Reviewer’s report

Title: Professional health care use and subjective unmet need for social or emotional problems: a cross-sectional survey of the married and divorced population of Flanders

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Reviewer: Martine Corijn

Reviewer’s report:

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined? The research questions are not well structured.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described? There are doubtful measures

3. Are the data sound? More accurate information should be given.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition? +/−

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data? Rather not because research questions were not well listed.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? Partly yes

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished? Only partially

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found? Only partially

9. Is the writing acceptable? Improvement is needed.

In general the article is not very convincing as too many factors are conceptualised/measured in a too general way. Moreover, a well-defined list of research questions / hypotheses is missing. Most parts have to be rewritten in a more structured way and with a more careful and critical phrasing.

Major Compulsory Revisions

Concepts conceptualised and/or measured in a too general way

the divorced: the authors are working on the ever-divorced (in a first marriage) not on the divorced as a sociological category and they seem to consider this as a life-long category (once divorced always ever-divorced); the authors should take into account that divorced as a demographic category refer to a – for many – temporary civil status. Moreover, most divorced repartner within 4 years,
making their living arrangement more relevant. Moreover, recent research on health-related issues no longer focuses on the association with civil status, but with living arrangement. Having a partner or not seems to be crucial for many health-related issues; the authors don’t value enough this literature.  

As such, introductory sentences as the high consumption of divorcees is not informative as some divorcees are remarried, others live together with a partner, others have a partner and some live alone. No rational is given why a civil status category should be a differential for high consumption.

- health and health care use: although the authors mention the problem in their discussion, the whole article is based on a very weak indicator consulting (or not) for social or emotional problems. The high consumption rates of divorcees (see background) probably does not concern only consultations for social or emotional problems. Trying to be conceptually clear, the authors restrict their vision on health and health care by excluding stress-related and emotional and social problems expressed through a physical problems and by excluding all psychosomatic complaints. But the value of their specific health care use measure is not very convincing, nor is it critically discussed.

- the dependent variable: the authors reduce the variation in their dependent variable health care use – which is a very selective one (see remarks above) to a 0/1 variable, neglecting the differences between one consultation a year and a weekly consultation. If they use this measure they should present its value in a more convincing way and anticipate all possible critical comments on their choice.

Comments on the background part
No critical comments are made on the studies that put all the divorced into one category.

The authors want to get a more complete picture of the prevalence of unmet need and its correlates. But in which sense do they obtain a more complete picture?

The research questions are not clearly formulated: we combine, we focus, we add, we study, we would expect;

The structure of the background part is not announced, moreover it is not clear. Other socio-demographic factors is not an informative title that reveals a structure.

We anticipate: does this refer to a hypothesis of this study? If yes, then the authors should be more critically about the use of their notion ‘divorcees’.

What is the appearance of the partner? Having one, living together with one or be married with one.

We expect: the authors should list their hypotheses in a more systematic way.

The presence of children is measured in a very weak way.
No hypothesis is formulated on the presence of a new partner.

Crowding-out and crowding-in hypotheses are formulated but no reference is made to them in the results or discussion part.

Very little empirical evidence is provided for the role of the other socio-demographic factors.

In general the authors should present in this part in a more straightforward way their hypotheses and/or research questions.

Comments on the Method section

What do they authors mean by their sample and what by their population?

The authors should explain more clearly how they proceed from a sample design based on first marriages to a sample of respondents.

The broad diversity of the population of divorcees concerns in the end only divorcees from first marriages, a serious limitation to the diversity of divorcees.

Information on the references first marriages with data from two participating partners should be in the core of the method section.

As information from all partners is used and hence part of the data are dependent at the first-marriage level, all results should be presented by gender! Moreover, this avoids the case to test for interactions with gender, which are conceivable.

No rational is given for why the frequency of contact is reduced to a 0/1 variable? A lot of heterogeneity is lost in this way.

No rational is given for why the duration since separation is split at 5 years.

If the presence of a partner is crucial for health related issues, information on the time elapsed since the presence of a partner (or on the actual living arrangement with that partner) could be informative; even more informative that the duration since the separation.

Children living in the household: is there a distinction possible between children living full-time and children living part-time in the household (custodial arrangement).

The authors should revisit their category ‘partner in the household’, ‘children living in the household’ and ‘bio vs stepchildren’ as these categories are interdependent. Children can only be living in if there are children. Stepchildren can only be present if there is a new partner.

The measure of the social support is very weakly justified. Is a continuous number the best way to operationalize the social support?

The role of the independent variables for any social or emotional problem is not
justified at all.

Comments on the results section
Very few comments are added to table 1.

Why is there in table 2 no model 4 with subjective unmet needed add in parallel with what is done in table 3?

The language: have more consultations/contact does not fit with the 0/1 approach of the contact variable.

The zero effect of social support is not linked with the crowding in and out hypotheses.

Comments on the discussion section
As no clear list of research questions / hypotheses was formulated, the results of the study and the discussion section are not well-ordered. Moreover, results are poorly interpreted.

The result that health care users report a need for care without seeking…. is uninformative as within the health care users rare and frequent users are combined.

Some of the limitations should already be mentioned when introducing critically the variables.

Minor Essential Revisions
Comments on the background part
No references are provided to prove the ‘considerable research’.

No information is given on the need factors from the model
The authors should justify why they split the period of the duration since separation at 5 years.

On the one hand: on the other hand: the reasoning is quite circular, no basis is provided for theses expectations.

Women suffer the most…. The authors should be more carefully in their phrasing

Why do the authors assume that the presence of children forces ex-partners to keep in touch. Some parents stay out of touch after a divorce, even if they have children.

Comments on the Method section
The sample design concerns ‘first’ marriages.

No information is given on the period of the data collection.

We contacted ex-partners: meant is ex-husbands/wives from the first marriage,
not other ex-partners. Information on the married couples in this sentence is strange.
Only one partner…… participated: hard/impossible to understand.
Respondents married in their first marriage have by definition no children of an ex-partner.
(in the tables: children of partner is misleading as ex-partner is meant).
A table summarizing the descriptives would be very useful. Now the reader has to infer some distributions from the N in table 1.

Comments on the results section
The titles of all tables should be more accurate and mention all dimensions involved
What are the implications of the small category of the recently divorced with a new partner?
Employment status is later on called working situation.

Language:
- The English language should be checked thoroughly
- Consumption rates: the authors should specify, at least in their first sentence, the kind of consumption is referred to.
- Language should be checked as equitable and equity could have a moral connotation

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests