



# Social network structure and the transition to widowhood

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האוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים  
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# Literature review

Widowhood is one of the most stressful life events

(Holmes & Rahe, 1967)

## Implications of widowhood:

- Decline in well-being
- Depression

(Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003; Powers, Bisconti, & Bergeman, 2014)

- Increase in social contact and support

(Guiaux, Van Tilburg, & Broese Van Groenou, 2007; Donnelly & Hinterlong, 2010)



Better adjustment

(Okabayashi et al., 1997; Bookswala, Marshall & Manning, 2014)



- The pre-loss social environment may influence the effects of widowhood on well-being (Stroebe et al., 2005)
  - Pre-loss instrumental and negative support influence adjustment
  - Pre-loss social support does not influence adjustment  
(Bonanno et al., 2002; Ha, 2010; Anusic & Lucas, 2014)
- **Pre-loss structural social factors** have not been examined in relation to adjustment to widowhood

# Pre-loss structural social factors

## 1. Social network size; 2. Contact frequency

Factors indicating the support available following widowhood  
(Huxhold, Fiori and Windsor, 2013)

## 3. Partner not part of social network

Better adaptation to his/her death due to ease of stress caused by:

- High conflict in the relationship  
(Bonanno et al., 2002)
- Caregiving  
(Schaan, 2013)



# Hypotheses

1. A larger **social network** (not including the partner) would predict better coping
2. Higher **frequency of contact** with social network (not including the partner) , would predict better coping
3. **Partner not a part** of the social network would predict better coping

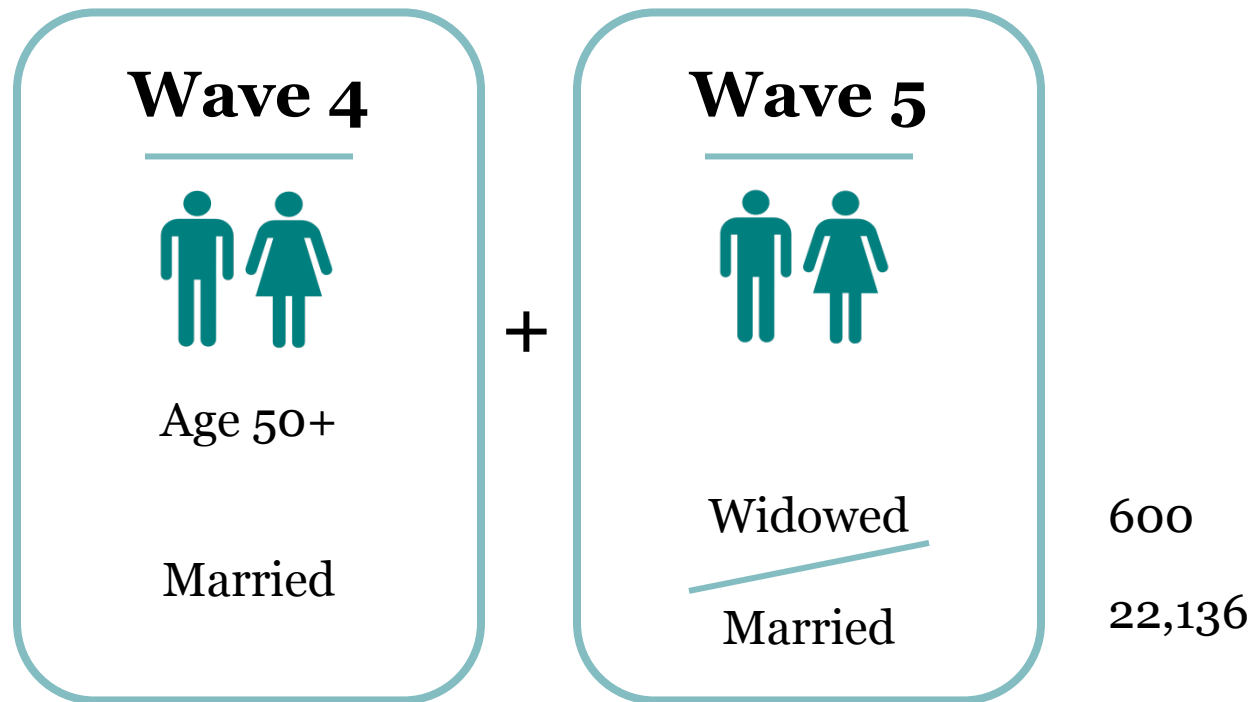
# Method

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# Sample

22,736 respondents from 13 countries who participated in waves 4 and 5





# Variables

## Outcome variables

- Indicators of change in negative and positive well-being (Diener & Chan, 2011):
  - **Negative** well-being: Euro-d scale for depression, 0-12.
  - **Positive** well-being: CASP scale for quality of life, 12-48.  
Life satisfaction – one question, 1-10.

These are two distinct but correlated components that present a fuller picture of mental health (Keyes, 2005, 2007).

Depression



Quality of life  
Life satisfaction



# Variables

## Widowhood – dummy variable

1=married in wave 4, widowed in wave 5

0=married in both waves

**Social network:** based on a name-generator in which respondents name up to 7 confidants and provide information about the confidants.

The name-generator technique allows:

- Characterizing the social network without the partner:
  - Size of social network, 0-7
  - Contact frequency with network members  
1-7 (never-daily; higher=more frequent contact)
- Identify whether the partner is considered to be part of the network: 1=not in network; 0=included in the network



# Variables

## Control variables:

- Age
- Gender
- Education (years)
- Health (subjective perception and number of chronic illnesses)
- Subjective financial status (1-4, higher=easier to make ends meet)
- Country

# Results





## Descriptive results

### Newly widowed, compared to continuously married:

- Decrease in well-being between the waves
- No difference in social network size (wave 4)
- Frequent contact with network members (wave 4)
- Partner less likely to be part of the network (wave 4)
- Older
- Less educated
- Women
- Less healthy
- Worse financial status

Variable	newly widowed	continuously married	p
Change in depressive symptoms	1.1	0.0	***
Change in life quality	-0.37	0.1	*
Change in life satisfaction	-0.7	-0.2	***
Social network size without partner (W4)	1.8	1.8	
Contact Frequency without partner (W4)	4.86	4.43	***
Partner not in network (W4)	36%	19%	***
Age (W4)	71.0	64.4	***
Education (primary) (W4)	51%	38%	***
Gender (women) (W4)	71%	51%	***
Perceived health (W4)	2.5	2.9	***
Chronic illnesses (W4)	2.0	1.6	***
Subjective financial status (W4)	2.8	3.0	***

\*\*\*p < .001, \*\* p<.01, \* p< .05;  
comparisons using t-tests / chi square



## Regressions predicting changes in well-being

Variable	Change in depression	Change in life quality	Change in life satisfaction
Widowed in Wave 5	0.069***	-0.031*	-0.060***
Size of social network without partner	0.001	0.016*	0.009
Mean contact frequency without partner	-0.013	-0.007	-0.008
Partner not in network	0.019**	-0.016**	-0.009
Widowhood * network size	-0.025*	0.024*	0.029**

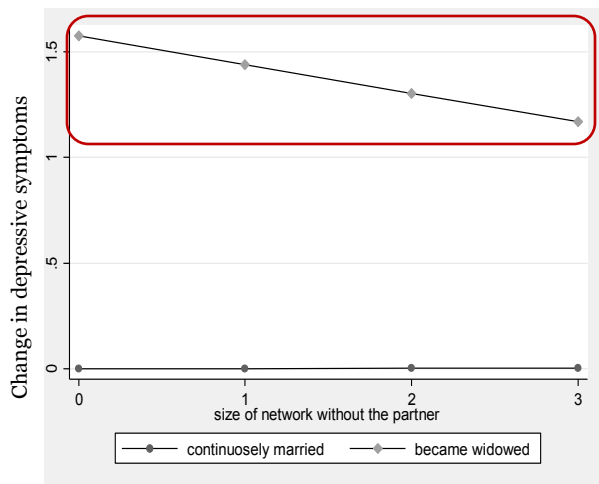
\*\*\*p < .001, \*\* p<.01, \* p< .05

Adjusted for: wave 4 well-being, age, gender, education, health, financial status and country

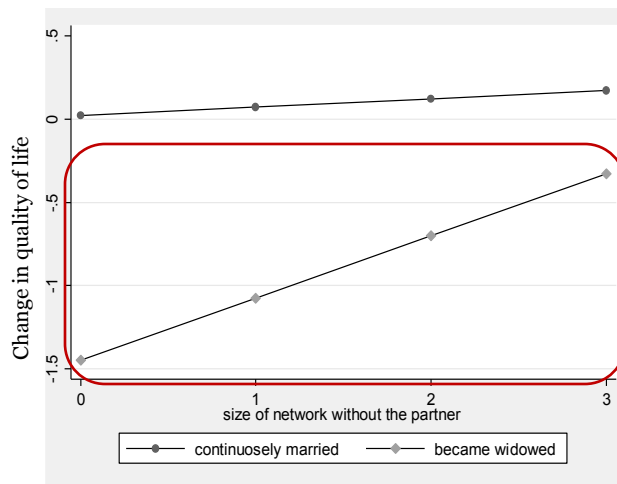


## Change in well-being and network size (without partner)

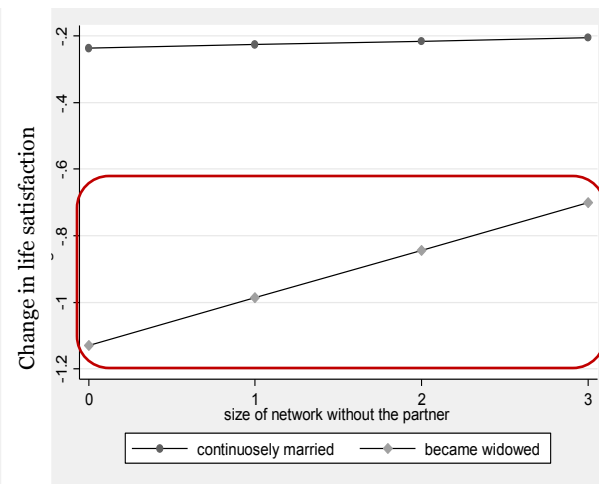
Change in depressive symptoms



Change in quality of life



Change in life satisfaction



Only among the newly widowed:  
Larger pre-loss networks related to a  
lesser decline in well-being



## Regressions predicting changes in well-being

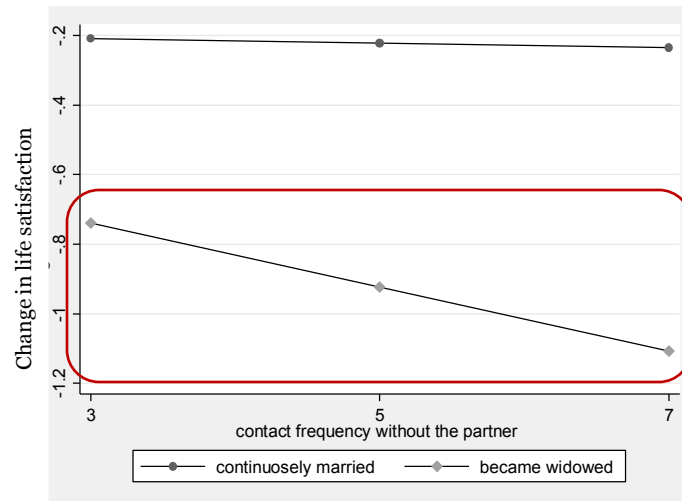
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Widowhood * network size	-0.025*	0.024*	0.029**
Widowhood * contact frequency	0.020	-0.028	-0.043**

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Adjusted for: wave 4 well-being, age, gender, education, health, financial status and country

## Change in well-being and contact frequency with network members (without partner)

### Change in life satisfaction



Only among the newly widowed:  
Higher contact frequency was related to a  
larger decline life satisfaction



## Regressions predicting changes in well-being

Variable	Change in depression	Change in life quality	Change in life satisfaction
Widowed in Wave 5	0.069***	-0.031*	-0.060***
Size of social network without partner	0.001	0.016*	0.009
Mean contact frequency without partner	-0.013	-0.007	-0.008
Partner not in network	0.019**	-0.016**	-0.009
Widowhood * network size	-0.025*	0.024*	0.029**
Widowhood * contact frequency	0.020	-0.028	-0.043**
Widowhood * partner not in network	-0.037***	0.024**	0.036***
R <sup>2</sup>	0.275	0.260	0.289

\*\*\*p < .001, \*\* p<.01, \* p< .05

Adjusted for: wave 4 well-being, age, gender, education, health, financial status and country

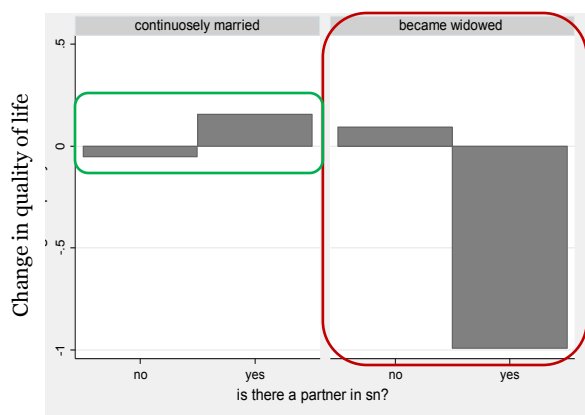


## Change in well-being and not having the partner in the network

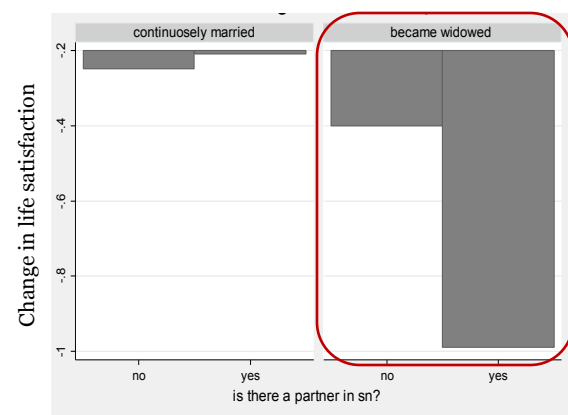
### Change in depressive symptoms



### Change in quality of life



### Change in life satisfaction



Newly widowed: Partner not in network related to a lesser decline well-being  
Continuously married: Partner not in network related to a decline well-being (depression and life quality)

# Discussion

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## Discussion

- A larger pre-loss **social network** predicted better adjustment to widowhood, in terms of positive and negative well-being.
- Those network members could become a resource for coping following conjugal loss by enhancing their support. This finding emphasizes the importance of close ties even before the loss of the spouse.
- Higher pre-loss **contact frequency** predicted a decline in life satisfaction among the newly widowed, but no change in the other well-being indicators.
- This finding contradicted the hypothesis. A possible explanation is that contact frequency indicates higher pre-loss stress, which leads to worse coping with bereavement.

## Discussion

- **Excluding the partner** from the pre-loss social network had opposite effects – it predicted better adjustment among the widowed, but related to deteriorating well-being among the continuously married.
- Not regarding the partner as a confidant could indicate a stressful relationship. Its continuation may mean continuing stress, while its end may cause some relief .

Thank you for listening!

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Any questions?