

Trajectories after widowhood. Life-course pathways of widows and widowers in the Netherlands, 1873-1934.

Abstract for the European Population Conference, Mainz 2016.

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ABSTRACT

Until the second half of the twentieth century, many husbands and wives lost their spouses early in their lives. After spousal loss, alternative strategies for survival and well-being had to be pursued by the left behind, but it is still unclear how the life courses of the widowed were affected by their loss. Due to the prevalent gender roles, widows would have had troubles maintaining an income, while widowers with families were in need of a care-taker. The Netherlands form an interesting case to research the life courses of the widowed due to the great variety in terms of religions, family systems and inheritance system. The aim of this paper is to analyse the life courses for widowers and widows that lost their spouse between 1873 and 1934 in the Netherlands. Data used come from the Historical Sample of the Netherlands (HSN). We derived 1749 widow(er)s and followed their events up to five years after spousal loss. After a descriptive analysis to deepen the phenomenon itself, a discrete time event history analysis was performed to evaluate better the occurrence of a) remarriage and b) migration as failure event. Preliminary results show that migration was most common among widows. Remarriage instead was more common among widowers.

Extended abstract

Introduction

Until the second half of the twentieth century, many husbands and wives lost their spouses early in their lives. Even though since the 1850s people tended to grow older, mortality rates were still high, and death would strike many before they had turned fifty years old (Kerzer and Karweit 1995, 232). Due to the ageing in society and the declining popularity of remarriage, many widows and widowers were inhabiting Europe (Fauve-Chamoux 2002, 107). Widow(er)s had little institutional support and they had to pursue alternative options to maintain their level of well-being. Dribe, Lundh and Nysted have identified five possible trajectories for widows and widowers, namely: “(1) carrying on alone as the head of the household, if necessary with the help of family or external labour; (2) remarrying and thereby securing the continuation of the existing household; (3) entering a household headed by a child or spouse of child; (4) entering a household headed by someone other than a child or spouse of child; and (5) migrating out of the parish” (Dribe, Lundh and Nysted 2007, 208).

Widowhood is an important moment in the life course of the left behind and it could be a decisive turning point for the pathway widows and widowers would follow the rest of their lives. Previous research (Frans van Poppel, 1995) was focused on remarriage after widowhood and focused on two Dutch towns, Gouda and Breda. The life course after widowhood is poorly studied in the Netherlands in a systematic way. The aim of this paper is to analyse the trajectories of widowers and widows in the Netherlands for the period 1873-1934, focusing on remarriage and migration and their occurrence.

Data and Method

Data are obtained from the Historical Sample of the Netherlands (HSN). The HSN contains a representative sample of the Dutch population born between 1850 and 1922. The chosen research persons are followed throughout the whole country from the cradle to the grave, and are only lost when they move out of the Netherlands. The HSN is an immensely rich database since it is based on a large variety of sources, such as population registers, civil registry offices, land registry archives, tax records and many more (Mandemakers 2002, 87-88). This dataset allows us to reconstruct the life course of the widowed in the years after spousal loss, even if they migrated afterwards. From the complete database we derived widows and widowers (N = 1749) for whom the date of widowhood was available. We restricted the dataset to the events occurred in the first five years after widowhood, as previous research has shown that most widows and widowers had chosen a new life trajectory at this point in time (Knodel 1985, 46; Dribe et al. 2007, 210). After a descriptive analysis to deepen the phenomenon, a discrete time Event History Analysis (EHA) was performed to evaluate better the occurrence of a) remarriage and b) migration as failure event.

Preliminary results and discussion

Our preliminary analysis shows that a rather large share of the widowed research persons stays in his or her own household, without remarrying a new spouse (30%, N=532). An even larger group consists of widows and widowers who migrate once in the five years after widowing into another household (35%, N=612). Another 22% of the widowed people remarried (22%, N=377), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Events occurred within 5 years after widowhood

Life-course event	N	Percentage
Remarried	189	11%
Migrated (once)	612	35%
Migrated (more than once)	155	9%
Remarried and migrated	188	11%
Stayed	532	30%
Died or left dataset	73	4%
Total	1749	100%

Compared to other regions the proportion of remarriages not as low as it might be expected at first glance. In preindustrial southern Sweden, for example, around 18% of the widowed persons remarried (Dribe et al. 2007, 219).

In the Netherlands and other European regions, it has been found that the increase in life expectancy caused widows and widowers to lose their partner later in their life, reducing the chances for a second or a third marriage (Knodel 1985, 56; Van Poppel 1995, 422; Van Poppel, Ekamper en Van Solinge 2007, 67). In the Netherlands, mortality already started to decline in 1855, but this decline only accelerated around 1880 (Wolleswinkel et al. 1998, 432). Next to that, there are other reasons to expect a decline in remarriage. These include decreased celibacy rates, reducing the amount of potential partners; the decline of the number of families relying on family production; the growing importance of the romance in the first marriage and widow's financial security due to increasing institutional help (Van Poppel et al. 2007, 67; Matthijs 2003, 198). Preliminary findings of this abstract seem to confirm this image, even if stronger conclusions will be assessed by the Event History Analysis (EHA) by the introduction of cohort as covariate. The percentages of widow(er)s who remarry decline from 45% before age 35 to 4% for widows and widowers that lost their spouse after the age of 65.

Remarriage within the first five years after the death of a spouse seems to be a gendered phenomenon. The remarriage frequency among men was higher than among women, while moving to another household was the preferred female life trajectory. This moving should not be considered as migration over (semi-)long distance, since, as Kok and Mandemakers (2014, 2) argued, these women would rely on their local network instead of migrating. On the other hand, the migration was a common event in the years immediately following widowhood. Regardless their age, around 55% of the people migrated after widowhood. This is in line with the findings of Van Poppel (1995, 431-432), who demonstrated that widows and widowers were highly mobile, even in old age. A high percentage (74,5%- 89,2%) of the widowed persons from Gouda and Breda moved in order to remarry, especially the men, who moved into the community of their brides. Moreover, it has been found that widows moved from rural regions to the cities in order to find an occupation (Van den Driessche en Van de Putte 2013, 158). The high number of migrations, especially of women, in the first five years after widowhood is therefore not surprising. Our descriptive results were confirmed by our discrete time event history analysis, as shown in Figure 1 and 2. In particular for Figure 1 we can see higher hazard for remarriage for men rather than for women. In this case a better splined curve will be performed to give an improved assessment of the hazard of remarriage for men. In Figure 2 instead, we observe how the hazard of migration tend to increase with age and level is higher for female. Also in this case a better spline will be studied to better adapt for the female hazard.

Figure 1. Hazard of Discrete time event history analysis. Dep. Variable: Remarriage. Male and Female.

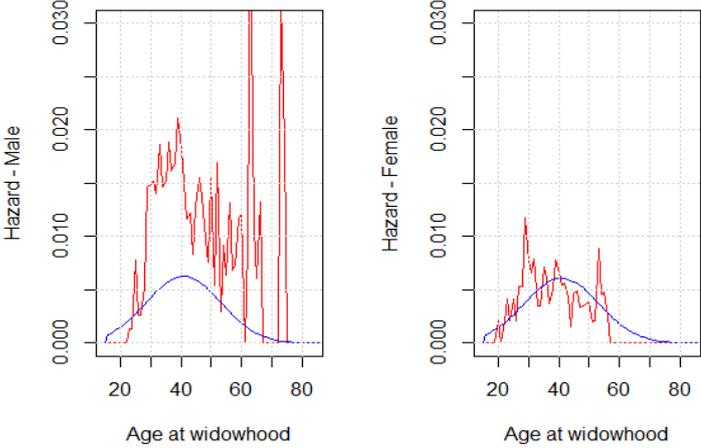
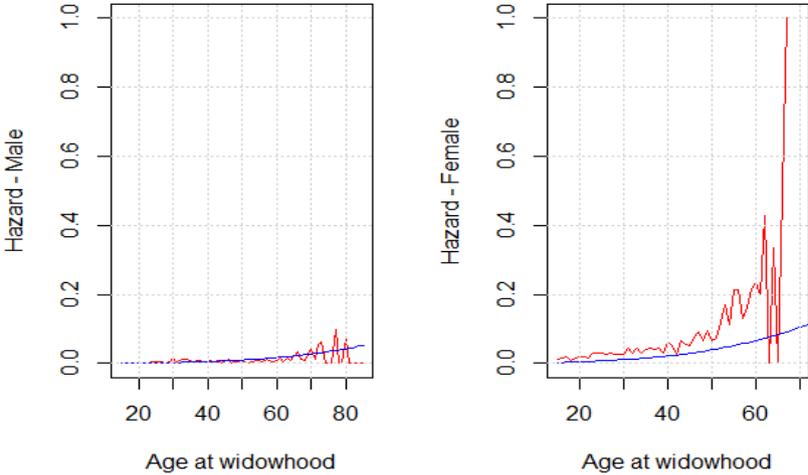


Figure 2. Hazard of Discrete time event history analysis. Dep. Variable: Migration. Male and Female.



Further research

These preliminary results will be improved. In particular, different curves to adapt better the hazards will be performed and two main cohorts (born between 1950-1970 and 1971-1909) will be introduced to check changes over time. Further steps will include a competing risk analysis to better quantify the risks of a hypothetical person to remarry, migrate or stay alone will be calculated, considering the influence of different variables.