

BSG conference submission

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Title: Marriage and physical functioning among older people in England

Conference sub-themes: Ageing and the life course

Preferred format of presentation: either oral or poster.

Abstract

Married people have lower rates of mortality and report better physical and mental health at older ages, compared to the unmarried. Few studies have investigated marriage and physical functioning at older ages and only one has investigated the association using objectively assessed physical functioning. Given declining marriage rates and increasing prevalence of divorce in the last 40 years, more people are now entering older ages unmarried, or with varied marital histories. Marital history comprises previous marital statuses, transitions in and out of marriage and duration spent in each marital status.

The aim of this paper is to investigate marriage and marital history and its association with physical functioning among those aged 50+ using nationally representative data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA). ELSA began in 2002 and comprises approximately 10,000 people aged 50+ in England. Physical functioning was captured in 2008 objectively by measuring grip strength (in kgs) using a dynamometer and walking speed (in metres per second) by timing respondents walking a distance of 2.44 metres.

Initial results from regression analysis indicate gender variations in the association between marriage and physical functioning. Marriage may be protective for men's physical functioning as never married men displayed poorer physical functioning than men who were continually married, however there were no such differences among women and never married women had comparable physical functioning to those who were continually married. Alternatively better health in earlier life may select men into marriage, resulting in better physical functioning at older ages.