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Marital status and generalized trust in other people: A population-based study

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Abstract

The association between marital status and generalized trust in other people was investigated. The public health survey in Skåne 2008 is a cross-sectional study including 28,198 persons (55% participation rate) aged 18–80 in southern Sweden. Logistic regression models investigated associations between marital status and trust, adjusting for age, country of birth, education, emotional support, instrumental support and economic stress. 33.9% of the men and 35.7% of the women had low trust. The significantly higher odds ratios of low trust for unmarried men and women and divorced men remained throughout the analyses, while the significant association disappeared for divorced women in the final model. In contrast, the odds ratios of low trust for widows/widowers remained not significant compared to the married/cohabitating category throughout the analyses.

Key words: Social capital, trust, economic stress, education, marital status, Sweden.

Introduction

Marriage has traditionally been defined as a legally recognized relationship between an adult male and female which entails certain rights and obligations. In recent years the concept often also includes cohabitation (without formal marriage) as well as marriage/cohabitation between two adults of the same sex (Scott, & Marshall, 2005). The emotional aspects of marriage have become increasingly important in modern and postmodern western societies (Stone, 1997). The family has often been regarded as an essential source for generating both social norms and trust among children and adolescents, and the relative decline of the traditional family as well as increased divorce rates in western countries have been regarded as major causes behind the ongoing successive decline in trust observed in new birth cohorts as they reach adulthood in the USA. Divorces may result in a lack of trust in other people among children and adolescents (Putnam, 2000.) but also hypothetically among adults, although the latter notion has been less investigated. A process of moral miniaturization, i.e. people continue to participate in group life while the groups themselves are less authoritative and produce a smaller radius of trust, may hypothetically be stronger among particularly divorced adults (Fukuyama, 1999). Furthermore, evidence suggests that strong emotional and social ties, feelings of being loved and generalized trust in other people are associated with being married/cohabitating as well as with health and well-being (Nakhaie, & Arnold 2010). A plausible hypothesis is thus that a significant and negative association between being never married (unmarried), divorced and widow/widower and generalized trust in other people may be present in the general population for reasons of loneliness, lack of support and moral miniaturization in these groups compared to the married/cohabitating.

Trust has been shown to be associated with age, sex, country of birth and education (Lindström, 2004) as well as economic stress (Lindström, 2009). Trust is by many social science researchers also regarded as an aspect of social capital. Social capital is defined as civic engagement and participation, generalized trust in other people, trust in institutions and generalized reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). The effects of social capital are currently studied within an increasing number of research areas, including e.g. public health where no less than four pathways causally linking social capital to health have been suggested (Kawachi, Kennedy, & Glass R, 1999). However, the social capital concept is still disputed in several respects. One of these discussions concerns the origins of social capital. Some theorists construe social capital primarily as “ties” and norms linking individuals together within groups and organizations across a setting of diverse formal and informal associational forms (Granovetter, 1973), while others regard social capital primarily as a moral and psychological resource such as trust (Fukuyama, 1995). The social capital concept in its modern form was constructed to elicit the types of relations between individuals nested within families and communities, and the influence of these relationships on educational attainment (Coleman, & Hoffer, 1985). Trust is thus an interesting concept in relation to family and marital status both in its own right and as an aspect of social capital. The aim of this study is to investigate the association between marital status and generalized trust in other people, adjusting for demographic variables, education, emotional support, instrumental (practical) support and economic stress.

Methods and materials

The 2008 public health survey in Skåne, southern Sweden, is a cross-sectional study. A total of 28,198 persons randomly selected from the official population registers of

persons living in Skåne born in 1928-1990 answered a postal questionnaire in the autumn of 2008 (55% participation). Two letters of reminder were sent. Ethical permission has been granted from Lund University, Sweden.

The dependent variable *generalized (horizontal) trust in other people* is a self rated item with the four alternatives “Generally, you can trust other people” with the four alternative answers: “Do not agree at all”, “Do not agree”, “Agree”, and “Completely agree”. These alternatives were dichotomized with the two first alternatives indicating low trust and the two latter high. The analyses were stratified for *sex*. Age and country of birth (born in Sweden and born in other countries) were included. *Education* was classified by length of education into 13 years or more, 10-12 years and 9 years or less. *Emotional support* assesses the possibility of care and the encouragement of personal value. It had four alternative answers: “Yes, I am absolutely certain to get such support”, “Yes, possibly”, “Not certain”, and “No”. The three latter alternatives were classified as low emotional support. *Instrumental support* measures the access of the individual to guidance, advice, information, practical services and material resources from other persons. It comprises the same options as emotional support and was dichotomized accordingly. *Economic stress* was measured with the item “How often during the past twelve months have you had problems paying your bills?” with the four alternatives “never”, “occasionally”, “every second month” and “every month”. *Marital status* entails four alternatives: married/cohabitating, never married, divorced and widow/widower.

Prevalences (%) of low trust, age, country of birth, education, emotional support, instrumental support, economic stress and marital status were calculated (not shown

in tables). Prevalences (%) and crude odds ratios of trust were also calculated for each of the variables (models a). Multiple adjusted odds ratios of low trust adjusting for demographic (model b) and all variables (model c) were calculated according to marital status (table 1). All analyses were stratified by sex. The statistical analyses (logistic regression) were performed using the SPSS software package version 17.0.

Results

33.9% of the men and 35.7% of the women reported low trust. Among males 73.5% were married/cohabitating, 18.2% unmarried, 6.3% divorced and 2.0% widows/widowers. Corresponding numbers among females were 69.2%, 15.7%, 9.2% and 5.8%, respectively (not in tables). Table 1 show that low trust was significantly more common in the youngest age group (18-34 years), among persons born abroad, with lower education, low emotional support, low instrumental support and economic stress. Unmarried men and women as well as divorced men had significantly higher odds ratios of low trust throughout the crude and multiple regression analyses, even in the final model. In contrast, the odds ratio of low trust became not significant in the final model among divorced women. Both widows and widowers retained not significant odds ratios of low trust throughout the crude, age-adjusted and multiple regression analyses compared to the married/cohabitating reference group.

Discussion

The significantly higher odds ratios of low trust for unmarried men and women and divorced men remained throughout the analyses. In contrast, the odds ratio of low trust among divorced women became not significant in the final multiple model. The

odds ratios of low trust for widows/widowers remained not significant throughout the analyses.

The longitudinal causal effects in the associations between marital status and trust remain to be discerned. The fact that the unmarried have lower trust may be an effect of a selection mechanism by which people with lower trust already from the outset (time of entry into adulthood) are less likely to ever marry, but it may also be due to the long-term effect of being unmarried. The significantly higher odds ratio of trust among divorced men (and almost significantly higher among women) supports the plausible but still not investigated notion that marriage dissolution is associated with lower trust among adults. The not significant odds ratios of low trust among widows/widowers is contrary to the hypothesis in the introduction, but plausible considering that the dissolution of marriage/cohabitation by death is an event free from the feelings of betrayal, conflict or antagonism which may affect trust in other people in connection with a divorce.

A substantial part of the married/cohabitating category has probably experienced previous divorces during their life course, a longitudinal perspective which has not been possible to investigate in this cross-sectional study (Lindström, 2009).

Strengths and limitations

The distribution of the other sociodemographic variables in a similar public health survey in Skåne in 2000 agreed well with the distribution of sociodemographic characteristics in the population in population registers (Lindström, 2004), and similar comparisons for the 2008 investigation have shown similar unpublished results. The

study is thus fairly representative and the risk of selection bias acceptable.

Confounders were adjusted for in the regression analyses with the effects shown in table 1. The cross-sectional nature of this study renders it impossible to infer causality.

Conclusions: The significantly higher odds ratios of trust for unmarried men and women and divorced men remained throughout the analyses. In contrast, the odds ratios of low trust for widows/widowers remained not significant compared to the married/cohabitating category throughout the analyses. Causality in the associations between marital status and trust among adults remain to be discerned. Marital status and marriage dissolution may affect the trust level not only of children and adolescents as implied in the previous literature but also of the adults involved.

Conflict of interest: No conflict of interest.

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Table 1. Prevalence and crude odds ratios (OR) of low trust according to age, country of birth, education, emotional support, instrumental support and economic stress, and prevalence, crude and multiple odds ratios (OR) of trust according to marital status. Men (N=12,726) and women (N=15,472). The public health survey in Skåne 2008.

	Men				Women			
	%	OR ^a	OR ^b	OR ^c	%	OR ^a	OR ^b	OR ^c
Age								
18-34	40.4	1.0	-	-	43.3	1.0	-	-
35-44	31.3	0.7*	-	-	32.6	0.6*	-	-
45-54	34.7	0.8*	-	-	34.0	0.7*	-	-
55-64	30.4	0.6*	-	-	32.9	0.6*	-	-
65-80	32.5	0.7*	-	-	33.6	0.7*	-	-
Country of birth								
Sweden	32.1	1.0	-	-	34.0	1.0	-	-
Other country	45.2	1.8*	-	-	45.5	1.6*	-	-
Education								
13- years	24.0	1.0	-	-	25.9	1.0	-	-
10-12 years	36.7	1.8*	-	-	40.4	1.9*	-	-
-9 years	41.2	2.2*	-	-	43.9	2.2*	-	-
Emotional support								
High	29.4	1.0	-	-	31.2	1.0	-	-
Low	41.6	1.7*	-	-	45.8	1.9*	-	-
Instrument. support								
High	30.0	1.0	-	-	31.4	1.0	-	-
Low	43.9	1.8*	-	-	49.5	2.1*	-	-
Economic stress								
Never	30.8	1.0	-	-	32.2	1.0	-	-
Occasionally	41.3	1.6*	-	-	43.4	1.6*	-	-
Every second month	47.3	2.0*	-	-	48.8	2.0*	-	-
Every month	61.6	3.6*	-	-	56.0	2.7*	-	-
Marital status								
Married/cohabitating	30.8	1.0	1.0	1.0	33.3	1.0	1.0	1.0
Unmarried	43.1	1.7 *	1.6*	1.4*	44.7	1.6*	1.5*	1.4*
Divorced	41.9	1.6*	1.6*	1.3*	39.6	1.3*	1.3*	1.1
Widower/widow	34.2	1.2	1.3	1.2	33.2	1.0	1.0	0.9
(Missing)	(665)				(700)			
R ² (Nagelkerke)		0.016	0.067	0.095		0.011	0.069	0.102

a Crude.

b Adjusted for age, country of origin and education.

c Adjusted for age, country of origin, education, emotional support, instrumental support and economic stress.

* Significant at 5% significance level.