

MARITAL STATUS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF FILIPINO WOMEN

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Introduction

In the last four decades, studies on women's well-being have gained considerable attention across different disciplines. In the 1980s, investigations into various indicators of psychological well-being started to proliferate and the impetus for almost all of these studies is the hypothesized link between psychological health and physical health (Ryff and Singer, 1998). A number of these researches look into the relationship between psychological well-being and major life transitions, including marriage. However, most of the studies on marital transition and psychological well-being were conducted in the developed country setting (e.g. Pearlin & Johnson, 1977; Gerstel, Riessman & Rosenfield, 1985; Doherty, Su & Needle, 1989; Horwitz, White & Howell-White, 1996). In the developing countries, few if any such studies exist. In particular, nothing is known about the association between separation, widowhood and remarriage with women's psychological well-being in the Philippines.

To address this gap in literature, this paper aims to: 1) examine the types and prevalence of marital status changes for a sample of Filipino women, and 2) explore whether, and how, current marital status relates to psychological well-being. This study is timely and crucial because the Philippines is presently confronting issues that tend to undermine the traditional institution of marriage, such as the proposal to legalize divorce in the country.

Marriage rates in the Philippines

Marriage as an institution is viewed with high regard in the Philippines. Marriage can be either legal (through church or civil wedding) or consensual, but majority of Philippine marriages are legal. A report by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Philippines (CBCP, 2000) claims that over 60% of Filipinos 15 years of age and above have chosen to get married; furthermore, it states that majority of these marriages (about 85%) are still intact, with only less than two percent having ended in separation and about 5% having ended due to death of a spouse. Divorce is not legal in the country, but the Catholic Church permits annulment, and the Family Code of the Philippines has provisions for the "nullity" and "voidability" of marriage (Chionglo-Sia, 2001; Lopez, 2001).

Data from the 10% Public Use File of the 2000 Census of Population and Housing give estimates of marriage rates in the country as follows: 54% of the population aged 15 years and above were legally married, 4.9% were widowed, 1.2% were separated, and 4.9% were in consensual or live-in arrangements. Until age 40, women had higher marriage rates compared to their male counterparts. Above 40 years old, however, more

men than women were reported as currently married (including remarried); women were more likely to be reported as widowed or separated.

Psychological well-being and marriage

As mentioned, there hardly is any literature that can shed light on the nature of the relationship between marital status and psychological well-being in the Philippine context. Nonetheless, studies in the developed countries offer some theoretical guidelines that help describe this relationship (Doherty, Su and Needle, 1989; Mastekaasa, 1992). Two hypotheses have been proposed. The first is the social causation hypothesis, which states that social ties like marriage affect and influence psychological well-being. Specifically, a good (continuing) marriage enhances well-being, while poor marital outcome (dissolution) reduces well-being. The second hypothesis is the social selection hypothesis. It argues that an individual's well-being or predisposition determines his or her marital state. The assertion is that those who may be inadequate marital partners due to certain predisposing traits that could lead to an unhealthy state of well-being may be more likely to experience poor marital outcomes.

Of relevance to this study is the social causation hypothesis because it focuses on psychological well-being as outcome rather than determinant of marital status. However, this study does not altogether discount the recursive nature of the relationship and therefore regards it as correlational rather than predictive. Psychological well-being in this study is measured in terms of the experience of depressive symptoms and domestic violence.

An examination of the effects of marital status on depression symptomology and domestic violence is abundant in Western literature. Pearlin and Johnson (1977), for example, report that those who are married are less susceptible to depression even after controlling for important characteristics such as sex, age and race. Their study also reveals that separated individuals are the most burdened by depression, while widowed and divorced individuals are troubled with it only to a moderate degree. Gerstel, Reissman and Rosenfield (1985) also found evidence associating marital dissolution with psychological distress and showed gender differences in this association. For women, psychological distress following marital dissolution tends to be associated with material conditions (i.e. those concerning income and other parental obligations), whereas for men the consequence is strongly felt in the loosening of social networks. Horwitz, White and Howell-White (1996), however, do not show similar gender differences for younger cohorts. They report that young married men and women derive equal benefits from marriage and experience increased levels of well being in terms of, e.g., psychosomatic symptoms and less alcohol intake. In a more recent investigation on the social causation hypothesis using the two-wave panel of the US National Survey of Families and Households (1987-88 and 1992-93), Marks and Lambert (1998), analyzed the effects of marital history (i.e. continuity and transitions in marital status) on well-being and found that, in general, marriage promotes well-being in terms of life satisfaction and self-esteem. They also demonstrated that more women than men are depressed and unhappy following divorce or widowhood. Barrett (2000) studied the psychological benefits of

first marriage and subsequent marriages using the Piedmont Health Survey and confirmed that marriage, in general, produces psychological gains; however, relative to first marriage, second and third marriages provide smaller benefits in well-being.

Relatively few studies have given focus on the effects of marital status on the incidence of spouse or partner abuse. For example, little is known about the frequency of spousal abuse among separated and widowed women. While it seems reasonable to assume that separated and widowed women are less prone to domestic violence because of the absence of a spouse, Kalmuss and Seltzer (1986) reported the prevalence of spouse abuse in families where one or both spouses have been divorced. Kurz (1996) also demonstrated the pervasiveness of violence among separated women in the US because apparently violence continues to be perpetrated during the couple's negotiation of marital assets following the dissolution of marriage.

On account of the foregoing, this study hypothesizes that widowhood and separation tend to be correlated with reduced psychological well-being among Filipino women insofar as experiencing depressive symptoms is concerned. However, the association of marital status with the incidence of violence has yet to be explored in the Philippine context. Furthermore, the study will also examine associations, if any, between remarriage and the experience of depression and violence.

Data and Method

This analysis uses data from the Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutrition Survey (CLHNS), which followed up a cohort of 3,327 women who gave birth between May 1983-April 1984. The study site is Metropolitan Cebu, the second largest metropolitan area in the Philippines with both urban and rural (or peri-urban) sectors. At the time of the baseline survey in 1983-84, the sample women were 15-47 years old. They were reinterviewed 18 times thereafter. The analysis focuses on the 2,009 women who were followed up in the latest survey round in 2005.¹ At this time, the women were 35-69 years old. Attrition of the sample was mainly due to outmigration, which accounted for 80% of those loss to follow up.

Table 1 examines selectivity due to sample attrition of the CLHNS women on the basis of selected baseline (1983) characteristics. Logistic regression analysis reveals that the women included in the analysis were of lower educational attainment and less likely to be residing in an urban community compared to women who dropped out of the sample. This is not surprising because women of higher education are concentrated in the urban areas, and the same women are likely to migrate because of better job opportunities elsewhere or abroad. No selectivity, however, is observed with respect to women's age, household size and asset ownership such as a television set.

¹ There were 2,018 women interviewed in 2005. The analysis, however, focuses only on the 2,009 women who reported ever being married (legally or consensually). The 9 cases of never married women are excluded from the analysis because they are too few to yield reliable results regarding their category.

Table 1. Odds of women being included in the analysis sample

Characteristics	OR (95% CI)	s.e.	p
Ownership of television	1.10 (0.88-1.36)	0.12	0.38
Household has electricity	0.85 (0.72-1.01)	0.07	0.06
Household size	1.02 (0.99-1.04)	0.01	0.20
Mother's grade	0.96 (0.93-0.98)	0.01	0.001
Mother's age	1.01 (0.99-1.02)	0.01	0.21
Residing in urban area	0.61 (0.51-0.74)	0.06	0.000

Measures

The main exposure variable in this study is marital status. As defined in the CLHNS, marriage is a union between man and woman, which could be either legal (through a church or civil wedding) or consensual. In this analysis, the statuses are defined as: 1) still married and living with first spouse, 2) currently widowed, 3) currently separated, and 4) remarried. Remarriage represents a change in spouse. Although these statuses imply transitions from one marital state to another, the analysis focuses only on the current state (at the time of the 2005 CLHNS) and how this relates with the current well-being of women.

Psychological well-being is the outcome of interest in this study. As in other studies (e.g. Pearlin and Johnson, 1977; Gerstel, Reissman and Rosenfield, 1985; Johnson, 1991; Spanier and Furstenberg, 1992; Simon and Marcussen, 1999; Wade and Cairney, 2000; Kalmuss and Seltzer, 1986; Kurz, 1996), this paper measures psychological well-being in terms of the experience of depressive symptoms and domestic violence. Specifically, the CLHNS provides information on: 1) depressive symptoms experienced in the last month prior to the survey, and 2) acts of violence done to and done by women in the last year.

On depression symptomology, the sample women were asked how often in the past month they experienced or felt 12 depressive symptoms.² Frequency was measured as: none of the time, occasionally, or most or all of the time. The score used in this analysis summed up “most or all of the time” responses. This depressive symptoms index yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79. Owing to the fact that only about three in 10 women reported experiencing at least one depressive symptom most or all of the time in the last month (Figure 1), this scale was subsequently dichotomized

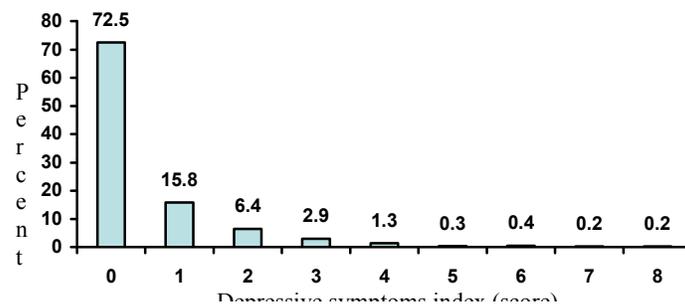


Figure 1. Distribution of women on the depressive symptoms score

² The items in the depressive symptoms index include experience or feeling of headaches, loneliness, worry, difficulty in sleeping, poor digestion, hopelessness about the future, inability to overcome difficulties, wishing one were dead, the idea of taking one's life, thought that one is worthless, thought that people are unfriendly, and being disliked by people.

for purposes of the logistic regression analysis (i.e., 0 representing no depressive symptom experienced most or all of the time, and 1 representing the experience of one or more depressive symptom(s) most or all of the time).

Domestic violence is measured in two ways, that is, woman as perpetrator and as victim of violence. For each measure, an index was constructed from five items demonstrating acts of violence done to, or done by, a family member or close friend.³ The index for “violence perpetration” has a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.59, while that of “violence victimization” has a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.66. As in the depressive symptoms scale, these indices were eventually dichotomized in the regression analysis. Some 55% of the sample women reported not having done any act of violence (Figure 2), while 86% said they had not been a recipient of any act of violence (Figure 3).

To control for possible confounders in the hypothesized relationship between marital status and each of the measures of psychological well-being in this study, other characteristics such as current age, age at first marriage, education, number of pregnancies, housing quality (as proxy for household asset), religiosity, work status and place of residence are included in the regression models. Age and education are measured in years, while the other control variables are dichotomous categories, except for number of pregnancies.

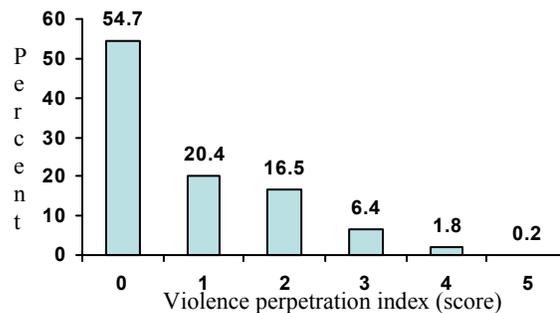


Figure 2. Distribution of women on the violence perpetration score

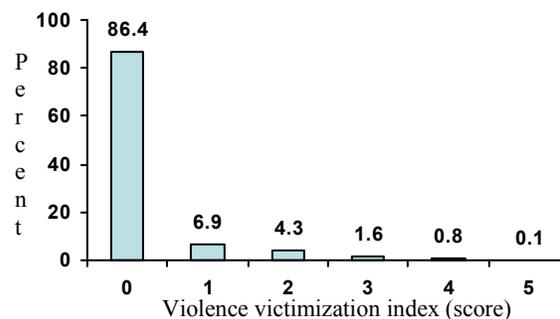


Figure 3. Distribution of women on the violence victimization score

³ The index for violence perpetration/victimization includes the following items: throwing something at someone, pushing, grabbing or shoving, hitting without anything at hand, hitting with something hard and harming someone enough to need medical attention.

Results

A distribution of the sample women by their current marital status and number of times married is shown in Table 2. Nine out of every ten women in the study have been married only once; only one in ten had two or more marriages. The table also highlights the fact that nearly all (96%) of those currently in a legal union were still in their first marriage, while the majority (66%) of those currently cohabiting had remarried. What is important to note in Table 2 is that current marital status, which is the main independent variable under study, does not capture the entire marital transition history of the sample women. For example, it is illustrated that there are women who are currently widowed or separated who have also been remarried, but these women are relatively few in number (18 and 21, respectively). Not shown but implied in the table is that those who are currently married or cohabiting in their second/subsequent marriage (68 and 97, respectively) have been separated or widowed in their first marriage.⁴

Table 2. Distribution of women by current marital status (in 2005) and number of times married

Marital Status	Number of times married		Total
	Once	More than once	
Legally married	1523 (95.7)	68 (4.3)	1591 (100.0)
Cohabiting	49 (33.6)	97 (66.4)	146 (100.0)
Widowed	166 (90.2)	18 (9.8)	184 (100.0)
Separated	67 (76.1)	21 (23.9)	88 (100.0)
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,805 (89.8)</i>	<i>204 (10.2)</i>	<i>2,009 (100.0)</i>

Table 3 presents a profile of the sample women by marital status category. With the exception of work status and degree of religiosity, women's characteristics differ significantly according to their current marital status. On the average, those who are currently widowed are older compared to the currently married and separated women. Women who have remarried are the youngest; they are also the ones who entered into their first marriage the earliest. Partly as a function of age, widows had the highest number of pregnancies, while the currently separated had the lowest. Separated women also had the highest level of education compared to those who were currently widowed or remarried; those who are still in their first marriage were second highest. A larger proportion of separated women resided in the urban areas and enjoyed better quality housing than the rest of their counterparts. The remarried women ranked second with respect to urban residence but proved to be the most disadvantaged in terms of housing quality. In fact, women who had remarried ranked lowest in socioeconomic status compared to women in other marriage categories.

⁴ An analysis of remarriage patterns of the CLHNS women (Gultiano and Hindin, 2006) in fact shows that 30% of the women who had remarried had been widowed in their first marriage, while 70% had separated from their first spouse. This analysis also describes the more common marriage trajectories of these women as, e.g.,: 1) consensual 1st marriage→separation→church marriage→currently together (for those who married twice), and 2) consensual 1st marriage→separation→consensual 2nd marriage→separation→consensual 3rd marriage→currently together (for those who married three times).

With respect to women’s psychological well-being, it is evident that more widows compared to others have experienced severe depressive symptoms, but more remarried women have experienced domestic violence. With regard to the experience of violence, it is noteworthy that, regardless of marital status, a larger proportion of women reported having done acts of violence compared to being victims of it. Among those who had been victims, a large majority had inflicted violence on others themselves.

Table 3. Characteristics of women by current marital status in 2005

Socio-demographic Characteristics	Marital Status (n=2009)				
	Continuously married with first spouse (n=1572)	Widowed (n=184)	Separated (n=88)	Remarried (n=165)	Total (N=2,009)
Mean age *	47.5	52.0	48.3	46.3	47.9
Mean age at first marriage*	20.4	20.6	21.0	19.2	20.3
Mean number of pregnancies*	6.4	7.5	5.5	6.8	6.5
Mean years of formal education*	7.0	6.1	7.6	6.3	6.9
% with college education*	13.7	10.3	20.5	8.5	13.2
% currently working	72.3	74.5	83.0	72.7	73.0
% religious @	66.9	65.8	62.5	61.2	66.1
% with quality housing # *	19.5	16.9	20.5	13.3	11.0
% urban *	68.8	67.4	84.1	71.5	69.5
% experiencing severe depressive symptom in past month*	25.5	39.1	29.6	32.7	27.5
% perpetrating violence in past year*	46.6	34.8	32.9	52.1	45.4
% victim of violence in past year*	14.2	4.4	6.8	22.4	13.6
% perpetrator & victim of violence*	12.2	3.3	5.7	20.0	11.7

@ Attends church services at least once a week

With strong housing materials, 4 rooms or more

* significant at p value<0.05

Results of the logistic regression analyses of marital status on each of the three measures of psychological well-being are shown in Tables 4, 5 and 6.⁵ The adjusted model takes into account respondent’s age, age the first marriage, number of pregnancies, years of education, religiosity, housing quality, work status and place of residence⁶.

As shown in Table 4, currently separated women are not significantly different from those who are still in their first marriage insofar as the risk of experiencing depression is concerned. Widowhood, however, is found to be associated with increased odds of experiencing at least one depressive symptom, even after controlling for a number of

⁵ Linear regression models were also run using scores on the indices of depression and violence as outcome variables and the results on significance of covariates did not differ from those obtained in the logistic regression analyses.

⁶ A model including control for number of times married (as a measure of previous marital experience) was also tried out, but yielded no perceptible differences in the adjusted coefficients or their significance level.

women’s characteristics. Relative to women who are still living with their first spouse, the currently widowed are 54% more likely to suffer from depression, despite the significant influences of number of pregnancies, religiosity and place of residence. A similar positive but weaker relationship is observed among remarried women, but the relationship tends to disappear when other socio-demographic characteristics are accounted for.

Table 4. Current marital status and the odds of experiencing at least one depressive symptom

	Experiencing depressive symptom			
	Unadjusted Model		Adjusted Model	
	OR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	OR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>
Marital Status (ref: living with first spouse)				
Separated	1.13 (0.66-1.94)	0.66	1.13 (0.65-1.96)	0.67
Widowed	1.66 (1.19-2.32)	0.003	1.54 (1.08-2.17)	0.02
Remarried	1.39 (0.98-1.96)	0.06	1.31 (0.92-1.86)	0.13
Covariates				
Age			1.01 (0.99-1.03)	0.47
Age at marriage			0.99 (0.96-1.03)	0.61
Number of pregnancies			1.04 (1.00-1.08)	0.03
Education			0.99 (0.97-1.03)	0.98
Religiosity (ref: does not attend church services at least once a week)			0.80 (0.65-1.00)	0.05
Housing quality (ref: weak housing materials)			0.90 (0.76-1.05)	0.17
Place of residence (ref: rural)			1.55 (1.23-1.96)	0.000
Work status (ref: not working)			0.95 (0.76-1.19)	0.66

The likelihood of women experiencing domestic violence given their current marital status and other characteristics is examined in Tables 5 and 6. On the odds of women inflicting violence to others, Table 5 demonstrates that those who are currently separated and widowed have a lower risk of perpetrating violence compared to women who are still living with their first spouse. Controlling for other covariates attenuates this relationship but does not nullify it. Those who are remarried are not significantly different from those who are in their first marriage as far as performing acts of violence is concerned. It may also be of interest to note that, holding marital status constant, older women have a reduced likelihood of perpetrating violence, while women who married at later ages, have had more pregnancies, and are residing in urban areas have an increased likelihood of doing acts of violence.

In regard to violence victimization, Table 6 underscores the following: 1) being remarried is clearly associated with being a recipient of violence, and 2) widowhood is strongly protective of this kind of violence. Controlling for possible confounders attenuates the former but not the latter. The odds of remarried women becoming victims of violence reduces from 77% to 58% if other characteristics of women are accounted for, but the odds of widows avoiding victimization remains at roughly 77% regardless of these controls. Women who have separated from their spouse are not found to be significantly different from those who have remained in their first marriage in terms of being victims

of violence. As in violence perpetration, number of pregnancies and urban residence are positively associated with the likelihood of becoming a victim of violence, while age is negatively associated with it.

Table 5. Current marital status and the odds of perpetrating violence

	Perpetrating violence			
	Unadjusted Model		Adjusted Model	
	OR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	OR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>
Marital Status (ref: living with first spouse)				
Separated	0.45 (0.26-0.77)	0.004	0.53 (0.30-0.93)	0.03
Widowed	0.53 (0.38-0.75)	0.000	0.65 (0.45-0.93)	0.02
Remarried	1.24 (0.90-1.71)	0.19	1.10 (0.78-1.54)	0.59
Covariates				
Age			0.91 (0.89-0.93)	0.000
Age at marriage			1.05 (1.01-1.08)	0.01
Number of pregnancies			1.19 (1.15-1.24)	0.000
Education			0.99 (0.96-1.03)	0.69
Religiosity (ref: does not attend church services at least once a week)			0.90 (0.73-1.10)	0.30
Housing quality (ref: weak housing materials)			0.97 (0.84-1.13)	0.68
Place of residence (ref: rural)			1.31 (1.06-1.62)	0.01
Work status (ref: not working)			1.02 (0.83-1.26)	0.84

Table 6. Current marital status and the odds of being a victim of violence

	Victim of violence			
	Unadjusted Model		Adjusted Model	
	OR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	OR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>
Marital Status (ref: living with first spouse)				
Separated	0.49 (0.20-1.24)	0.13	0.52 (0.20-1.32)	0.17
Widowed	0.23 (0.10-0.53)	0.000	0.22 (0.10-0.51)	0.000
Remarried	1.77 (1.20-2.621)	0.004	1.58 (1.06-2.37)	0.03
Covariates				
Age			0.97 (0.95-1.00)	0.07
Age at marriage			0.99 (0.95-1.05)	0.98
Number of pregnancies			1.11 (1.05-1.16)	0.000
Education			0.98 (0.93-1.03)	0.45
Religiosity (ref: does not attend church services at least once a week)			0.80 (0.60-1.05)	0.11
Housing quality (ref: weak housing materials)			0.91 (0.73-1.12)	0.36
Place of residence (ref: rural)			2.08 (1.50-2.88)	0.000
Work status (ref: not working)			1.17 (0.87-1.58)	0.30

Discussion

The analysis has given evidence that, among ever-married, childbearing women in Cebu, Philippines, current marital status is associated with women's psychological well-being. The findings of this study lend support to the social causation hypothesis that social

relationships, specifically marital relationship, can affect an individual's psychological well-being. Although the paper did not examine marital history or transitions in detail, and did not include an analysis of the single or unmarried state, it nonetheless provides valuable information and insights that contribute to the understanding of how psychological health of women is related to widowhood, separation and remarriage.

Specifically, the results suggest that widowhood makes a woman susceptible to depression but safeguards her from domestic violence. One could surmise that when a woman is widowed she assumes the role of father to her children and provider for her family, and in a society where there are no measures to protect the family from economic uncertainty, the widow is thus heavily burdened physically and emotionally. She may, however, be shielded from the possibility of domestic violence primarily because of the absence of a spouse who is the most likely person in the family to inflict and/or provoke violence.

A regrettable state as illustrated in this study is that of remarried women. These are the women who are most likely to be victims of violence. This observation contradicts a common assumption that remarriage can give women a second chance at happiness, especially if it is seen to correct or compensate for negative circumstances surrounding a previous marriage. For some, remarriage may even be considered a viable option following separation for women who were victims of violence in their previous marriage. But, as the social selection hypothesis would argue, it may come as no surprise if victims of spousal abuse in a previous marriage will tend to repeat the same experience in their subsequent marriage.

The case of marital separation probably merits further scrutiny. This study has provided evidence only of the association between separation and the perpetration of violence but not with the other two measures of psychological well-being. Perhaps there is more to learn about the effects of separation (as well as widowhood and remarriage) on women's psychological well-being if the analysis were approached from a marital history or marriage trajectory perspective. The data, however, did not permit this approach because of inadequate information on the sequencing of marital status transitions vis-à-vis women's psychological conditions before and after each transition. Another limitation of the study is in its measurement of psychological well-being. It is acknowledged that depression and domestic violence, although common indicators of psychological well-being, do not capture the whole gamut of psychological health. Lastly, it is important to recognize that the relationship between marital status and psychological health must also be examined from the perspective or experiences of men.

Despite these limitations, this study has addressed a conspicuous gap in Philippine research regarding the relationship between marital status and psychological well-being. It paves the way for a more thorough investigation of the psychosocial consequences, both positive and negative, of marital dissolution due to death or separation (or divorce) and subsequent marriages as practiced in this culture. Similar researches are therefore strongly encouraged.

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