

Divorce and spousal bereavement in later life: What contributes to psychological adaptation?

Integrative Abstract:

Interpersonal loss in old age is a critical life event which requires adjustment to a new life situation. Spousal bereavement is a high-probability life event in later life, but also the divorce rate of long-term marriages in older adults is increasing. Both transitions can cause considerable distress, but can also lead to personal growth. For both critical life events, the large interindividual differences in psychological adaptation are still not well understood.

Results from quantitative and qualitative studies from Switzerland and the UK identified crucial challenges and factors that promote or hinder psychological adaptation to the new life situation.

Based on a large longitudinal study on relationship-related transitions in later life, patterns of psychological adaptation after spousal loss as well as their predictors were identified. For divorced participants, the role of the ex-partner for adaptation after marital break-up was explored.

Furthermore, similarities and differences in personal growth and grief symptoms after both life events were examined and implicit theories of a successful relationship in married, divorced and widowed individuals were compared. Qualitative studies identified psychological characteristics, social support and religious faith as key factors for resilience in older widowed men and women.

After marital breakup, challenged identity emerged as a central experience and the process of identity reconstruction was examined. These different aspects of adaptation after interpersonal loss in later life will be integrated in an ecological framework of resilience.

Topic: 10. Normative and non-normative life events and transitions

Period of life: 5. Middle and later adulthood

Individual abstracts:

Expression of Grief and Personal Growth in Divorced and Widowed Older Adults

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Divorce and spousal bereavement in later life cause distress and require adaptation to a new life situation but can also lead to personal growth. However, few studies compare the reactions after different types of relationship-related life events and it remains unclear how the type of the event affects the expression of grief and personal growth. Firstly, we examined whether the expression of grief and personal growth was distinct in divorced and widowed older adults. Secondly, we compared the level of prolonged grief and personal growth after both events. The sample included participants from a longitudinal study on relationships in later life which is part of the Swiss National

Centre of Competence in Research 'LIVES – Overcoming vulnerability: life course perspectives'. A total of 795 divorced and widowed older adults (65% women, 45% divorced, 55% widowed) with a mean age of 64 years (SD = 13 years) were compared in terms of their reactions to interpersonal loss. Symptoms of grief were assessed with the Prolonged Grief Questionnaire (PG-13, Prigerson et al. 2008). Posttraumatic growth was measured with the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI-SF, Cann et al, 2010) which was developed for assessing personal growth after different critical life events. Testing for differential item functioning, we found that emotional symptoms of grief such as yearning and emotional pain as well as avoiding reminders of the loss were differentially influenced by the type of the loss. In divorced individuals, yearning for the ex-partner, strong feelings of emotional pain and avoiding reminders of the loss were indicators of very high levels of prolonged grief. In widowed participants, these symptoms were rather common and were not related to higher levels of grief. Other symptoms such as trouble accepting the loss or reductions in social functioning were not affected by differential item functioning.

In contrast to grief, the expression of personal growth after divorce and bereavement was similar apart from one exception. Widowed participant who reported that they had established a new path for their lives had a considerably higher level of posttraumatic growth than divorced participants who endorsed the same response categories. Taking these differences in the expression of grief and personal growth into account, divorced participants reported significantly lower levels of prolonged grief but similar levels of personal growth than bereaved older adults.

“A loose limb”: Identity reconstruction in separation and divorce.

Dr Laura Soulsby

Marriage is associated with a process of coupling and a public and personal change from “I” to “we” (Soulsby & Bennett, 2015). Separation and divorce, at any age, are associated with psychological and behavioural changes that may impact on a person’s sense of self. This paper draws on rich qualitative interview data to examine the process of identity reconstruction following the breakup of a long-term marriage. In-depth interviews were conducted with 82 cohabiting, married, widowed, and divorced British adults, focusing on changes in daily routine, social relationships, and social support. We draw attention to findings of a subset of interviews with men and women whose marriages ended after a marriage of at least 10 years (n=8). Challenged identity emerged as a central experience of marital separation and divorce. Interview participants described an initial loss of identity and associated changes in confidence. Yet, over time, most participants established a new, satisfying lifestyle which provided meaning to their lives as a single person. Positive changes in

identity emerged as participants began to re-evaluate themselves after divorce and gained a greater sense of agency. The interviews demonstrated a breadth in the experience of marital breakup but revealed that, overall, separation and divorce facilitate a greater sense of individual autonomy and provide an opportunity for personal growth.

Refining the Ecological Model of Resilience for Older Widowed Men and Women

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Widowhood is a high-probability life event in later life. Whilst bereavement and subsequent widowhood are naturally highly stressful, the majority of widowed men and women cope well enough to continue their lives without professional intervention. Amongst those widowed people are some, reported as between 38 and 54% (Bennett, 2010; Bonanno, 2004; Spahni et al., 2015) who could be defined as resilient, able to adapt or bounce back in the face of adversity (Windle, 2011). Thus, there is growing interest in resilience amongst widowed people, and in the factors that contribute to that resilience.

However, much of the work has focused on quantitative analyses and on bereavement rather than qualitative work focusing on the longer-term effects of widowhood. In this study I examine resilience amongst older widowed people using qualitative methods. I utilise the following definition of resilience: "the process of negotiating, managing and adapting to significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment facilitate this capacity for adaptation and 'bouncing back' in the face of adversity" (Windle & Bennett, 2011). I analyse data from 100 in-depth interviews of older widowed people which focused on the experiences of widowhood (61 women and 39 men). Utilising an ecological framework (Windle & Bennett, 2011), I examine factors that promote or hinder resilience. 36 participants were resilient and 21 were not. The remaining 43 showed some resilient features. In this paper I identify individual, community and societal level resources which facilitate or hinder resilience. Key factors include psychological characteristics, social support, and religious faith. I discuss the methodological challenges in researching resilience, these include operationalizing resilience and identifying factors in the ecological system. I also develop the idea of more than binary classification of resilient or not-resilient. Finally, I conclude by discussing how those widowed people who are not yet resilient may be supported to become so.

Trajectories of Adaptation to Spousal Bereavement in Old Age

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Spousal bereavement in later life is a high probability life event and traditionally it is also thought to be one of the most stressful. Bereaved individuals are typically characterised by lower well-being, however, more recently studies have demonstrated that there are substantial individual differences in both the experience of stress-related effects, and the trajectory of psychological adaptation to the event. Further, work has suggested that intrapersonal resources might be the main reason for the differences. The data presented stem from a longitudinal survey, which is part of the Swiss National Center of Competence in Research 'LIVES – Overcoming vulnerability: life course perspective', funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Our analyses are based on results of an exploratory latent profile analysis performed at the first assessment in 2012 among 402 widowed participants (228 women, 174 men) aged between 60 and 89 (mean age 74.41 years), who lost their partner within the last 5 years, after having been married for on average 45 years. Three different classes of adaptation in terms of depressive symptoms, hopelessness, loneliness, life satisfaction, and subjective health were identified: 'resilients' (54% of the sample), 'copers' (39%) and 'vulnerables' (7%). Resilient participants were more likely to be women and for longer time widowed than copers. They also reported higher levels of spousal social support than the copers, but not marital happiness, or social support more generally. In addition, resilient participants reported higher levels of psychological resilience, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness and lower levels of neuroticism in contrast to both, copers and vulnerables. The vulnerables, in contrast, reported a more negative emotional valence concerning loss experience compared to the other two groups. The aim of the present contribution is to shed light on the trajectories of these participants two years after the first data wave, and examine what predicts stability or change in group affiliation. The best fitting model of the latent transition analysis shows that the majority of bereaved respondents remained in the same profile over the two observations, but that there were also a minor part of participants who moved to higher or lower adapted profiles. The evaluation of the trajectories of adaptation to this critical life event and knowledge about the variables that enhance the adaptation over time is essential for prevention and intervention in social and clinical services.

Implicit theories of a successful relationship after transitions in older age – variations by civil-status and well-being

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People's implicit theories of a successful partnership influence goals, motivations, and behaviour in romantic relationships. Life transitions, especially critical life events, could have an influence on the personal templates of an ideal partnership. They have the potential to generate a discrepancy between perceptions and individual standards, which drives emotions and cognitions and motivates behaviour designed to reduce or resolve the discrepancy. We examined the differences between the implicit partnership theories that divorced spouses, widowed persons and long-term married couples ($N = 800$, age 62–91 years) subscribe to, regarding what constitutes a successful marriage, and how their assumptions relate to various subjective dimensions of well-being. Results revealed that the prioritization given to the key elements of a successful relationship (i.e., mutual respect in long-term married couples, successful communication in divorced spouses and love in widowed persons) varied among the groups. Comparing low and high scores for individual well-being resulted in differences between implicit partnership theories held by divorced and widowed persons but not married couples. These findings provide important considerations for counselling persons after the loss of a partner due to separation, divorce or death. An idealized view of the deceased spouse as a soulmate and emphasis on the shared love could be adaptive for widowed persons, whereas the emphasis on successful communication techniques could be an important step in improving cognitive and emotional well-being for divorced persons.

Marital breakup after long-term marriage: how the past and ongoing relationship with the ex-partner is linked to psychological adaption

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While negative effects of divorce on well-being are well documented in research literature, the role of relationships with the ex-partner after marital breakup on adaptation remains unclear. This is especially the case for marital breakup after long-term marriage, which is still a neglected research topic. This research focuses on the relationships with the ex-partner (past and ongoing), and the extent to which the quality of these relations are linked to psychological adaptation to marital breakup (i.e., life satisfaction and depressive symptoms) over time. Therefore, we take into account socio-demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, financial resources), personality variables (i.e., personality traits, resilience) as well as the current relationship status. Data stem from two waves

(2012, 2014) of a longitudinal survey-based study, which is part of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research 'LIVES – Overcoming vulnerability: life course perspectives'. Our analyses are carried out on a subsample of 501 divorcees (349 females, 152 males) aged 40 – 65 years ($M= 51$ years, $SD= 6.7$). The average length of their former relationship was 21.6 years ($SD= 8.1$) and participants experienced the separation on average 3.8 years ago ($SD= 2.8$). Half of the participants ($n= 255$; 49%) were in a new relationship, the majority (71%, $n= 360$) were still in contact with their ex-partner. Of those persons, 29% reported 'tense to very tense' contact to the ex-partner, 29% responded with 'partly tense, partly good' and 41% reported of a 'good to very good' contact. Preliminary results by multiple linear regression analysis demonstrate that for those who are still in contact with the former partner, ongoing conflicts are related to worse adaptation (i.e., lower life satisfaction, higher depressive symptoms), even when the participants are in a new relationship. Variables related to the ex-relationship (i.e., length of and happiness with former relationship, initiator status of separation, time passed since separation) only play a limited role for adaptation. In a next step, we will examine longitudinal associations using structural equation modelling. These results offer important insights into the process of adaptation to marital breakup, which can be used for counselling.