

Mar 24th, 11:00 AM - 2:30 PM

## Let's Talk About Death: Conversation and Bereavement in Late-Life Widows and Widowers

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### Recommended Citation

Bass, Bekah, "Let's Talk About Death: Conversation and Bereavement in Late-Life Widows and Widowers" (2020). *Research in the Capitol*. 1.

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## Research Questions

- This study looks at those who are widowed later in life and whether conversations about death occurred with their spouse prior to their death. I raise the following questions:
  - (1) does talking with one's spouse about their impending death impact the death avoidance present in the bereaved widow or widower? and
  - (2) Is death avoidance greater among bereaved widows or widowers that did not discuss end-of-life prior to a spouse's death?

## Background

- Death is highly taboo despite its inevitability
- The study of death and dying from a sociological perspective originated in the late 60s and late 70s, but has not grown at the same rate as other areas within the discipline (Walter 2008).
- In a 2018 ethnographic study at a nursing home, Alftberg and colleagues concluded that reasons assistant nurses did not talk to older residents about death included time constraints and emotional strain. It is difficult to talk about death, even with those whose deaths are impending.
- Those who do not accept the loss of a spouse tend to exhibit more intense and prolonged grief compared to those who do (Holland et al. 2013).
- In a preliminary study on an online community, openly talking about death had impacts on the acceptance of death (Miller-Lewis et al. 2018).

## Data and Methods

### Data

- Changing Lives of Older Couples (CLOC) Dataset
- Multi-wave prospective study on bereavement in older couples in Detroit in 80s and 90s

### Sample

- Total n=1,532 respondents

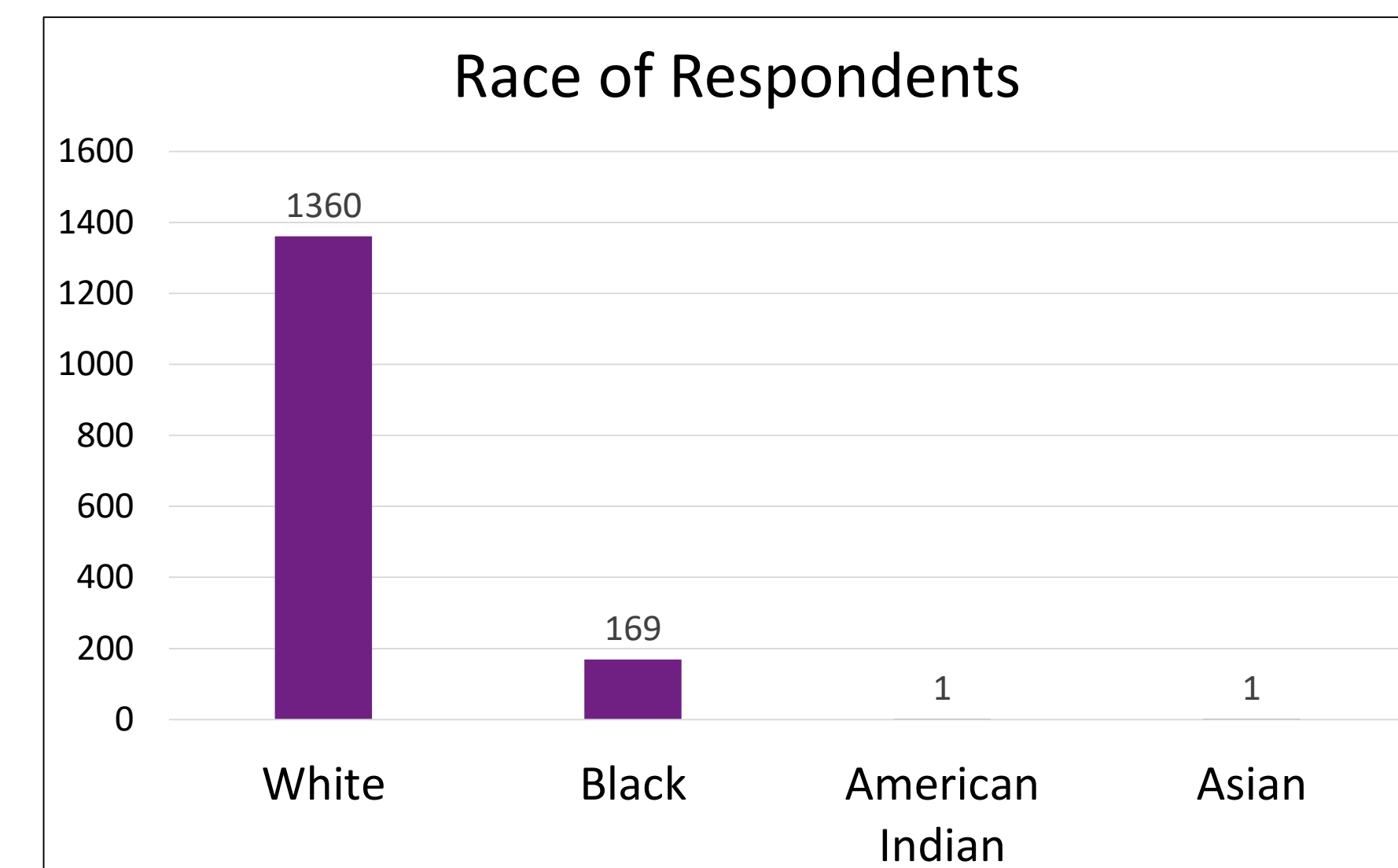
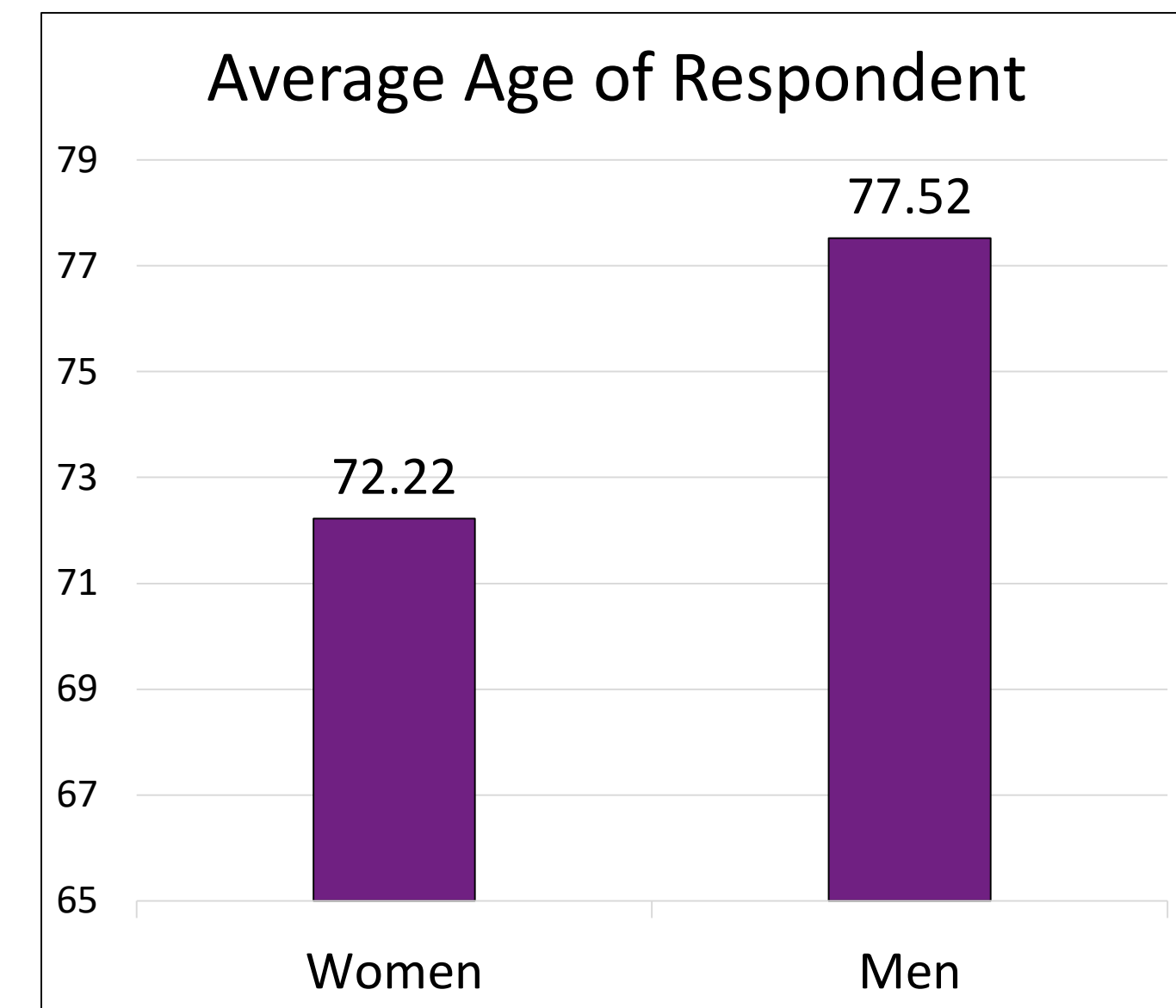
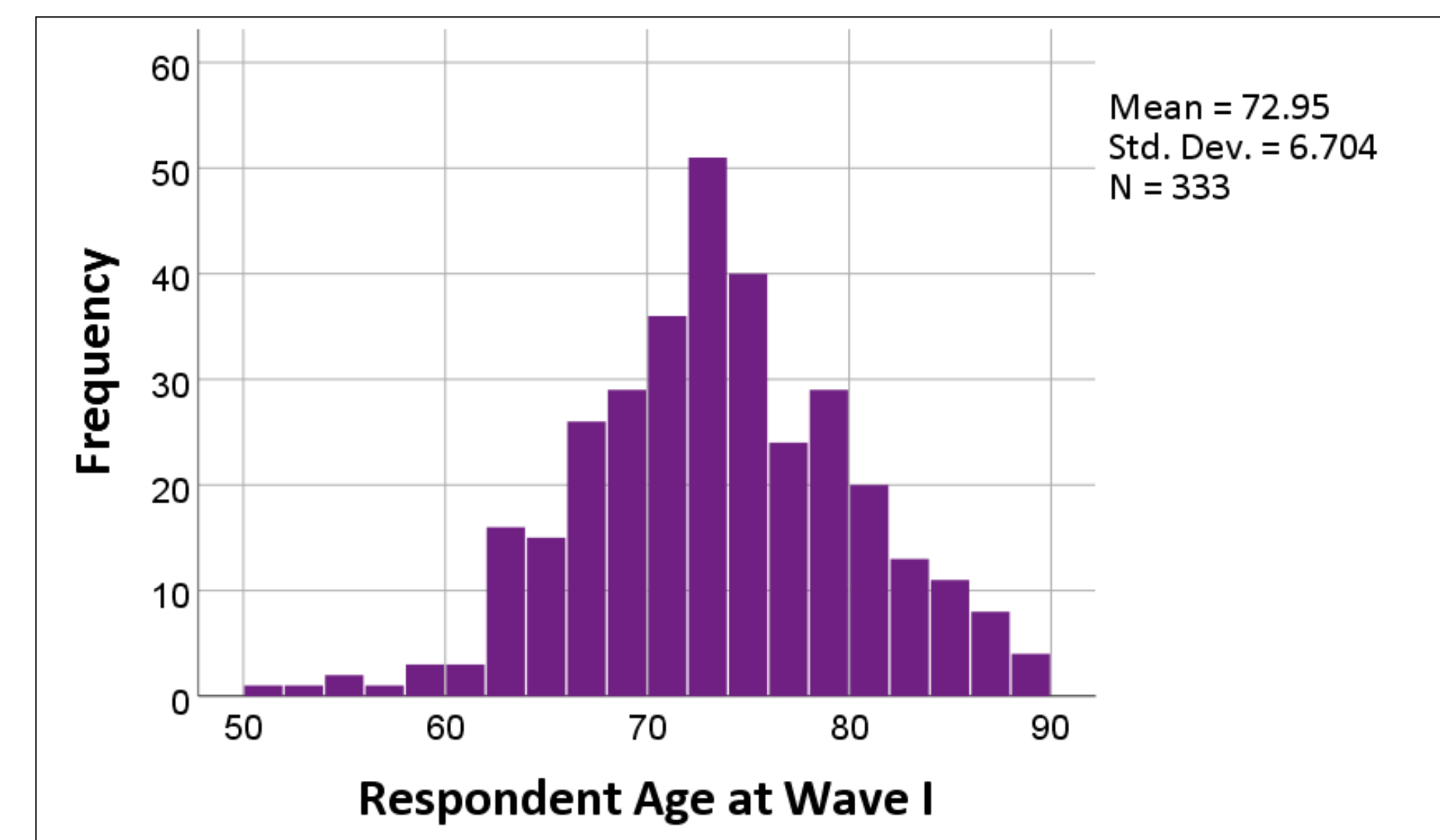
### Measures

- Conversation about death
  - "Did you and your (husband/wife) talk about the fact that (he/she) might die?"
  - "Did you and your (husband/wife) talk about how you would deal with being on your own?"
- Death avoidance
  - "How much have you done things that help you feel close to your husband/wife, such as going to the cemetery?"
  - "How much have you tried to forget about what has happened?"
  - "During the past month, have you avoided people or places that remind you of him/her?"
- Covariates of race, gender, and age

### Analysis

- Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) tests for goodness-of-fit were done for all combinations of Wave 1 measures. Additionally,  $\chi^2$  tests for categorical covariates and each variable measure were calculated.

## Sample Characteristics



## Responses by Race

	Race	$\chi^2 = 9.06$ p = .003	How much have you done things that help you feel close to your spouse?	
			A little or a lot	Not at all
	White		155 (147.4)	48 (55.6)
	Black		20 (27.6)	18 (10.4)

## Responses by Race cont.

	Race	$\chi^2 = 4.30$ p = .038	Have you avoided people or places that remind you of your spouse?	
			Yes	No
	White		31 (35.4)	180 (175.6)
	Black		11 (6.6)	28 (32.4)

## Independent and Dependent Variable Crosstabulations

	Did you and your spouse talk about how you would deal with being on your own?	$\chi^2 = 5.05$ p = .025	How much have you done things that help you feel close to your spouse?	
			A little or a lot	Not at all
	Yes		41 (36.4)	5 (9.6)
	No		39 (43.6)	16 (11.4)

	Did you and your spouse talk about how you would deal with being on your own?	$\chi^2 = 0.04$ p = .853	How much have you tried to forget about what has happened?	
			A little or a lot	Not at all
	Yes		21 (20.5)	26 (26.5)
	No		24 (24.5)	32 (31.5)

	Did you and your spouse talk about how you would deal with being on your own?	$\chi^2 = 0.36$ p = .549	Have you avoided people or places that remind you of your spouse?	
			Yes	No
	Yes		5 (6.0)	44 (43.0)
	No		8 (7.0)	49 (50.0)

## Results

- All but one combination of variables was insignificant.
  - The combination of whether spouses had talked about how the widow would do on their own and how much the widow did things to make them feel close to their spouse were significant.
  - We saw higher numbers of individuals who did things to feel close to their spouse in those who had talked about being on their own, than expected. This implies that there is something about talking about being on one's own that is associated with participating activities to feel close to the deceased.
- There were significant differences between black and white respondents on two variables
  - Black respondents were less likely to have done things to feel close to their deceased spouse than expected.
  - Black respondents also avoided people and places more than expected when compared to their white counterparts.

## Conclusions

- This implies that talking with your partner about being on one's own is somehow associated with participating activities to feel close to the deceased.
- The lack of significant findings with most combinations of variables suggests that talking about death did not have the impact hypothesized.
- There are differences between how white and black individuals experience and react to the death of a spouse.
- Future research should investigate the impact of conversations about death and the impact of race.

## Limitations

- Due to the methodology of original study, a large amount of missing data occurred because many respondents were not asked the items measured in this data analysis
  - Between n=106 and n=250 respondents for each item
  - There were not enough cases to complete more advanced multivariate analyses, like binary logistic regression, on the data

## References

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## Acknowledgements

- This research was made possible by the Donald and Gudrun Fruehling Undergraduate Research Fellowship and the CSBS Undergraduate Research Award.
- A special thanks to Dr. Ashleigh Kysar-Moon in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology at the University of Northern Iowa for her mentorship on this project.