, at the time of the Wave 2 interview. The third wave of the NSFH is particularly well-suited for this project because it follows respondents from previous waves who were 45 and older in 2001, making it an ideal data source to study relationships in later life. Potential correlates of re-partnership will primarily be measured during the first two waves of data collection. In addition, the data contain rich marital and union histories, potentially important predictors of re-partnering in mid to later life such as characteristics of the previous marriage, time since spouse passed away or divorce, employment/retirement status, income, psychological well-being, self-rated physical health and health functioning, basic demographic variables, and attitudinal variables such as whether their children would approve of them dating, cohabiting or remarrying.

¹ Wave 3 of the NSFH had a response rate of 73%.

Measures and Analysis

The dependent variable assesses whether and when a remarriage occurred between Waves 2 and 3. The analysis will first use basic life table techniques to describe patterns of remarriage between Waves 2 and 3. Next, we will use Cox proportional hazard models to examine the estimated effects of covariates on risk of entry into remarriage between Waves 2 and 3. We will also examine whether there are gender differences in patterns and correlates of remarriage and differences associated with varying routes into singlehood (widowhood versus divorce) in later life. In addition, we will explore alternative specifications of re-partnership such as examining transitions to remarriage for currently cohabiting or dating individuals versus other divorced or widowed individuals not in a relationship of any kind.

Basic demographic characteristics such as age and income may be related to re-partnering after widowhood. Men typically prefer marrying younger women and men with greater financial resources or higher education may be more desirable as partners to women (South, 1991). Younger individuals may feel that they have a greater amount of time to invest in new relationships, and therefore may be more likely to re-partner than older individuals. In addition, we will examine how characteristics of respondents' previous marriage relate to re-partnering. Individuals who were with their spouse longer or who lost their spouse more recently may not be as ready to date and marry as other widows or widowers (Davidson, 2001). The independent variables will also include labor force status as retired individuals may have more time to pursue a relationship, whereas employed individuals may have more social support and have less need for a

romantic relationship. However, individuals who are employed may make desirable partners as they may be more active and have more disposable income (Chevan, 1996). Similarly, individuals in poor physical health or with low emotional well-being may have the greatest need for entering a relationship, but may make less desirable partners (Davidson, 2001). The attitudes of friends and family may also influence widows and widowers. Thus, we will include indicators of whether friends and family wanted the respondent to date, cohabit or get married. These attitudinal measures may be particularly important as older adults tend to be very close to their adult children and the views of their adult children are highly influential in their decision making (Kemp & Kemp, 2002).

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