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Older Adults' Social Relations: Life Satisfaction to Widowhood

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Older Adults' Social Relations: Life Satisfaction to Widowhood

Cover Page Footnote

Older Adults' Social Relations: Life Satisfaction to Widowhood Hyunsook Kang, Ph.D. Stephen F. Austin State University School of Human Sciences kangh@sfasu.edu 936 468 2975 P.O. Box 13014, SFA Station Nacogdoches, TX 75962 Bonnie Ahn, Ph.D. Southeastern Louisiana University Dept. of Health and Human Sciences

Running head: WIDOWED OLDER ADULTS

Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine the breadth and depth of relationships with relatives and friends and the possible implications of those relationships with regards to life satisfaction to widowhood. Data from the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP) survey were used, which sampled persons 57-85 years of age ($N=3005$). It was hypothesized that older widowed adults have greater quality of both family and friend relationships than do older married adults. Structural Equation Modeling analysis results supported these hypotheses, revealing that older widowed adults reported higher quality of engagement in family and friend relations compared to older married adults, possibly enabling greater life satisfaction to widowhood.

Key words: widowed older adults, life satisfaction to widowhood, family and friend relations in widowhood

Introduction

Currently, the proportion of older adults living alone increases with age. By age 65, almost 50% of women and 25% of men live alone due to divorce, death of a spouse, or lifelong single status. By age 85, about 80% of women and 43% of men live alone (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2017). Although change in marital status is accepted as a normal life experience, the death of a spouse is a significant life event for older adults due to the associated changes in roles, income, identity, housing, social contacts, and physical and emotional health status (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2015).

For older adults, transition to widowhood can be an extremely challenging time, which requires a tremendous amount of coping. Although the majority of people have the ability to bounce back from general adversity, the ability to demonstrate life satisfaction to widowhood varies greatly based on the breadth and depth of family and friend relationships. Although all widowed adults experience an emotional and physical loss, having frequent contact with family and friends can be the key to a successful show of life satisfaction to such losses. For example, frequent social relationships with relatives and friends may minimize emotional stress and depression while boosting psychological well-being (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2017).

Life satisfaction refers to an evaluation of one's life. Life satisfaction results from the comparison of an individual's standard [which he/she perceives as appropriate for him/her] to his/her life circumstances (Bowling, Farquhar, & Grundy, 1996). If an individual's circumstances (e.g., health, income, social networks) meet or exceed his/her standards, then he/she is satisfied. Therefore, this may be a subjective judgment rather than an externally imposed objective standard (Oishi, Diener, Suh, & Lucas, 1999). According to Hamarat, Thompson, Zabucky, Steele, Matheny, and Aysan (2001), older adults' self-perceptions of their

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coping resources is associated with more life satisfaction. Better mental health is positively related to life coherence among older adults (Ungar & Florian, 2004).

Life satisfaction develops and changes over time through ongoing social relations. For older adults, spouse loss can be an example of life adversity and some widowed older adults are very resilient to have a capacity to grow from and find active social life. Therefore, social relations can be implemented to help older adults strengthen their life satisfaction and thereby improve outcomes following challenging life events, such as spouse loss (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2015).

Among the multitude of changes that come with widowhood, the most common changes for older widowed adults involve their identity and social relationships, particularly with other couples. Sheykhi (2006) discussed that widowhood removes a central identity as wife or husband. Furthermore, older married adults are more likely to socialize with other couples, but when one of the couples experiences widowhood or divorce, disruption in the friendship is likely (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2015). Utz, Carr, Ness, and Wortman (2002) proposed that older widowed adults tend to rely on the lifelong relationships from which they derive support and a sense of stability and continuity. Gradually, older widowed adults modify their social lives to spend less time with married friends and more time with other widowed individuals. Therefore, it is possible to assume that the emotional support provided through rebuilding or intensifying existing relationships with friends and family creates a source of life satisfaction for widowed adults (Bennett, 2005).

Although previous research has found that family support for older adults is important, little data exist about how family and friend relationships can foster life satisfaction for older widowed adults specifically. Given that only a few studies have investigated the topic, mostly

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with small, non-representative samples, there was a need to explore the topic with larger representative samples. The objective of this study was to examine the breadth and depth of relationships with relatives and friends and the possible implications of those relationships with regards to life satisfaction to widowhood.

Literature Review

Life Satisfaction to Widowhood

There is increasing consensus that close relationships with family and friends provide psychological and social benefits for older widowed adults. Frequent engagement with family and friends offers opportunities for broader social interactions and associations with other people (Duay & Bryan, 2006), which provide for the developmental needs for life satisfaction. Life satisfaction may pertain to people's ability to adapt successfully and to overcome adversity, and to rebuild their lives even after devastating events (Public Broadcasting System Online, 2011). Widowhood is such an event, demanding rebuilding and overcoming.

Using Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM), Pinquart (2003) revealed that adult children, siblings, and close friends were specifically important for the life satisfaction of older widowed adults. In addition, Pinquart (2003) found that relationships with family and friends provide benefits (e.g., reduce loneliness and increase emotional satisfaction) in later life that might foster emotional satisfaction to widowhood. Within the body of research of widowhood in later life, Elwert and Christakis (2006) stressed changes in relationships with adult children following widowhood, i.e., relationships with adult children intensify with widowhood. The volume of interaction with adult children increases and persists at higher levels for older widowed women. Mother and daughter dyads are typically closer than any other combination, with more daughters acting as confidantes and fewer likely to disappoint their mothers (Mottram

& Hortaçsu, 2005).

Boden-Albala, Litwak, and Elkind (2005) noted that face-to-face contact and residential proximity are important factors to close relationships in later life widowhood. According to Lopata (1996), many urban widowed women were happier if they had strong friendships that expanded their social lives and increased opportunities for being involved in social relationships. Consistent with previous research, Blieszner (2006) found that maintaining contact with family members, friends and neighbors is strongly associated with well-being and effective coping.

The fact that widowhood in later life encompasses diverse relationship changes makes it important to understand how older widowed adults perceive their lives with regard to their social relationships (e.g., family and friends). This is important because more than 10 million Americans are older widowed adults (Fields & Casper, 2001). Given that social isolation may contribute to depression and loneliness (Stolzenberg & Waite, 2005), it seems evident that close relationships with family and friends may improve life satisfaction to widowhood.

Older adults who engage frequently with family and friends have higher levels of self-efficacy and life satisfaction (McAuley, Morries, Motl, Hu, Konopack, & Elavsky, 2007). Garcia, Banegas, Perez-Regadera, Cabrera, and Rodriguez-Artalejo (2005) observed that family and friend relationships provide a sense of integration and serve as a predictor of self-rated well-being or quality of life after becoming widowed. In addition, Hooyman and Kiyak (2015) noted that being involved with family and friends has been known as an important benefit to the health of older widowed adults because it alleviates depression and lends itself to day-to-day support. As such, engaging in family time and friendships seems likely to increase life satisfaction among older widowed adults (McAuley et al., 2007). In particular, Hooyman and Kiyak (2015) noted that active participation in activities (e.g., leisure, hobby, and day-to-day tasks) with family and

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friends after becoming widowed may reduce the possibility of disability and chronic disease. Clearly, frequent engagement with family and friends is a crucial factor for life satisfaction to widowhood.

However, studying the impact of close relationships on life satisfaction to widowhood has been largely neglected. Given the increasing population of older widowed adults, more detailed research should be conducted to analyze the impact of close relationships on the quality of life of older widowed adults. In fact, the sheer number of baby boomers continuing to age creates a level of urgency around this research. By understanding the associations, it is possible to set social policy and ultimately bolster the social support systems of older widowed adults more effectively.

Theoretically, convoy model support that older adults would be seeking ways to fill both the physical and emotional voids in their lives created by the loss of their partner. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to address how widowed older adults' social relations affect their perceived life satisfaction.

Theoretical Framework

Although various theories explain how ties with family and friends foster to widowhood, there is a lack of consensus on the developmental processes of social relations. For example, the convoy model outlines the developmental process of coping with life changes and the individual, social, cultural, and/or structural factors that serve as determinants of social relations.

Convoy Model

Kahn and Antonucci (1982) developed the basic concept of the convoy model to explain social relationships and their longitudinal characteristics. The convoy model moves with the individual through time, social circumstance, and each individual's ability to cope with life

challenges. The basic tenet of the convoy model is that social relationships are dynamic in nature; in other words, members of a social network change over time (Kahn & Antonucci, 1982). Individuals join or leave social networks, moving into and out of relationships over the course of their lifetime. Each individual's close social relationships with family and friends may influence their lives positively or negatively (Blieszner, Bedford, & Westport, 1995; Kahn & Antonucci, 1982). In addition, while some social relationships are consistent in patterns and quality, the patterns and quality of most social relationships change over time (Blieszner et al., 1995). Accordingly, the convoy model proposes that each individual's social relationships may change in quantity and quality based on that individual's changing social needs and roles (Antonucci, 2001).

Antonucci and Akiyama (1995) noted that convoy model concepts include interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of social relationships, where differences in age and gender might contribute to social relationships and behaviors. The inter-individual aspect of social relationships refers to the social relationships between individuals developing over time, whereas the intra-individual aspect refers to changes that take place within an individual over time. Similarly, Blieszner and her colleagues (1995) explained social relationships in terms of inter-individual and intra-individual aspects. In terms of the inter-individual aspect, people's social relationships are evolving, developing, and changing with the individual's development over time. With respect to the intra-individual perspective, social relationship changes are related to the changes in each individual's personal and social resources (e.g., health, age, and social contexts).

With the convoy model, family and friends are important for social interaction and support in later life (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1995). Each individual's close relationships may

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change based on their changing social needs and roles. Contact with family and friends may facilitate exchange of emotional support and improve quality of life for older adults (Antonucci, 2001). Therefore, the convoy model supports the hypothesis that engagement with family and friends may foster a greater level of life satisfaction to widowhood.

Methods

Sample

The present study employed an explanatory approach using a cross-sectional study design. This study utilized data from the *National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project* (NSHAP), (Waite, Laumann, Levinson, Lindau, McClintock, O’Muircheartaigh, & Schumm, 2015). The NSHAP measures older adult health and other related social factors using a national scale for the purpose of assessing older adult well-being. NSHAP data collection entailed three measurements: in-home interviews, bio-measures, and leave-behind respondent-administered questionnaires. The face-to-face interviews and bio-measure collection took place in respondents' homes. The weighted response rate for the NSHAP study was 75.5%. This study conducted a secondary data analysis of the NSHAP second wave data, comprising community-dwelling adults 57-85 years of age (n=3,005).

Variable Operationalization and Measurement

To address the two hypotheses, the study employed one independent variable and six dependent variables. Marital status was the independent variable and it was a nominal measurement (e.g., 1=“married,” 2= “divorced,” 3= “widowed,” and 4=“never married”). The study proposed that six variables *depended* on marital status.

Three of the dependent variables focused on the family and three focused on friendships: family network size, quality of family relationships, frequency of family demands and criticisms, breadth of friendships, quality of friendships, and frequency of friend demands and criticisms. In

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essence, marital status (married, divorced, widowed or never married) is hypothesized to affect each of these variables.

Family network size. The size of family network was assessed with one question in this study: “How many relatives do you feel close to?” Family network size was calculated as an ordinal variable with scores on a 1-5 Likert type scale for the question (1= “one,” 2= “2-3,” 3= “4-9,” 4= “10-20,” and 5= “more than 20”).

Quality of family relationships. The quality of family relationships was assessed with two questions in this study: “How often can you open up to your family?” and “How often can you rely on your family?” Quality was calculated as an ordinal variable measuring frequency, with scores on a 1-3 Likert type scale for each question (1= “hardly ever or never,” 2= “some of the time or seldom,” and 3= “often”). Cronbach's alpha reliability for this sample was 0.86.

Frequency of family demands/criticisms. Family demands and criticisms were assessed with two questions in this study: “How often does your family make demands of you?” and “How often does your family criticize you?” Demands and criticism by family members were calculated as ordinal variables, with scores on a 1-3 Likert type scale for each question (1= “hardly ever or never,” 2= “some of the time or seldom,” and 3= “often”). For this study, original scores (1= “often,” 2= “some of the time or seldom,” and 3= “hardly ever or never”) to both questions were reversed from 1 to 3 to 3 to 1 so that a higher score indicates greater frequency. Responses were summed with higher scores reflecting higher levels of demands and/or criticism. Cronbach's alpha reliability for this sample was 0.82.

Breadth of friendships. The breadth of friendships was assessed with one question in this study: “How many friends do you have?” Breadth was calculated as an ordinal variable with

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scores on a 1-5 Likert type scale (1= “one” 2= “2-3”, 3= “4-9”, 4= “10-20”, and 5= “more than 20”).

Quality of friendships. Quality of friendships was assessed with two questions in this study: “How often can you open up to your friends?” and “How often can you rely on your friends?” Quality of friendships was calculated as an ordinal variable, with scores on 1-3 Likert type scale for each question (1= “hardly ever or never,” 2= “some of the time or seldom,” and 3= “often”). Cronbach's alpha reliability for quality of friendships was 0.87.

Frequency of friend demands/criticism. Demands and criticism from friends were assessed with two questions in this study: “How often do friends make demands of you?” and “How often do friends criticize you?” Demands and criticism from friends were measured as ordinal variables with scores on a 1-3 Likert type scale for each question (1= “hardly ever or never,” 2= “some of the time seldom,” and 3= “often”). For this study, the two questions’ scores were reversed from 1 to 3 to 3 to 1. Responses were summed with higher scores reflecting higher levels of demands and/or criticism. Cronbach's alpha reliability for demands and criticism from friends was 0.85.

Analysis

To address hypotheses, a Structural Equation Modeling was carried out. Structural equation modeling was used to test a series of mediating relationships, elucidating the potential pathways by which demographic factors influence widowed older adults’ social relations. The model in Fig. 1 was tested using Bentler’s (1995) EQS structural equations program. Input for the EQS program consisted of the covariance matrix and estimated reliabilities for each variable. Below I discuss several issues concerning the estimation and evaluation of structural equation path models. The correlations allow for the fact that parallel constructs in the demographic variables

and social relations may share common causes that are not explicitly modeled. The results of this analysis revealed that the model in Fig. 2 is identified and therefore will provide a set of unique parameter estimates.

Results

The total sample size was $N=3005$. The descriptive statistics for the current study are summarized in Tables 1 and 2. The majority of the participants were married (62%) and the rest were widowed (22%), divorced (12%) or never married (4%). The mean age of the sample was 69.3 ($SD=7.9$) with a range from 57-85 years. The majority was retired (63%). There was an even representation of men (48%) and women (52%). The race composition was 70% White, 17% African American, 10% Hispanic, and 2.3% Other ethnicity. Close to two thirds (60%) had average or lower incomes. More than half (57%) had poor to good health. These results mean that the average participant was a married, retired, 69 year old white man or woman in poor to good health, living on an average to low income. Regarding the two hypotheses, 22% were widowed compared to two thirds being married.

The mean scores for the six dependent variables are as follows. Starting with family, the mean score of *family network size* was 2.8 ($SD = 1.2$) (Likert scale 1-5). Regarding *quality of family relationships* “opening up to family” was 2.2 ($SD = .9$) and “relying on family” was 2.5 ($SD = .8$) (Likert scale 1-3). The mean score of *family demands* was 1.8 ($SD = 0.8$) and *family criticism* was 1.2 ($SD = 0.7$) (Likert scale 1-3). In summary, participants felt close to 3.5 relatives to whom they opened up to or relied on some of the time or seldom. Some of time they received demands from their family, but they hardly ever received negative criticism.

The mean score of *breadth of friendships* was 3.2 ($SD = 1.4$) (Likert scale 1-5). Regarding *quality of friendship relationships*, “opening up to friends” was 2.0 ($SD = 0.9$) and

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“relying on friends” was 2.2 (SD = 0.9) (Likert scale 1-3). The mean score of *demands made by friends* was 1.0 (SD = .7) and *criticism from friends* was 1.0 (SD = 0.7) (Likert scale 1-3). In summary, participants felt close to 3.5 friends to whom they opened up to some of the time or seldom, and relied upon hardly ever or never. They hardly ever or never received criticism or demands from their friends. It was hypothesized (H1) that older widowed adults would report a higher *quality of family relationships* than married older adults.

The dependent variable *quality of family relationships* was regressed against the independent variable marital status (see Table 3). Independent variables (i.e., marital status) accounted for 4% of the variance in frequency of “opening up to family” ($R^2 = .04$, R^2 adjusted=.04, $p < .001$). Beta values indicated that participants who were widowed ($\beta = .05$, $p < .05$), as opposed to married, had higher frequency of "family opening up." On the other hand, independent variables accounted for only 2% of the variance in frequency of respondents "relying on family" ($R^2 = .02$, R^2 adjusted= .02, $p < .001$).

In addition, it was hypothesized (H2) that older widowed adults would have a higher *quality of friendships* than older married adults. With respect to quality of friendships, independent variables (i.e., marital status) accounted for 5% of the variance in frequency of “opening up to friends” ($R^2 = .05$, R^2 adjusted= .04, $p < .001$). Beta values indicated that participants who were widowed ($\beta = .05$, $p < .05$) had a higher frequency of "relying on friends" than did those who were married.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics (n=3,005)*

Variables	Categories	Percentage
Marital Status (n=3,005)	Married	62%
	Divorced	12%

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	Widowed	22%
	Never married	4%
Retirement Status (<i>n</i> =3,005)	Retired	63%
	Non-retired	37%
Age (<i>n</i> =3,005)	Young-old (57-74)	30%
	Middle-old (75-85)	70%
Ethnicity (<i>n</i> =2,993)	White	70%
	Black	17%
	Hispanic	10%
	Other Ethnicity	2%
Gender (<i>n</i> =3,005)	Male	48%
	Female	52%
Health status(<i>n</i> =2,993)	Poor	8%
	Fair	19%
	Good	30%
	Very good	31%
	Excellent	12%
Income Status (<i>n</i> =2,362)	Far below average	9%
	Below average	18%
	Average	33%
	Above average	16%
	Far above average	3%

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Dependent Variables

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Family network	3.5	0.84
Friend network	3.5	0.75
HH income relative to American families	2.9	1.0
Self-rated physical health	3.3	1.1

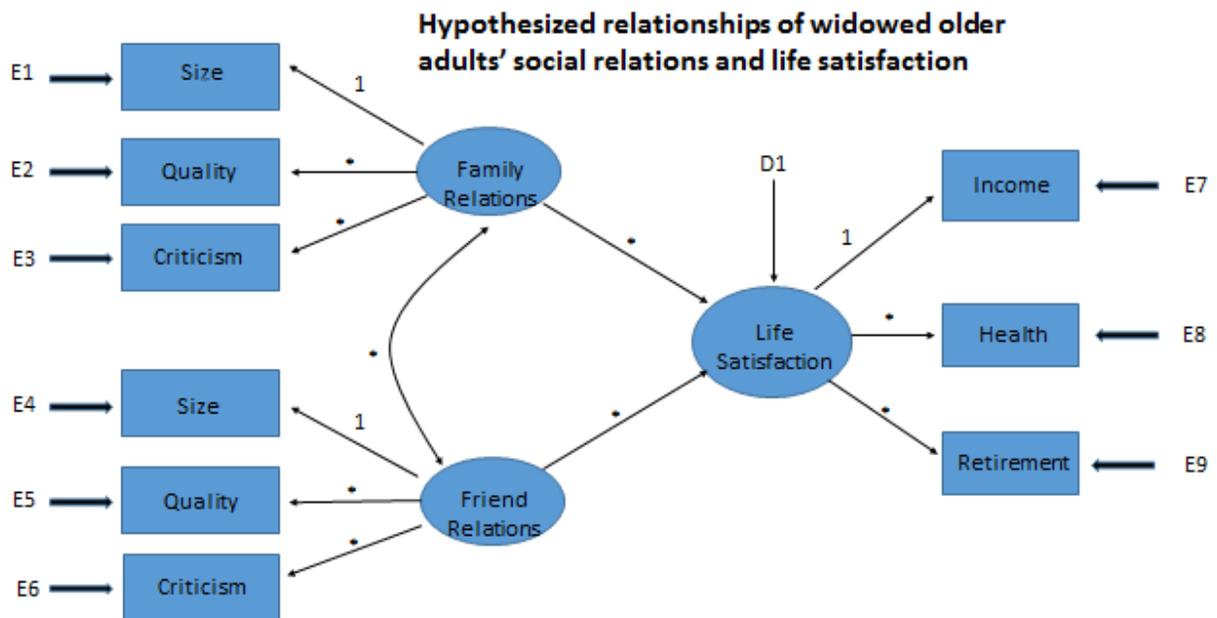
Table 3. Correlations among Variables

	Correlation (<i>r</i>)
Income	.28**
Retirement	.06

Health	.19**
Friend relations size	.02
Friend relations quality	.27**
Friend relations criticism	.14
Family relations size	.20
Family relations quality	.15
Family relations criticism	.18

* $p \leq .10$; ** $p \leq .05$; *** $p \leq .01$.

Figure 1.



Rectangles represent observed variables. Ovals indicate latent variables.

One-headed arrows indicate an expected directional relationship between two variables.

Two-headed arrows indicate covariation between two variables.

The asterisks on the arrows indicate that these relationships are freely estimated parameters.

The numbers on the arrows indicate that these relationships are fixed (at those numbers).

E indicates errors and D disturbances. Although not indicated in the diagram, the variances of the errors and the disturbance are all free parameters.

The participants range in age from 57-85 years and the mean age of the sample was 69.3 ($SD = 7.9$). Forty-eight percent of the total sample ($n=3005$) was male and fifty-two percent were

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female. Marital status composition was widowed 22%, married and living with partner 62%, never married (life-long single) 4%, and divorced or separated 12%. As the non-singled older adults group, widowed, married, and divorced older adults were included in this study.

Overall Model Fit

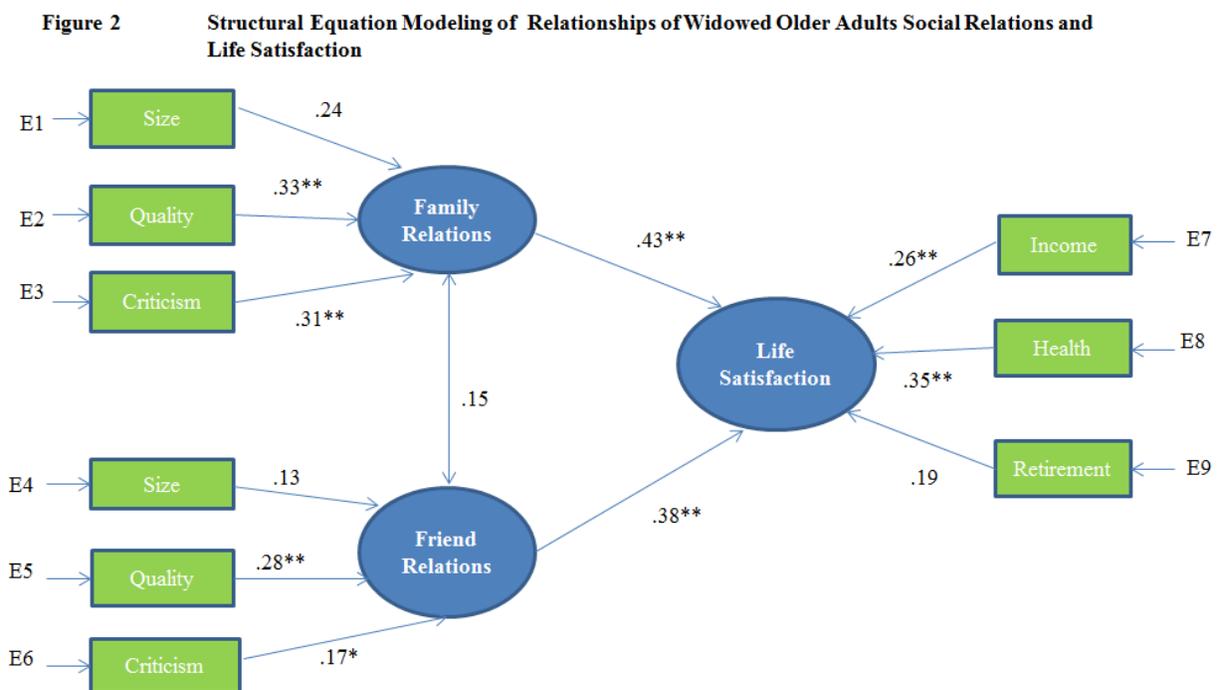
The Tucker–Lewis index was equal to .93 and the incremental fit index and the comparative fit index were each equal to .97, indicating a good fit of the model to the observed data. The overall model χ^2 was 77.23 with 44 degrees of freedom and a p value less than .01.

Parameter Estimates

Table 2 presents the correlations among the exogenous variables and Fig. 1 presents the hypothesized relationships among social relations and demographic variables. To facilitate presentation of the parameter estimates in Fig. 2, we report the predictors of each set of endogenous variables in turn. The first predictor of life satisfaction is family relations. As hypothesized, quality and criticism were significantly and positively related to family relations, whereas size was not significantly related to family relations. The second predictor of life satisfaction is friend relations. As hypothesized, friend relations' quality and criticism were significant and positive predictive relation of life satisfaction. In addition, income and health were significant and positive predictive relations of life satisfaction.

SEM analysis results indicated that older adults who have a higher income and health status reported higher score of life satisfaction (income: $\beta = .26^{**}$, $p < .001$, health: $\beta = .35^{**}$, $p < .001$). However, older adults retirement statue was not positively related to life satisfaction ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$). It is not surprising that older adults who have higher income may experience a higher quality of health service and broad social relations than older adults who have lower

income levels. These findings are consistent with the findings in previous studies of Hooyman & Kiyak (2015). Hooyman and Kiyak explained how income and health status play a role in the older adult's broad social behaviors. Among the samples of older adults who have higher social status, such as income and health, reported a more active social engagement with their social members. One can assume that there may be a higher chance of demands when the older adult has fewer resources (e.g. income or available social members) and his or her health declines. It is also possible to assume that older adults of higher socio-economic status may maintain more positive social networks and may have fewer negative experiences, such as demands or criticisms from their social members.



Rectangle represent observed variables. Ovals indicate latent variables. One-head arrow indicates an expected directional relationship between two variables. Two-head arrows indicate covariation between two variables. The asterisks on the arrow that these relationships are freely estimated parameters. The numbers on the arrows indicate that these relations are fixed (at those numbers). E indicates errors and D disturbances. Although not indicated in the diagram, the variances of the errors and the disturbance are all free parameters.

Consistent with the current findings, Barnes et al. found that income was associated with the closeness of people who were not family members, such as friends, neighbors, and church-

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related social members. Therefore, it is possible to assume that a higher income level may be associated with maintaining close social relationships and a larger numbers of people in later life, which is also consistent with the mutually-supportive, reciprocal nature of social relationships. Further research is needed regarding the nature of the social relationship between income and older adults along with its potentially moderating effects on social networks.

Discussion

The current study examined reports that older widowed adults enjoy a higher quality of close relationships with friends and family than older married adults. Widows did have higher quality family relationships than married people. But with marital status accounting for only 4% of the variation in opening up to one's family, and 2% in relying on one's family, something else other than being widowed must be going on when it comes to having higher quality family relationships. The results of this study suggested that the loss of a spouse leads to higher quality of social relationships. For example, married people may share their daily life with a spouse, which involves degrees of opening up to them and relying on that one person. However, widows/widowers have no spouse, so they may have to turn to other social members to rely on and open up to.

The findings revealed that older widowed adults need a higher quality of close relationships (both family and friends) than older married adults. These findings suggest that social welfare programs and policies need to address older widowed adults' overall well-being. It is consistent with previous research. For example, Ha (2008) noted that there is an increased amount of support from family and friends when older adults become widowed. Ha (2008) compared married and widowed groups of older adults and found that widows have less

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confidence in themselves but report higher levels of emotional support from their social relationships. For older widowed adults, the loss of a spouse does not negatively affect family relationships; on the contrary, family support increases after the loss of a spouse. Clearly, both family and friends are a key source of emotionally close relationships for older widowed adults. Having high quality of social relations (e.g., family and friends) after spouse loss might have a moderating effect on the resilient widowhood. Accordingly, widowed older adults' social connections may have positive effect on their successful later life. These findings support convoy model in which each individual's close social relationships with family and friends may influence their lives positively or negatively (Blieszner, Bedford, & Westport, 1995; Kahn & Antonucci, 1982).

Given the increasing numbers of older widowed adults expected in the future, the current findings warrant future research on the specific dynamics around how close relationships serve to foster life satisfaction to widowhood and the associated implications for social policy. In addition, future research should direct more attention to the older widowed women and their different approaches to life satisfaction via social relationships. By understanding the factors of life satisfaction to widowhood, family and gerontological researchers, family policy makers, and family welfare workers will be able to focus on the social programs (e.g., social gathering, therapy, and counseling) that provide the most benefits to older widowed adults and their families, friends, and other close associations. Further studies could examine the marital status difference in family activities and social relations in later life. In addition, specific patterns and frequency of participation in social networks among older adults needs to be explored.

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