

Marital Status and Social Relationships in Later Life

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Introduction

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- Previous research has suggested that the unmarried may be at a disadvantage in personal networks and social support.
 - Little is known whether the quantity and quality of social relationships differ by marital status and whether the unmarried seek more friend and family support to compensate for a lack of marital support in later life.
 - Little is known about the social relationships of the remarried and the cohabitators in later life.



The “marriage as an integrative institution” perspective

- Marriage can foster and enhance multiple social relationships by providing resources and opportunities for various social interactions (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016).

- Marital dissolution may disrupt shared social relationships as well as neighborhood ties (Leopold, 2018; Lin et al., 2017).

- Empirical evidence:
 - ✓ Married adults reported higher satisfaction with their social relationships than the divorced, widowed, and never married (McLaughlin et al., 2010).

 - ✓ Most divorced men and women experienced losses in their networks after divorce (Wrzus et al., 2013). Parental divorce is associated with less contact and lower parent-child relationship quality, especially for divorced fathers (Ward et al., 2014).

The “marriage as a greedy institution” perspective

- The demands of a modern marriage can leave little time for the married to invest in other social ties in the wider community (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2012).
- Marriage may compete with and even undermine couples’ ties to their extended families including parents and adult siblings as well as their friends.

Empirical evidence:

- ✓ Married US adults are less likely to socialize with and provide help to their friends, parents, siblings, and neighbors than their unmarried counterparts (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016).

Research questions of the current study

- What are the similarities and differences in the **quantity and quality** of three major types of social relationships in late adulthood (i.e., friends, children, and family members) across six marital status groups (i.e., first married, remarried, cohabiting, divorced/separated, widowed, and never married)?
- Whether the link between social relationships and marital status varies by gender?

DATA AND METHODS

- Leave-Behind Questionnaire (LBQ) of the Health and Retirement Study (HRS, 2006 and 2008)

- Analytic samples
 - Community-dwelling respondents aged 51 and over
 - our final sample sizes ranged from 11,636 to 12,087.

Measures: Dependent Variables

Social relations (friends, children, family members)

- *network size*: the number of **close** relationships with friends, children, and family members (excluding spouse)
- *Contact frequency*: the mean of three items that asked about how often the respondents meet up, speak on the phone, or write/email with their friends, children, and family members.
- *Positive social relationships*: the mean of three items that ask about the perceived social support.
- *Negative social relationships*: the mean of three items that ask about the perceived social strain.

Measures: Independent Variables

Marital status

- first married (reference), remarried, cohabiting, divorced/separated, widowed, and never married.

SES and health

- SES: educational attainment (in years) and household income
- Health: self-reported health and limitations in activities of daily living

Other covariates

- age (in years), gender, race/ethnicity and an indicator for survey year

METHODS

- OLS models

- Analytic strategy:

 - Model 1: marital status+controls (base model)

 - Model 2: Model 1+ SES+Health conditions+ controls (full model)

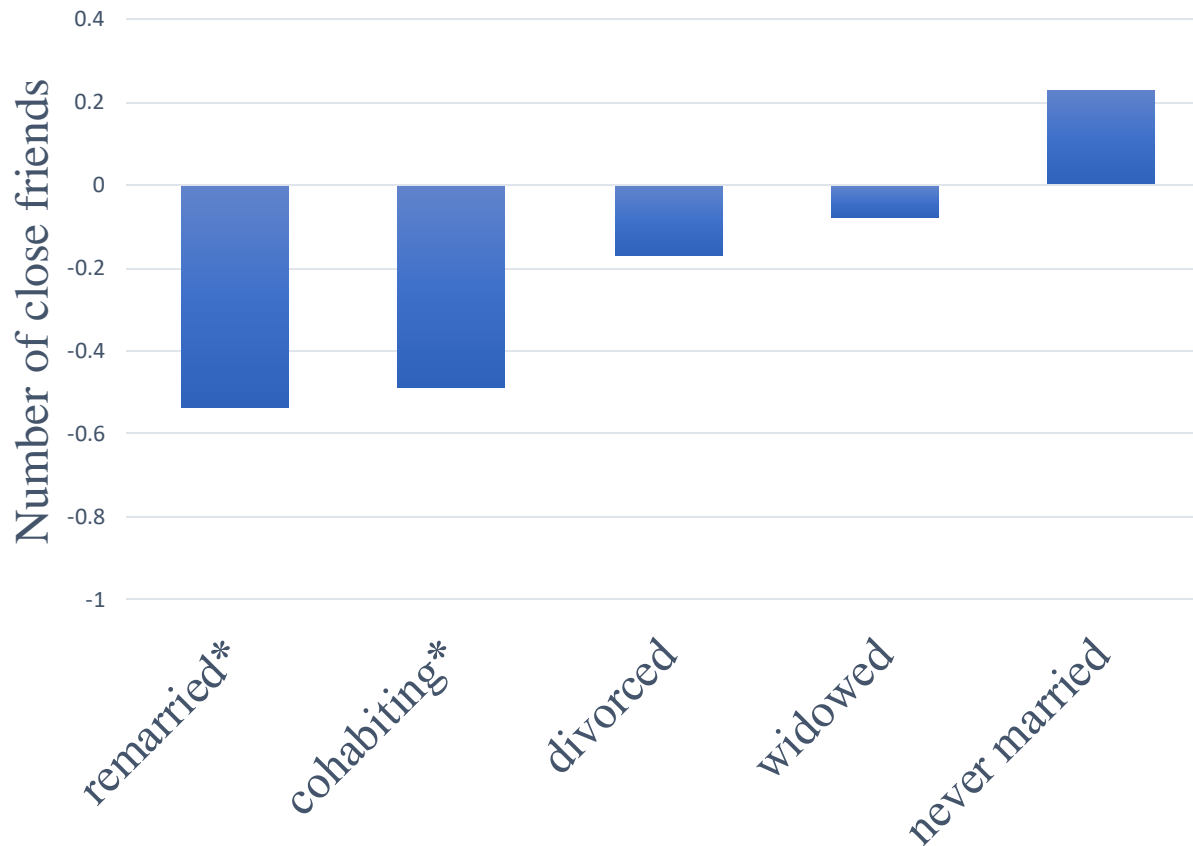
 - Model 3: Model 2+ marital status X Female

- We conducted all analyses using Stata 15.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH FRIENDS



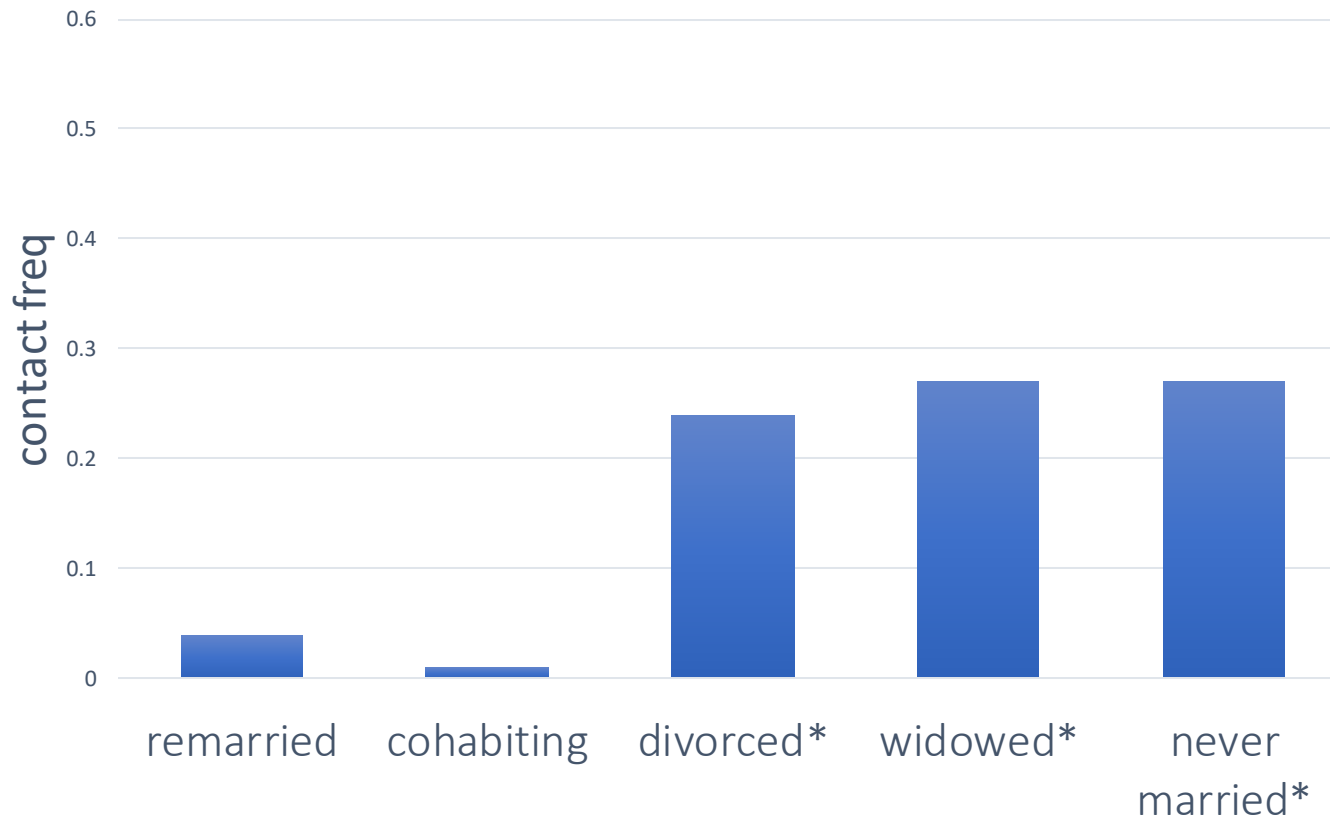
Marital status and number of close friends



Note: reference=first married. * statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Model controlled for gender, age, race, education, household income, self-reported health, ADL disability, and survey year.

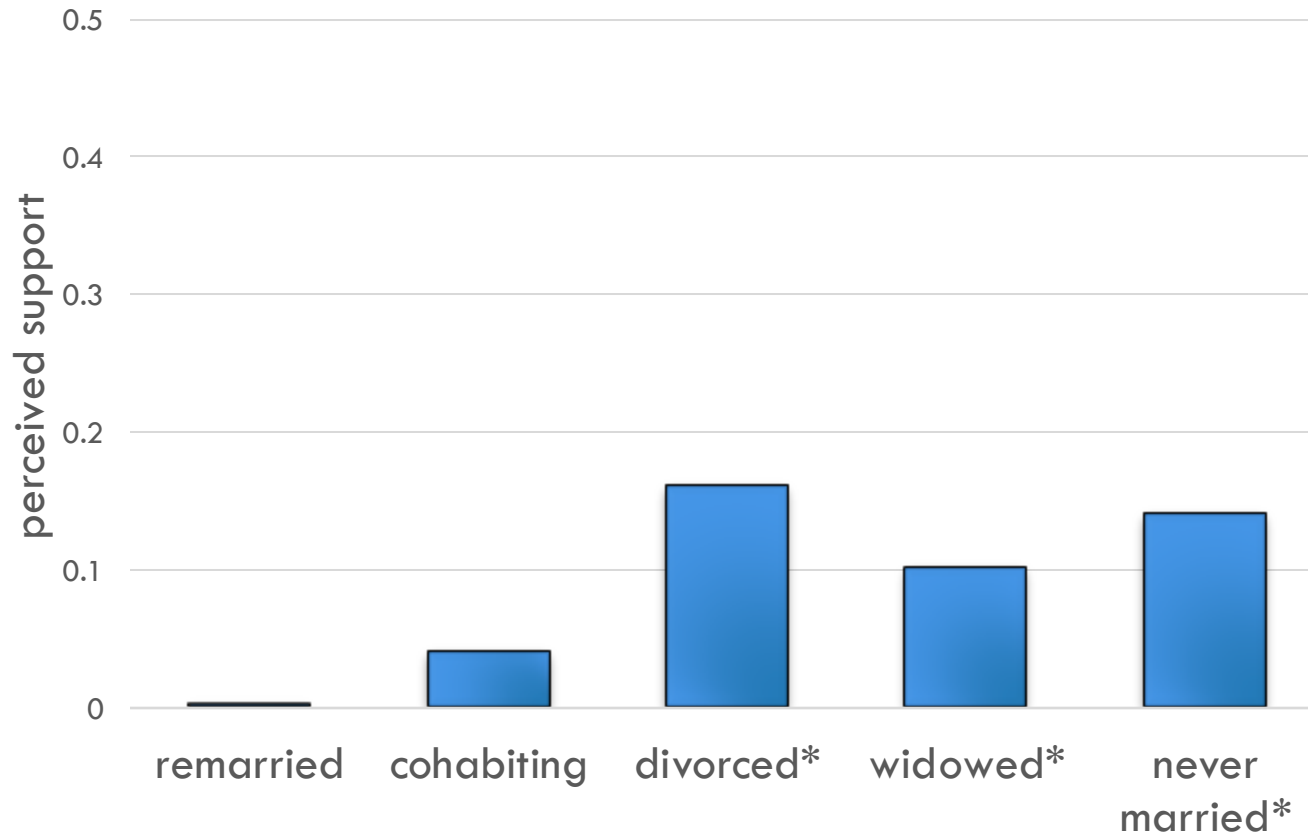
Marital status and contact frequency with friends



Note: reference=first married. * statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Model controlled for gender, age, race, education, household income, self-reported health, ADL disability, and survey year.

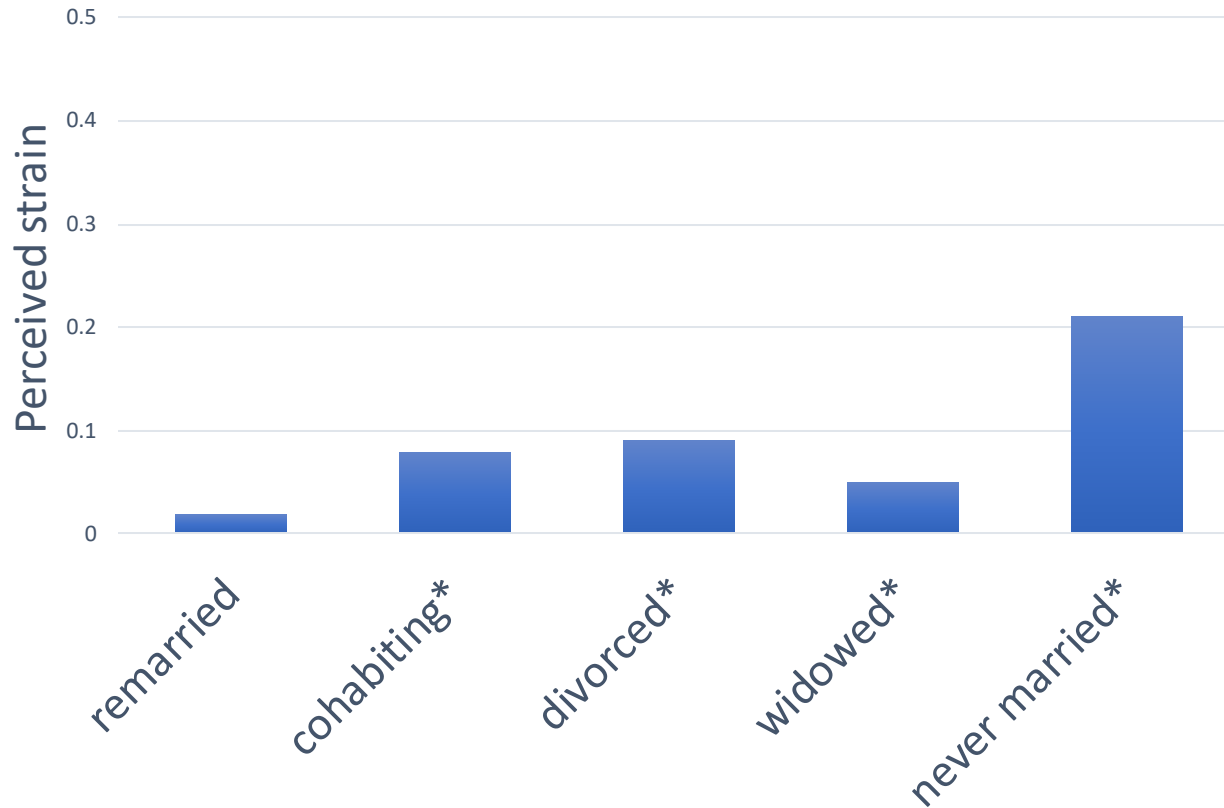
Marital status and perceived support from friends



Note: reference=first married. * statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Model controlled for gender, age, race, education, household income, self-reported health, ADL disability, and survey year.

Marital status and perceived strain with friends



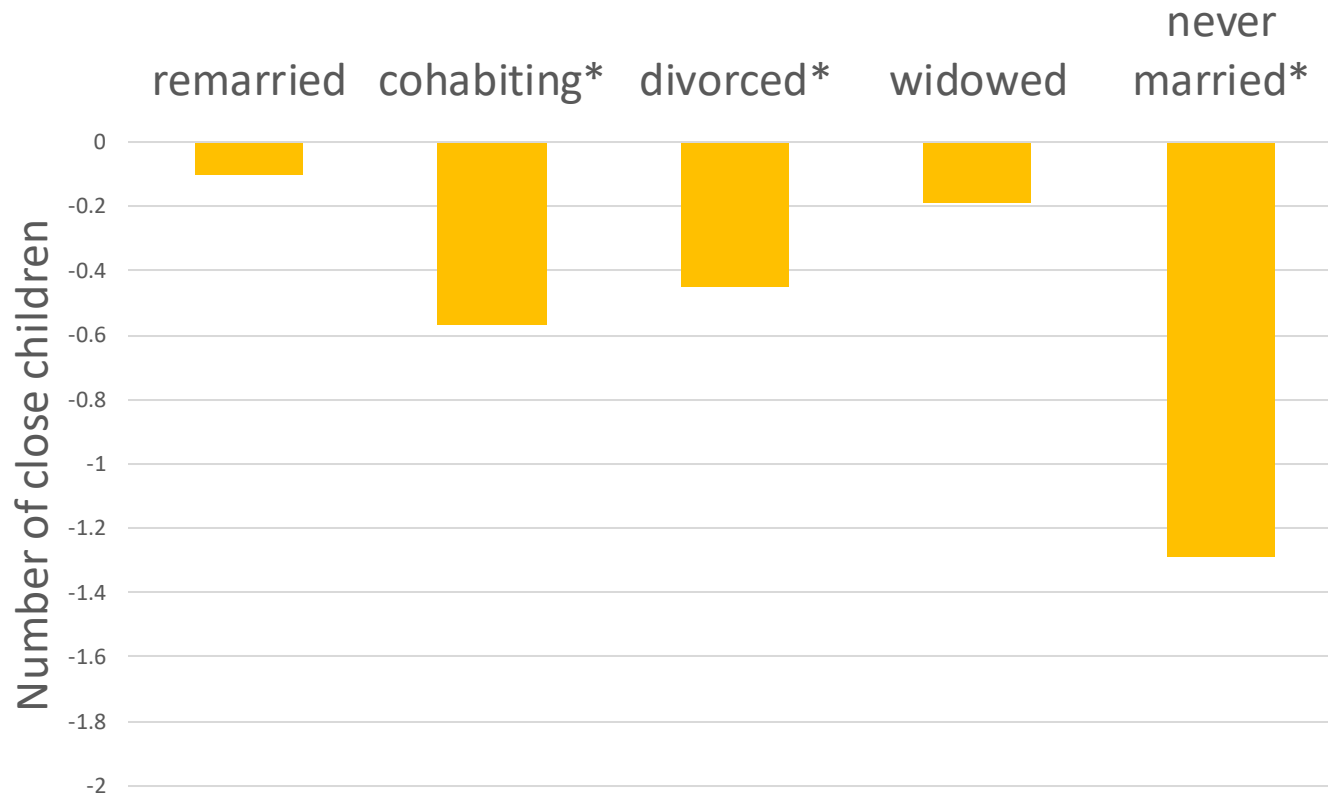
Note: reference=first married. * statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Model controlled for gender, age, race, education, household income, self-reported health, ADL disability, and survey year.

RELATIONSHIP WITH CHILDREN



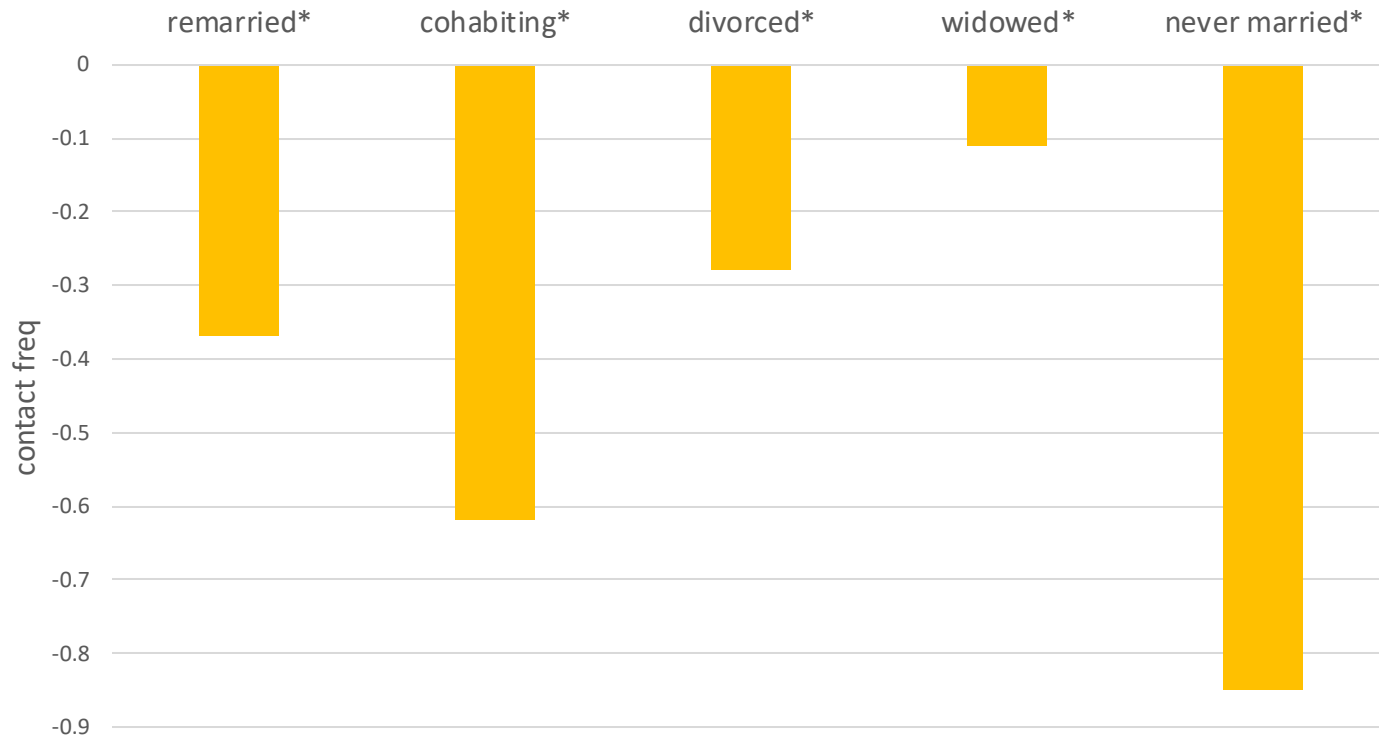
Marital status and number of close children



Note: reference=first married. * statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Model controlled for gender, age, race, education, household income, self-reported health, ADL disability, and survey year.

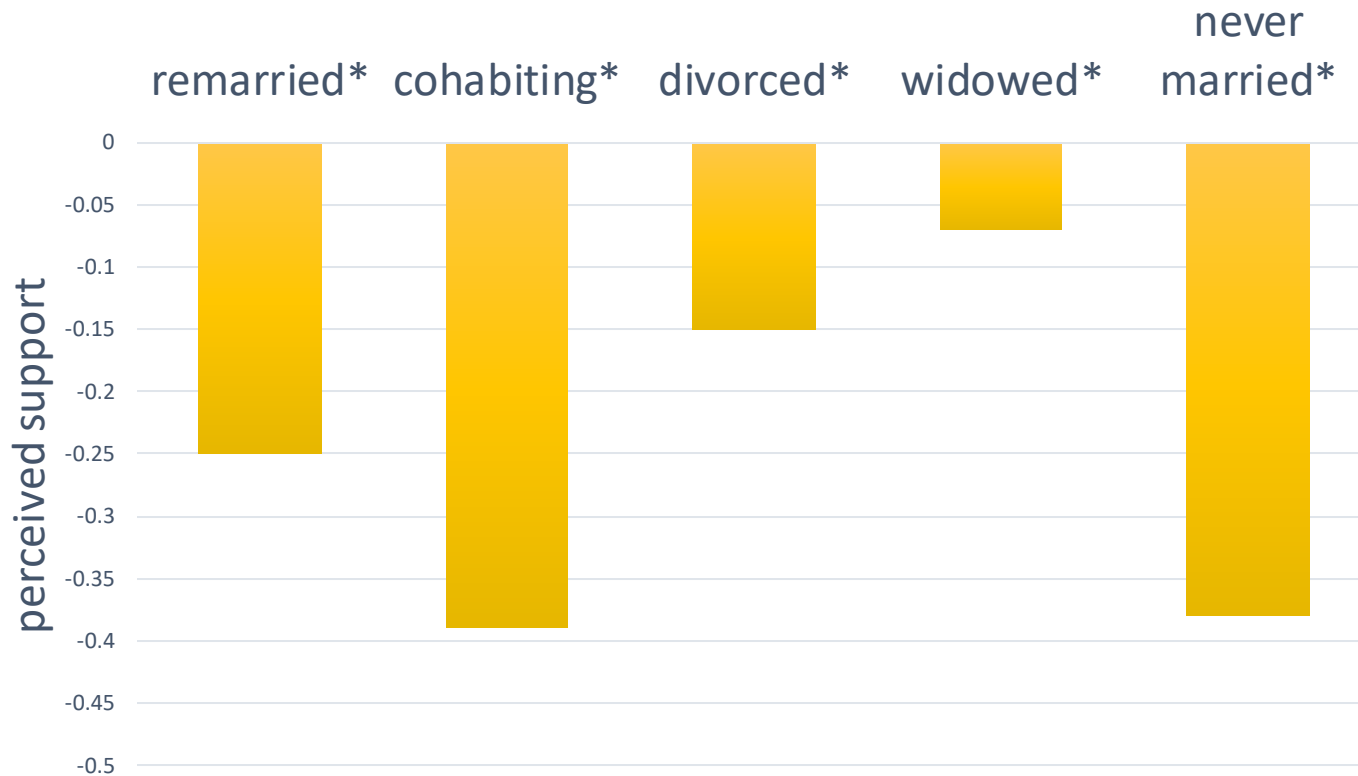
Marital status and contact frequency with children



Note: reference=first married. * statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Model controlled for gender, age, race, education, household income, self-reported health, ADL disability, and survey year.

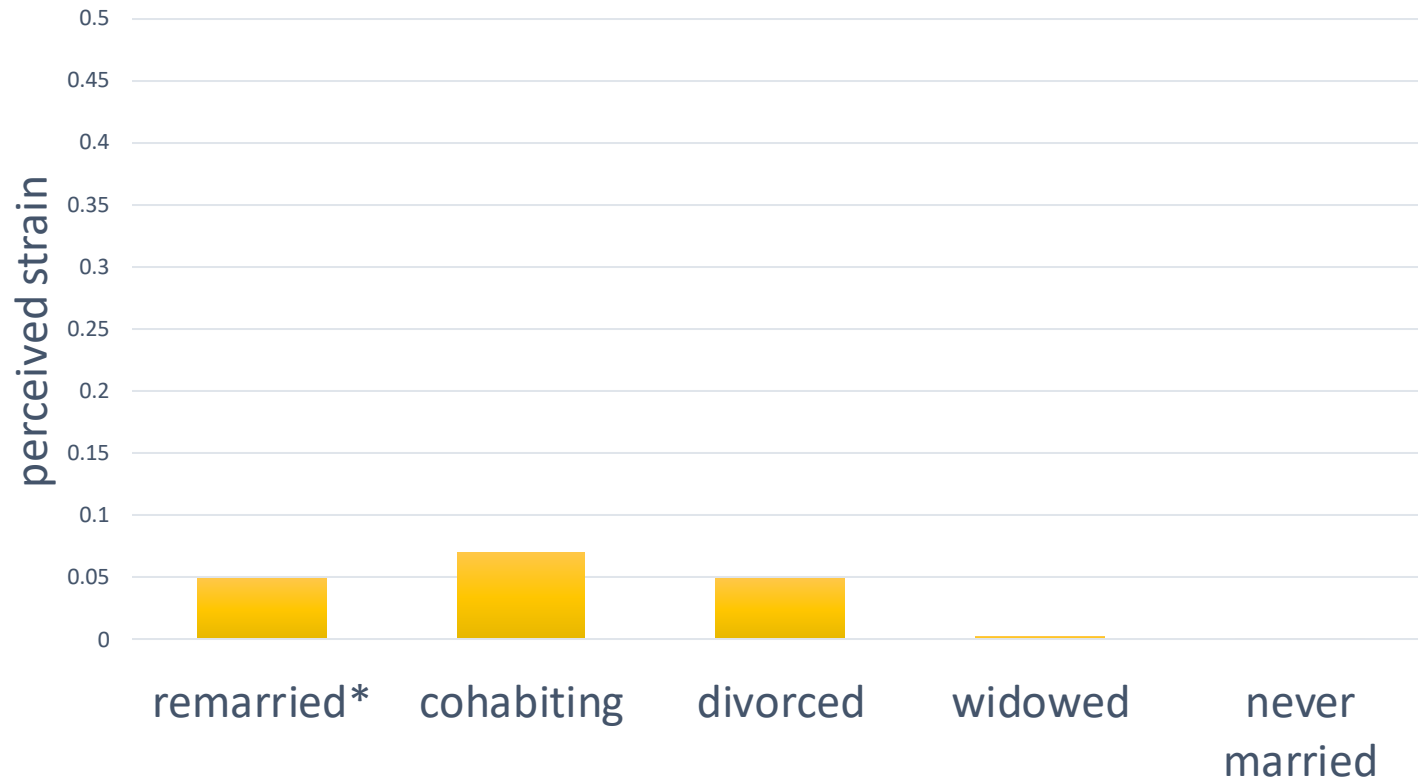
Marital status and perceived support from children



Note: reference=first married. * statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Model controlled for gender, age, race, education, household income, self-reported health, ADL disability, and survey year.

Marital status and perceived strain with children



Note: reference=first married. * statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Model controlled for gender, age, race, education, household income, self-reported health, ADL disability, and survey year.

Relationship with family members

- Few significant differences over marital groups.
- The remarried reported fewer close family members, lower contact with, and support from their family members than the first married.
- The never married had both greater support and strain from their family members.

Does gender moderate the association between marital status and social relationships?

- The most salient gender interaction effect is in **the relationship with children.**
- Men's relationship with children were hurt more by remarriage, cohabitation, and divorce than women's relationship with children.

CONCLUSION

- Although the unmarried (divorced/separated, widowed, and never married) are disadvantaged in some dimensions of social relationships, especially in terms of relations with their children, they also show some advantages in their friendship networks.
- Marital history matters. The remarried had disadvantages in multiple dimensions of social relationships examined compared to the first married.
- Gender interacts with marital status in the relationship with children. Remarriage, cohabitation, and divorce have more negative impact on relations with children among men than among women.

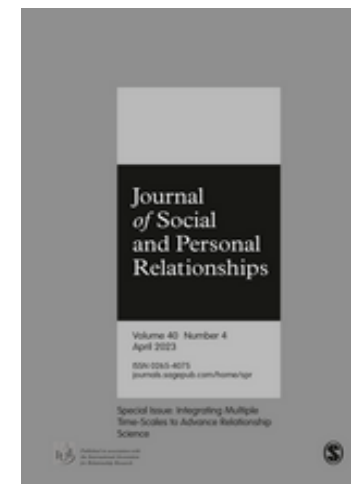


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Social relationships in later life: Does marital status matter?

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