



A comparison of widowhood and well-being among older Greek and British-Australian migrant women

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ABSTRACT

The impact of widowhood on well-being has been well-documented, but to date has not focused extensively on the experience of older migrants who have aged in a foreign land. This study aimed to examine the well-being of older migrant widows from two groups in South Australia: British-born ($n = 61$) and Greek-born ($n = 60$) Australian migrants, who had been widowed, on average, 13 years. All participants completed a self-report questionnaire in their preferred language. Three indicators of current well-being (self-rated health, depression and loneliness) as well as variables expected to differ cross-culturally, and potentially influence well-being (mourning rituals; continuing bonds to one's spouse; religiosity; social support) were measured. Greek-born widows displayed higher levels of mourning rituals, continuing bonds and religiosity than the British. Both groups perceived similarly high levels of familial social support. Greek widows also reported worse self-rated health, and increased symptoms of depression and loneliness compared to the British. This paper suggests that the detrimental impact of widowhood on well-being may be greater for non-English speaking migrants who are ageing outside of their country of origin, and who, despite residing in an English-speaking host country for several decades, have retained the linguistic, cultural and religious practices and traditions of their home country.

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Introduction

One third of all older Australians were born overseas, with post WWII migration from the UK and southern Europe representing the largest cohort of individuals aged over 65 (ABS, 2010). Little is known about the experience of ageing as a migrant, particularly for those who find themselves 'ageing in a foreign land' (NYAM, 2009), or one particularly in a country which is culturally and linguistically distinct from their country of origin. This paper aims to extend knowledge and understanding of a particular aspect of ageing as a migrant: that is, how widowhood impacts well-being from within a context sensitive to the role of migration and the potentially influential forces of ethno-cultural identity that may shape the experience of

widowhood in later life. It focuses explicitly on the experiences of older widows, rather than widowers, due to the fact that they make up the majority of widowed migrants due to gender differences in life expectancy and the tendency for women to marry men older than themselves (Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994). Whilst the particular emphasis in this study is on the well-being of Greek migrant widows, a group of British migrant widows is also included to distinguish the impact on well-being of being a widowed immigrant per se, and being a widowed migrant from a different cultural and linguistic group which is inherently less 'mainstream' than that of the predominant Anglo Australian culture.

Loss of a spouse entails stages of mourning, bereavement and widowhood, often believed to be conceptually distinct periods. In this paper, mourning refers to any behaviour (regardless of time widowed) during which a surviving spouse remembers the deceased (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998). Bereavement refers to the initial period of losing one's spouse, whilst

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the term widowhood reflects a more enduring status and lived experience over time (Barrett & Schneeweis, 1980). Thus, the present study provides evidence that for some individuals, the stresses associated with the daily lived experience of widowhood persist for years after the death of their spouse, somewhat contrary to the notion that there exist separate stages of adaptation.

Although the experience of losing a spouse undoubtedly changes over time, resulting in a variety of experiences throughout the overall duration of widowhood (Williams, Sawyer, & Allman, 2012), the death of a spouse has been found to have a pervasive negative impact on health and well-being, particularly loneliness (Golden et al., 2009) and depression (Bennett, Smith, & Hughes, 2005). The nexus between well-being and widowhood is the central focus of this study.

The majority of research to date on widowhood has been conducted with participants residing in their countries of origin (for example, Krochalk, Li, & Chi, 2008) despite calls as early as the 1970's for cross-cultural studies of widowhood (Lopata, 1971b). Existing cross-cultural literature on widowhood is mostly anthropological or descriptive in nature, typically detailing the unique customs and rituals of different ethnic groups without exploring the potential impact of such practices on well-being (for example, Sossou, 2002). Lopata challenged many of her own previous assumptions of widowhood in a cultural context as dismal and problematic, and stated that more work was required to explore the heterogeneity of the widowhood experience across individuals and over the life-course (Chambers, 2005).

Migrants who maintain a long residence in a new country are likely to face unique challenges as they age (Binstock & George, 2011). The widowhood experiences of those whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds are dissimilar to the host country (e.g., Greek migrants to Australia) are inherently different from those of migrants (e.g., from Britain to Australia) who possess the cultural and linguistic background and norms closer to that of the host country. Due to early childhood socialisation in the home country, migrants often arrive with, and retain ideas and feelings regarding gender appropriate behaviour, the roles of husband and wife, family relations, religious beliefs and rituals, work and leisure. Such differences between mainstream and minority cultures often result in culture-specific understandings of death, bereavement and its associated implications not being understood by mainstream society (Lopata, 1987). Due to the changing age-structure of much of Australia's migrant population (ABS, 2010), understanding culturally-specific expectations surrounding a typically age-related, normative transition such as widowhood is essential.

Greek and British-born migrants to Australia have lived and aged in Australia and their experiences of ageing are undeniably influenced by a range of events over their life-course, particularly those associated with the migratory and settlement or adjustment process. There is a lack of research focusing explicitly on the well-being of widowed migrants, particularly those from the sizeable Greek diaspora, large numbers of whom settled in the US, Canada and Australia. Many of these individuals now find themselves both widowed and ageing in a foreign land. Thus far, we have only identified two studies which have focused on widowed Greek migrants dating back several decades: Rosenbaum (1990) and Rosenman and

Shulman (1987) (as cited in Lopata, 1987). These studies offered insights into the formal care, cultural values, support systems and health beliefs of Greek widows, but did not theorise on the impact of migrants' daily experience of widowhood and implications for their well-being subsequent to the death of their spouse. Nor did these studies of Greek migrant widows have a comparison group of migrant widows more akin to widows from the host country. By including migrants of both groups, the present study provides such a point of comparison, and attempts to rectify this dearth in the literature.

The widowhood experience as culturally relative

The meaning of death, grief and mourning differs profoundly across cultures with most societies outlining appropriate behaviours for those who are widowed, based on socially constructed sets of norms (Cowles, 1996; Robben, 2004). Grief itself is said to be largely shaped by society's culturally prescribed way of mourning, dictating appropriate thoughts, feelings, values, behaviours, roles, spiritual expressions and ceremonies following bereavement (Hooymann & Kramer, 2006; Hsu, Kahn, & Hsu, 2003). The increasing secularisation of value systems has seen mourning rituals and bereavement largely de-institutionalised in most individualistic Western societies with expressions of grief actively said to be restricted or denied (Bedikian, 2008; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998).

Grief expression and mourning rituals, as well as continuing bonds to one's spouse, may be particularly related to religious or spiritual frameworks. Religiosity itself is believed to be positively correlated with well-being (Child, 2010), particularly by supporting psychological health. Strong religious identification provides emotional support and cushions against the absence of other social networks among older people (Lopata, 1979). Such beliefs may serve as adaptive coping mechanisms during widowhood, as bereavement predicts increases in religious beliefs and church attendance among women, promoting greater mental, physical and self-rated health, and perceptions of social integration and quality of life (McCann Mortimer, Ward, & Winefield, 2008). By providing a framework in which predetermined rituals are implemented to help individuals adapt to loss, religious beliefs may also encourage grief resolution (Becker et al., 2007). Strength of belief is an important predictor of adjustment following the loss of a spouse, with individuals who have stronger beliefs shown to resolve their grief and adapt to bereavement more completely than non-believers (Becker et al., 2007; Walsh, King, Jones, Tookman, & Blizard, 2002). Ethnic minority groups typically exhibit greater levels of religiosity and demonstrate increased dedication to religious rituals and ceremonies (Lobar, Youngblut, & Brooten, 2006) compared to those of Anglo background (Becker et al., 2007; Walsh et al., 2002). For most ethnic minorities, such as Greek migrants to Australia, religion is intertwined with culture.

In Australia's largely secular society, thoughts and feelings about the deceased may be concealed and the performance of mourning rituals is virtually non-existent (Jalland, 2006). Public expressions of grief may be shrouded in embarrassment and deemed problematic, with continuous grieving thought to interfere with one's daily routine (O'Gorman, 1998). Those who are widowed are often encouraged to 'get over' their grief by employing emotional restraint and displaying personal

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