BREAKUP AFTER LONG-TERM MARRIAGE: HOW THE PAST AND ONGOING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EX-PARTNER IS LINKED TO PSYCHOLOGICAL ADAPTATION

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH AIMS

The current and former relation with the ex-partner can be a resource but also a chronic stressor affecting psychological adaptation to divorce. Little research has been carried out on this topic especially regarding in breakups after a long-term relationship.

Aims and Hypotheses:

Considering this gap and based on the divorce-stress-adjustment-perspective (Amato, 2000), we want

(1) to explore how quality of current contact to the ex-partner is associated with psychological adaptation (i.e., life satisfaction and depressive symptoms) across three waves (2012, 2014, 2016).

(2) to examine the association of satisfaction with prior relationship and reason of separation with the (2a) quality of the current relationship and with (2b) psychological adaptation at t1. We consider intrapersonal variables as well as the current relationship status and socio-demographic variables.

We hypothesize that

- (H1a) independent of time, being in conflictual contact with the ex-partner is related to poorer adjustment (higher depressive symptoms, lower life satisfaction).

- High satisfaction with the ex-relationship is related to (H2a) better quality of contact to the ex-partner and to (H2b) better psychological adaptation at t1.

- The separation reason "infidelity of the ex-partner" is related to (H3a) poorer psychological adaptation and (H3b) lower quality of contact at t1.

METHODS

Study description and statistical analyses

- Data stem from the longitudinal, survey-based study 'relationships in later life' with three measurement points (2012, 2014, 2016), which are a part of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research 'LIVES' (funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation).

- **Sample**: 411 persons aged 45 – 65 years (M = 51.17 years, SD = 6.68) at t1 (117 men; 294 women); breakup after 21.60 years (SD = 8.1). Time since separation: 3.74 years (SD = 2.70). 70% (n = 275) were still in contact with their ex-partner at t3.

- Statistical analyses were carried out with longitudinal structural equation modeling (Mplus).

Variables

Psychological adaptation
- **Life Satisfaction**: Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985)
- **Depressive symptoms**: CES-D (Radloff, 1977)

Current and former relation with ex-partner
- **Being in contact or not with the ex-partner** (yes, no)
- **Quality of current contact to ex-partner**
- **Former relation**: satisfaction in ex-relationship; separation reasons; relationship duration; time passed since separation

Personality
- **Neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness**: BFI-10 (Rammstedt & John, 2007)

Current relationship status (new relationship: yes, no)

Socio-demographic variables
- **Socio-demographics** (age, gender, financial resources); **common children with ex-partner**
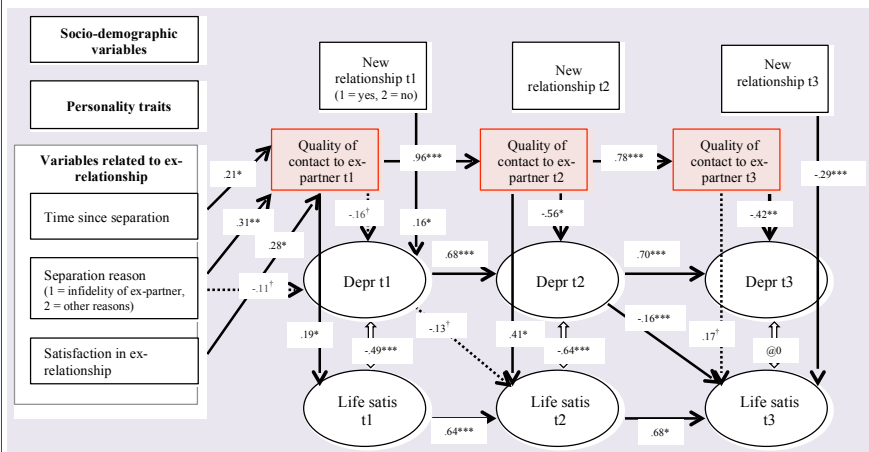
RESULTS

Figure 1. Psychological adaptation across three waves, predicted by prior and current relation to the ex-partner, relationship status, personality traits and socio-demographic variables (final latent autoregressive model).
Depr = depressive Symptoms; Life satis = life satisfaction. For simplicity, we omitted the effects of socio-demographic and personality variables. All the reported parameters are standardized. Fit indices: χ^2 (2804) = 3331, p <. 001, CFI = .967; TLI = .965; RMSEA = .026, 90% CI [.023 .030]. $^{\dagger}p$ < .10. $^{*}p$ < .05. $^{**}p$ < .01. $^{***}p$ < .001.

DISCUSSION

- Our results demonstrate that being in contact or not with the ex-partner was not related to psychological adaptation.

- In line with our hypothesis, quality of current relationship to the ex-partner was significantly related to adaptation at all three waves, even when partnership status, personality traits and socio-demographic variables were considered. It can therefore be assumed that current contact to the ex-partner can be a long-term stressor – or in case of high contact quality a resource – for psychological adaptation.

- In contrast to our expectations, prior marital satisfaction and separation reasons were not predictive for psychological adaptation at t1, but of current relationship quality at t1 (higher dissatisfaction with ex-relationship and ex-partner infidelity was related to worse quality of the current relationship).

- In line with prior research, personality variables (i.e., lower scores in neuroticism, higher scores in extraversion and agreeableness) and being in a new relationship predicted better psychological adaptation.

- Knowledge about variables accounting for inter-individual differences is important to gain a deeper understanding of the process of adaptation to separation after long-term relationships and for therapeutic intervention.

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

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