

TRAJECTORIES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ADAPTATION TO MARITAL BREAKUP AFTER A LONG-TERM MARRIAGE

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH AIMS

An ample body of research has shown the wide-reaching negative consequences of marital breakup. Although population-based studies on divorce document a broad range of negative effects, more fine-grained analyses reveal a large heterogeneity in people's adjustment which is still not well understood. In addition, a limitation in research to date is that most studies have focused on younger adults.

The present research

This study focus on marital breakup after a long-term marriage. It builds up on results from a longitudinal project, where at T1 five classes of psychological adaptation were identified (Perrig-Chiello, Morselli, & Hutchison, 2015): Two groups of well adapted ('average copers', $n = 151$; 'resilients', $n = 90$), and three groups of poorly adapted individuals ('resigned ones', $n = 12$; 'malcontents', $n = 37$; 'vulnerables', $n = 18$).

Aims

- To explore trajectories of adaption of these five classes after two years (i.e. from T1 to T2);
- To examine which variables account for recovery or chronicity in terms of intra-personal resources, relationship-variables, and socio-demographic variables.

Hypotheses

Based on existing research (e.g., Amato, 2000; Bonanno, 2004), we expect:

- An upward change for a substantial number of individuals from the classes with poor adaptation after two years. In contrast, we expect that the well-adapted individuals remain stable.
- That upward changes are primarily associated with better intrapersonal resources (e.g., higher resilience) and in second line with less relationship stressors (e.g., dissatisfaction with former relationship).

METHODS

Study description and statistical analyses

- Data stem from the longitudinal, survey-based study with two measurement points (2012, 2014), being part of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research 'LIVES' (funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation).
- Sample: 308 persons aged 45 – 65 years (113 men; 195 women), who divorced within the last 5 years after having been married for an average of 24 years.
- Statistical analyses were carried out by latent transition analyses (Mplus).

Variables/Instruments

Indicators of psychological adaptation:

- **Life Satisfaction:** Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985); **Depression:** CES-D (Radloff, 1977); **Hopelessness:** Hopelessness Scale (Beck et al., 1974); **Mourning:** self-developed item ("Do you mourn your ex-relationship?"); **Subjective health:** single-item question.

Intrapersonal resources:

- **Neuroticism, extraversion, openness:** BFI-10 (Rammstedt & John, 2007); **Resilience:** Resilience Scale RS-11 (Wagnild & Young, 1993); **Personal growth** (Cann et al., 2010).

Stressors/variables related to the ex-relationship:

- **Time passed since divorce; satisfaction in ex-relationship; duration of ex-relationship:** self-developed items.

RESULTS

Figure 1. Transition probabilities from T1 profiles by T2 profiles

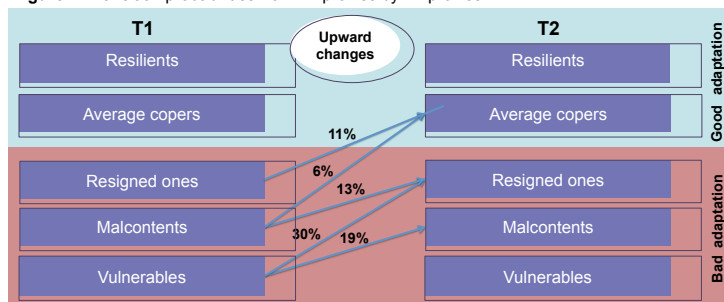


Table 1. Resilience in the 5 groups: means (n)

	Vulnerables ₁₂	Malcontents ₁₂	Resigned ₁₂	Copers ₁₂	Resilients ₁₂
Vulnerables ₁₁	3.81(4)		5.9(3)		6.48(1)
Malcontents ₁₁		4.56(30)	5.73(5)	4.97(2)	6.65(3)
Resigned ₁₁			5.3(56)	5.53(15)	
Copers ₁₁				5.65(126)	
Resilients ₁₁					6.27(63)

Table 2. Satisfaction with ex-relationship in the 5 groups: means (n)

	Vulnerables ₁₂	Malcontents ₁₂	Resigned ₁₂	Copers ₁₂	Resilients ₁₂
Vulnerables ₁₁	7.58(3)		7.55(3)		1.05(1)
Malcontents ₁₁		4.2(28)	5.27(7)	3.77(3)	7.66(1)
Resigned ₁₁			6(54)	3.23(9)	
Copers ₁₁				6.18(146)	
Resilients ₁₁					5.78(53)

DISCUSSION

- The majority of divorcees adapt successfully over time. However, a minority of divorcees shows pronounced long-term difficulties of psychological adaptation to marital breakup.
- As expected, the groups of well-adapted individuals remained stable regarding their psychological adaption to marital breakup throughout the two years.
- Our results demonstrate that people from high-distress marriages have less difficulty in adapting than those from low-distress ones over time.
- The most consistent results related to upward changes were intrapersonal resources, namely the NEO personality traits and resilience.
- Our result supports the assumption that positive changes (i.e., perceived growth in personal strength) are possible even after a marital breakup in later years.
- Knowledge about the diversity of these trajectories of vulnerability and the resources that account for recovery could be of great help for designing psychological interventions to better tackle this critical life event.