



Does marriage matter in later life?

*An insight into the relationships of older South
Australian couples*

Dr Ruth Walker & Prof Mary Luszcz, School of Psychology, Flinders University

Background to the research project

- ▶ ARC Linkage 2007-2010
- ▶ Partners: OFTA, ECH, Alzheimer's SA, Relationships Australia SA
- ▶ Aims: to explore
 - ▶ How having a partner adds to, or detracts from, ageing well
 - ▶ Factors that contribute to the longevity of marriage



Key points for presentation

- ▶ Why study marriage in later life?
 - ▶ Demographic trends
 - ▶ Health benefits of marriage
 - ▶ Theoretical importance of marital context for late life development
- ▶ Health and well-being within older couples
 - ▶ Key findings from the literature – what do we already know?
- ▶ How do couples affect one another's well-being over time?
 - ▶ Subjective well-being and cognitive function
 - ▶ Caregiving & widowhood: Older women and sleep
- ▶ Marital satisfaction in later life
 - ▶ The 'top 10 essential ingredients'
 - ▶ Do social networks impact on marital satisfaction?



Why study marriage in later life?

▶ 1. Demographic trends

- ▶ Ageing of the population
- ▶ During last 30 years, the proportion married among men and women aged 65+ has increased
- ▶ Improvements in life expectancy has increased the probability that spouses will survive together into old age

▶ (Thomassini et al, Population Trends (2004))



Why study marriage in later life?

▶ 2. Health benefits of marriage

- ▶ People who are married live longer and have better health
 - ▶ Theories of selection and protection
 - Healthy people might be more likely to marry
 - Marriage may provide protective benefit by influencing social, psychological and physical environments and thus health



Why study marriage in later life?

- ▶ 3. Theoretical importance of marital context for late life development
 - ▶ “..individual development influences and is influenced by co-developing persons throughout the lifespan and into old age” (Hoppmann & Gerstorf 2009)
 - ▶ Increased closeness (Acitelli & Antonucci 1994; Carstensen 1992)



Health and well-being within older couples

- ▶ Key findings from the literature:
 - ▶ Similarities in physical and psychological health
 - ▶ *Cross sectional research:*
 - *Strong evidence for depressive symptoms*
 - *Some evidence for sharing similar health-risk behaviours and chronic conditions*
 - ▶ Marital satisfaction and marital relations
 - ▶ *Small amount of research, difficult to make generalisations*
 - ▶ Marital quality and well-being
 - ▶ *Positive marital relations (characterised by support and closeness) may be protective of psychological well-being, especially for wives*



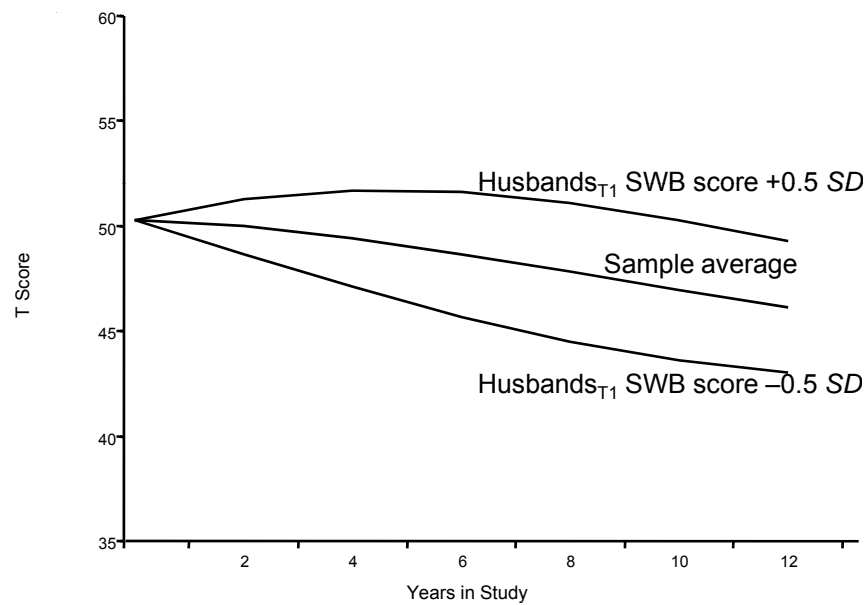
How do couples affect one another's well-being over time?

- ▶ subjective well-being/morale (Walker, Luszcz, Gerstorf & Hoppmann 2010)
 - ▶ N=316 couples in the ALSA, mean age = 75yrs
 - ▶ 11 years of data
 - *Agree or Disagree with questions such as:*
 - *"I am satisfied with my life these days"*
 - *"I get upset easily"*
 - *"I sometimes feel life isn't worth living"*

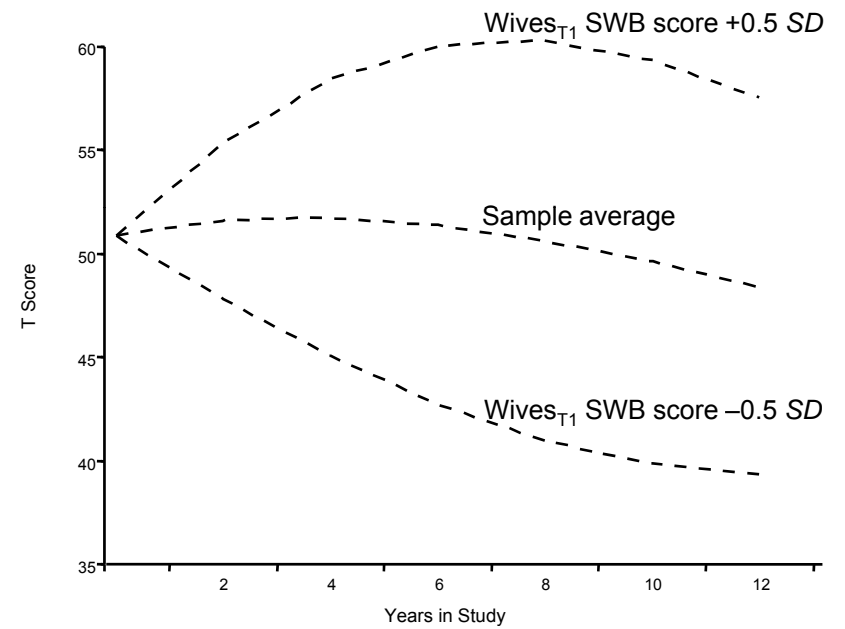


Subjective well-being

(A) Wives



(B) Husbands



-
- ▶ Conclude: *wives play an important role in setting the tone of SWB in older couples*

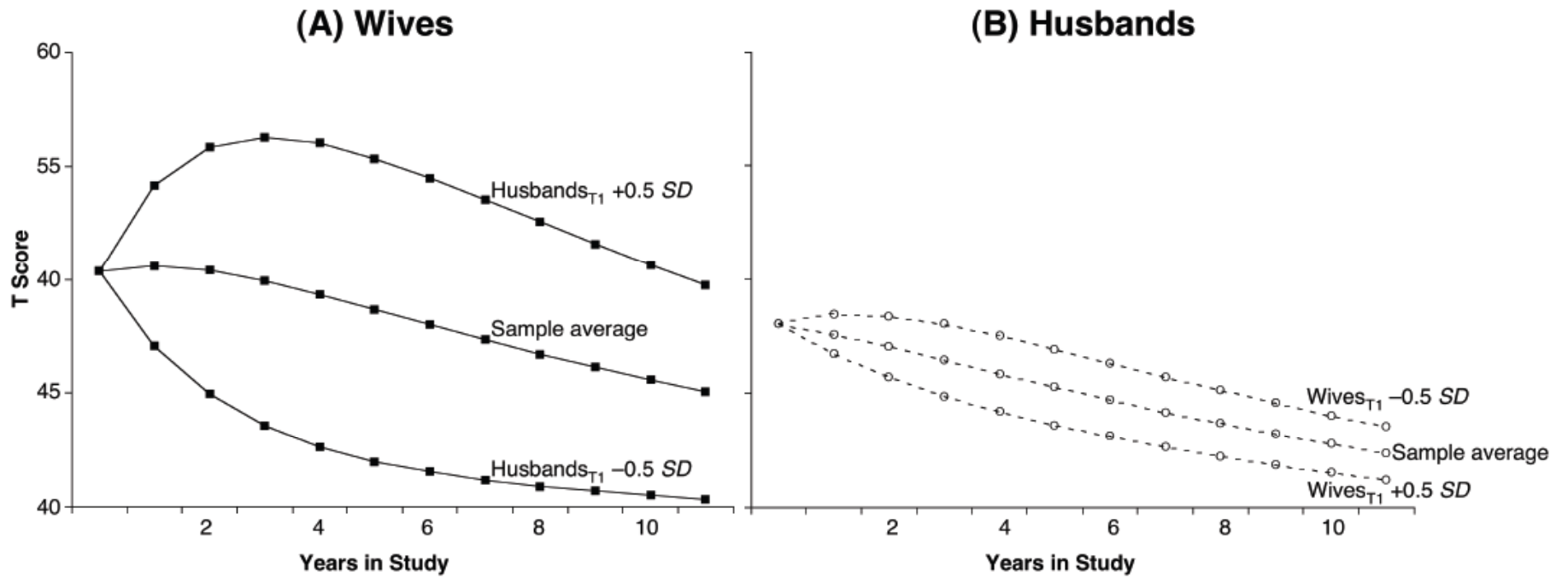


How do couples affect one another's well-being over time?

- ▶ cognitive function (Gerstorf, Hoppmann, Anstey & Luszcz 2009)
 - ▶ N=304 couples in the ALSA, mean age = 75yrs
 - ▶ 11 years of data



Cognition



-
- ▶ Conclude: *Old-age changes in basic cognitive processes appear to be moderated by one's partner, particularly for wives*



Summary


- ▶ These findings suggest that late-life development is not solely a product of individual strengths and weaknesses but is closely interrelated between elderly spouses
- ▶ Directionality of effects (i.e husbands or wives the key driver) depends on domain of functioning



Caregiving and widowhood: older women and sleep

- ▶ Walker, Luszcz, Hislop & Moore, 2010
 - ▶ N=12 women in the ALSA, 8 widowed, 4 married
 - ▶ Mean age = 86yrs
 - ▶ In-depth interviews
 - ▶ Found:
 - ▶ Significant life changes and burden of roles associated with caring for a spouse had impact on sleep, broader psychological well-being and social networks
 - ▶ *“Cyril was gradually getting worse and worse and we had 12 weeks where I don’t think we got much sleep at all. It was the most awful time, and of course my sleeping habits got worse and worse” (widow, age 85)*



-
- ▶ *“He has an insert every three months and he goes to see the surgeon to have something else changed into his kidneys and he’s on quite a few tablets. It’s my job to see that he takes them all, he makes sure I earn my carer’s money. We do have our [moments]..I do get a bit depressed..you wonder whether you are doing the right things. Then I’ll get in bed and worry and start thinking what I can do better, those sorts of things”
(married, age 86)*
 - ▶ *“I get fed up with the four walls..I can pop into Salisbury ..but I’ve got no outside interests, I gave them up when Brian was crook, so I do need to get out of the four walls sometimes, even just to walk down the road. But I often think about what can I take up that will keep me close to home”
(married, age 86)*
-
- 

Marital satisfaction in later life

- ▶ Walker, Burton, Kitwe-Magambo & Luszcz, 2010
- ▶ 'Essential ingredients' for long-term marriage
- ▶ Do social networks impact on marital satisfaction?
 - ▶ 40 couples
 - ▶ Mean age = 76yrs, range 65-92yrs
 - ▶ Separate, semi-structured interviews and self-complete questionnaires



'Essential ingredients' for long-term marriage

▶ Study Rationale:

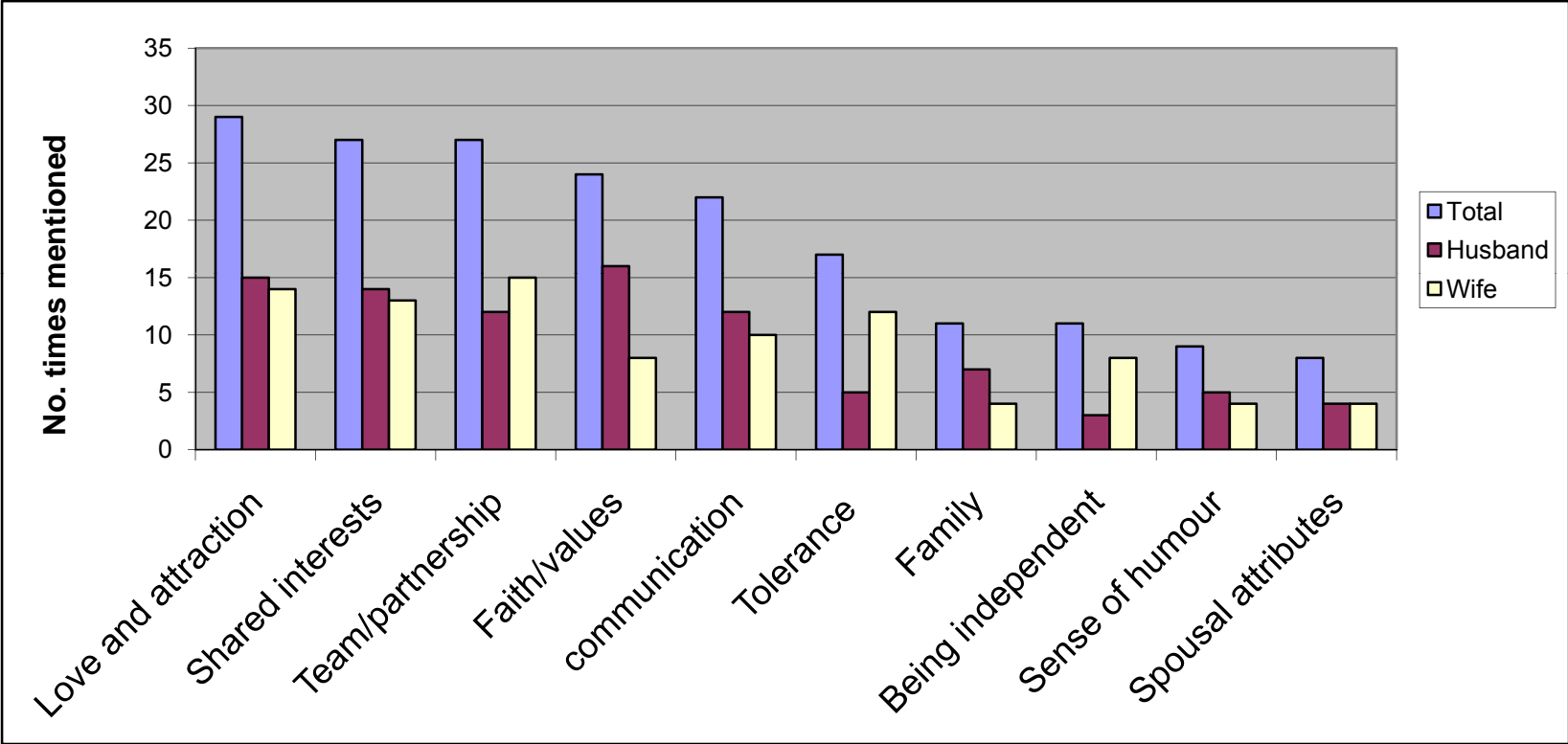
- ▶ Marriage and marital satisfaction are protective for health and wellbeing
- ▶ Little known about:
 - ▶ the determinants of marital satisfaction and factors that contribute to longevity of marriage

▶ Methods:

- ▶ Open-ended question: "In your opinion what has helped to make your marriage last so long?"
- ▶ Responses transcribed, coded using content analysis, and tallied to produce 'top 10'.



Top 10 'essential ingredients' for long-term marriage



Do social networks impact on marital satisfaction?

- Study Rationale:
 - Evidence that social networks are beneficial for health and well-being
 - Link between marital support and satisfaction (i.e social support from spouse) – Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994
 - Little known about whether social networks outside of the marriage are linked to marital satisfaction



Do social networks impact on marital satisfaction?

- ▶ *Control variables:*

 - Sociodemographics (age, country birth, education, length marriage etc)

- ▶ *Possible mediators:*

 - Self rated health

 - Depression (CESD-10, Kohout et al 1993)

- ▶ *Predictor variable:*

 - Social networks (Glass 1997)

- ▶ *Outcome variable:*

 - Marital satisfaction (MSQFOP, Haynes 1992)



Do social networks impact on marital satisfaction?

▶ Findings:

- ▶ Having satisfying social networks with friends and children is important for happy marriage (net of age, gender, education, years of marriage)
- ▶ Psychological health mediated the relationship between social network satisfaction and marital satisfaction
- ▶ Only 20% of determinants identified – other factors may be important



Does marriage matter in late life?

- ▶ It can be beneficial, if at least one of the spouses have good levels of functioning (well-being, cognition)
- ▶ There are demands and pressures around care-giving and transition to widowhood
- ▶ Marital satisfaction depends on factors within the marriage (interpersonal processes) and also wider relationships with social networks
- ▶ Psychological well-being appears key in moderating benefits to marital satisfaction derived from relationships with others
- ▶ Need to address lack of diversity in current research on late life couples. We don't know about de-facto, same-sex or CALD couple relationships



Marriage matters: applying the research

- ▶ Most fundamentally, healthy ageing policy needs to acknowledge the marital context
 - ▶ Positive and negative aspects of marriage on health and well-being
- ▶ Ensure support for care-giving spouses, not just financial (e.g. carer's pension) but emotional support and opportunities for community connection
- ▶ Lessons from 'successful' long-term marriages incorporated into relationship counselling services





Does marriage matter in later life?

*An insight into the relationships of older South
Australian couples*

Dr Ruth Walker & Prof Mary Luszcz, School of Psychology, Flinders University