Time Heals Some Wounds: Psychological Adjustment after Marital Breakup in Middle Aged Individuals

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Marital breakup is among the most incisive stressors in adult life. While the negative effects of divorce on well-being are well documented in numerous studies, the large interindividual differences in psychological adaptation to this critical life event over time are still not well understood. This is especially the case of divorce after long-term marriage, which have increased significantly in the last decades. According to the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective (Amato, 2000), the process of divorce sets into motion numerous stressful events. Severity and duration of negative outcomes depend on the presence of a variety of moderating factors such as intra- and interpersonal resources. A central but contro-versially discussed question in this context is whether martial breakup is a crisis to which individuals gradually adapt after a certain time, or if it is rather a chronic stressor with outlasting negative consequences.

Aims and Hypotheses:
The aim of this study is:
- To investigate the role of *time passed since marital breakup* as a predictor of short and long term psychological adaptation along with socio-demographic and personality variables, social environment, contextual factors of ex-relationship and break-up circumstances.

Based on theoretical insights and the status quo of research, we hypothesize among other that:
- Individuals with a marital break-up happened within the last 24 months show a poorer psychological adaptation than those who experienced it 5 years and longer ago.
- Individuals with a breakup longer than 5 years ago do not differ from the age-matched married control group regarding the indicators of adaptation.
- Time passed since separation is a significant predictor of various indicators of psychological adaptation, namely life satisfaction, depressive symptoms and perceived stress.

Reference
Amato, P. R. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children.
Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62(4), 1269-1287.

METHODS

Study and Sample Description

- Data presented were gathered in a first wave of the prospective questionnaire study 'Vulnerability and growth: Developmental dynamics and differential effects of the loss of an intimate partner in the 2nd life half', which is part of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research 'LIVES – Overcoming vulnerability: life course perspectives' (funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation).
- A random sample was supplied by the Swiss Federal Office of Statistics, furthermore participants were recruited by advertisements.

Table 1. Sample description

	Divorced/Separated	Married Control Group
Age (*M*) (Range: 40-65)	53 years	52 years
Time since separation	4.6 years	No marital breakup
Age at separation	40 years and older	-
Duration of (ex-) relationship (*M*)	23 years	28 years
n (women/men)	520 (344/176)	348 (189/159)

RESULTS

Table 2. Group comparisons between divorced and married individuals

Indicators of psychological adaptation	Separation <=24 months (A) *M (SD)*	Separation >60 months (B) *M (SD)*	Married control group (C) *M (SD)*	t-Test (A/B)	t-Test (B/C)
Depressive symptoms (Range 0-3)	0.88 (0.61)	0.58 (0.39)	0.43 (0.30)	5.50 ***	4.68***
Life satisfaction (Range 1-7)	4.54 (1.25)	4.71 (1.22)	5.62 (0.77)	-1.35 ns	-9.70***
Perceived stress (Range 1-5)	2.67 (0.86)	2.34 (0.73)	2.21 (0.59)	3.76***	2.70**

** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

Table 3. Hierarchical linear regression analyses predicting psychological adaptation to marital breakup

	Depressive Symptoms		Life Satisfaction		Perceived Stress	
	<= 24 months	> 60 months	<= 24 months	> 60 months	<= 24 months	> 60 months
Step 1. Socio-demographic variables						
Age	-.08	.21*	.16†	-.05	-.05	-.03
Educational level (6 Levels)	.03	.13*	-.05	.08	-.00	-.03
Financial resources (0= not enough money, 1= more than enough money)	-.11†	-.27**	.32**	.40***	-.06	-.33***
Gender (1=female, 2=male)	-.17	-.12	-.08	-.00	-.06	-.02
Occupation						
0= unemployed, 1= employed	.03	.05	.14*	.20**	-.10	-.15*
0= retiree, 1= employed	.11	-.01	.23**	-.07	-.06	-.05
Step 2. Personality variables						
Extraversion	-.04	-.01	-.05	.14*	.00	.00
Neuroticism	.22**	.30***	-.12	-.05	.23**	.34***
Resilience	-.26**	-.31***	.33***	.22**	-.37***	-.25***
Step 3. Social environment						
Currently in a relationship (0= no, 1 =yes)	-.23**	-.01	-.20**	.10	-.14*	-.02
Social support (1= no, 2 =yes)	.09	-.15*	-.05	.17**	-.04	-.05
Step 4. Contextual factors ex-relationship						
Happiness in ex-relationship	.19**	-.02	.12†	.15*	.03	-.01
Duration of ex-relationship	.14	-.15*	-.14	-.02	.14†	.02
Initiatorstatus (0= Me, 1=Ex-Partner)	-.02	-.11†	-.16*	.00	-.02	-.12†
Status of ex-relationship (1= divorced, 2=not divorced)	-.01	.05	.14*	-.02	.09	.08
Step 5. Time since separation	-.11	-.19**	-.05	.07	-.12†	-.09
Total *R²*	.39	.41	.40	.40	.37	.34
n	164	203	170	216	170	215

Note. Standardized coefficients (*B*) are reported
†*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

Variables and Instruments:
- **Life Satisfaction**: Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985; **Depression**: CES-D (Radloff, 1977); **Perceived Stress**: Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983); **Neuroticism, Extraversion**: BFI-10 (Rammstedt & John, 2007); **Resilience**: Resilience Scale RS-11 (Wagnild & Young, 1993).
- **Time passed since separation; Currently in a relationship; Social support; Happiness in ex-relationship; Duration of ex-relationship; Initiator break-up and status of ex-relationship**: self-developed Items.

DISCUSSION

- Our results support the crisis as well as the chronic state approach. There is indeed a recovery effect: The more time passed since separation, the better the psychological adaptation. However, the difference regarding the indicators of psychological adaptation between the sepa-ration group 5 and more years ago and the married controls is still significant.

- Time since separation plays an important role for predicting depressive symptoms, even after controlling for several other variables. However this is not the case for life satisfaction and perceived stress.

- Personality variables (especially neuroticism and resilience) are the strongest predictors for the psychological adaptation in the short as well in the long term.

- Whereas being in a new relationship is a significant predictor for the short term adaptation, social support has an important role in the long-term.

- Variables concerning the ex-relationship are more important for the short term adaptation.

- Results will be validated with longitudinal data gathered in the second wave, which will take place in spring 2014.

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