Survival stories: wellbeing of older widowed Greek migrants in rural South Australia

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Worldwide, the experience of widowhood affects many older adults and can be associated with diminished mental health and wellbeing. This presentation draws on PhD research exploring the social and economic dimensions of wellbeing in widowhood for older Greek widows and widowers in South Australia’s Riverland region, including factors of ethnicity, residential location, gender, socioeconomic status and social support. Australia’s ageing population (individuals aged 65+) includes 55,000 first-generation Greek migrants who arrived mainly in the 1950s and 1960s, and who have aged ‘in place’ in a ‘foreign land’.

Aims: The work presented in this paper aims to fill a gap in existing knowledge about the widowhood experiences among rural older Australians from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, and the implications of this knowledge for service delivery and policy. This group is particularly likely to experience multiple disadvantages, and has lower service use than the mainstream Anglo population.

Methods: A qualitative study has been designed to capture the distinct and nuanced ‘voices’ of older Greek widows and widowers from rural areas in their native language by a researcher who shares their cultural and linguistic background. A mutual understanding and consideration of relevant socio-historic, cultural and contextual information enables a deeper understanding of the widowhood experience and wellbeing for this cultural group. In-depth interviews are used to uncover the lived experience of widowhood and factors relating to wellbeing, as presented by individuals who are routinely excluded from mainstream research due to linguistic difficulties and rural locale.

Results: Findings from in-depth interviews with 20 widows and widowers will be presented, and will focus on the following aspects of widowhood: participants’ perceptions of their health and wellbeing; the lived and cultural experience of widowhood in a rural area; gender differences in bereavement/widowhood ‘roles’; and the impact of socioeconomic status and social support (including the importance of family) in daily life. The paper will draw on Bourdieu’s conceptions of four types of capital (social, cultural, symbolic and economic) to explore the factors shaping experiences of widowhood. Implications for policy and service provision for this group will also be highlighted.

Conclusion: Cultural background shapes the way individuals experience ageing and widowhood. This paper presents the voices of some older rural migrants, appreciating that experiences vary both across and within groups. Only by depicting the lived reality of older rural Greek-Australians from their subjective vantage point may we truly begin to inform policy and service diverse populations.