Author's response to reviews

Title: Marital history, health and mortality among older men and women in England and Wales

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Marital history, health and mortality among older men and women in England and Wales.
Emily Grundy, Cecilia Tomassini
Dear Dr Lindstrom

Thank you for inviting us to resubmit this paper. We are very grateful to the referees for their detailed and helpful comments and now have revised the paper taking these into account and are resubmitting it for your consideration. As instructed, changes are shown in ‘track changes’ mode. Below we outline our responses to the referees’ comments and suggestions.

Stefan Fors – Minor essential

Dr Fors suggested stating more explicitly the aim of the paper at an earlier stage; disentangling comments on the never-married and formerly married; highlighting where in the tables the results by current marital status could be found and helpfully pointed out that we had referred to a 6% change rather than a 4% change in mortality risk at one point (an error for which we apologise). We have adopted all these suggestions and so now include an earlier statement of the paper’s aims (abstract and background section – page 4); additional revisions to background section; highlighting where results by current marital status are shown (page 13) and correction of the error.

Stefan Fors – Discretionary revisions

In response to these further suggestions, and the suggestions of the other reviewers, we have rewritten the discussion section. This now includes more acknowledgement of the limitations of our socio-economic indicators and the possibility of residual confounding and reference to the Doblhammer paper. We also include in the Discussion more consideration of the implications of the difference in reported prevalence of long-term illness between 1991 and 2001. We have included in the Methods section a fuller explanation of our choice of Poisson regression for the mortality (pages 11-12) and added some references in
support of this (this point was also raised by other reviewers). We have corrected in the abstract the reference to 1971 rather than 1991 and made other changes and corrections to table headings etc as suggested. We have also included reference to 'in older cohorts' (page 4), corrected a grammatical error which led to the confusion about the exclusion of those in institutions in 1971 (data for co-variates was missing for this group) and replaced the term ‘normative’ and provided a fuller explanation of our thinking in the relevant section. We have retained the terms divorces and divorcees as, although French in origin these words are now accepted in the English language.

We thank Dr Fors for his comments.

Edith Guilley- Compulsory revisions; major and minor; ‘nitty gritty’

As noted above we now give more explanation for our choice of Poisson regression. We have retained use of logistic regression to analyse the long-standing illness data but now explain more clearly that this is a binary variable. In our revision of the discussion we have included more on the interrelationship between family trajectories and other life course pathways among women.

We have added information on the proportion of people in cohabiting relationships (page 9); included number of subjects in the abstract; corrected the reference to 1971 in the abstract (see above) and throughout presentation of the results included more often explicit statement of the reference group when referring to results for sub groups. We have checked the estimate for all widowed men in Table 2 and it is correct.

We thank Dr Guilley for her comments.

B Modin

Dr Modin suggests a re-analysis using time varying co-variates and imputing ‘exact year’ of marital events on which we lack information. While we appreciate this suggestion and might in future work consider whether such imputation was possible drawing on Modin’s work and probably information from other data sets, we think it would be problematic and beyond the scope of this paper. We are therefore pleased that the editor’s guidance was that such a comprehensive reanalysis was not required.

We take Modin’s points about the assumptions made about nulliparity of women who were never-married in 1971. This is in fact an issue that we discussed at length during our work on the paper so it is useful to have another comment on this. In view of Modin’s suggestions we have modified our comments on the analyses including parity throughout the text. We have also corrected an error in the N value shown in Table 5 and are very grateful to Modin for drawing this to our attention. Modin asks for further information about the long-standing illness question; the question is reported on page 11. Modin also wonders whether it would be possible to control for health status in 1971; unfortunately the answer is no as this question was not included in censuses prior to 1991. We have now made this clearer. Modin’s comments on our social class score led us to recheck the algorithms and distributions and we have added some further explanation (we could include a figure illustrating the linear relationship between this score
and out outcomes but as the paper is already long decided against this – however it is available if required). Modin notes that the paper is long and in places difficult to read. We have tried to remedy this by revising sections, particularly the Discussion section. However, we obviously cannot do anything about the fact that our results overall do not show as strong an advantage of considering marital history (compared with just marital status) as we might have envisaged. While this means that the results are less attention grabbing, we believe that negative results merit publication as much as positive ones. We now include an additional section in the Discussion on differences in results according to outcome and also further consideration of possible reasons for the results we found for the long-term remarried. (We have also expanded our consideration of results for the never-married).

We are grateful to Dr Modin for these comments.

Additional revisions

We have rechecked tables and text and made some minor modifications. We have also made formatting changes to the reference list in accordance with the Journal’s style requirements.

Thank you again to you and the referees for the careful consideration of our paper and we look forward to hearing from you in due course.

Yours sincerely

Emily Grundy and Cecilia Tomassini