

SPOUSAL BEREAVEMENT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADAPTATION IN OLD AGE THE ROLE OF PERSONAL RESOURCES, MARITAL BIOGRAPHY AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

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Theoretical Background

Spousal bereavement in old age is a critical life event with a high potential for vulnerabilisation. The loss of a spouse leads to stressful changes in daily life and is associated with an increased risk for a decline in psychological and physical well-being. Numerous studies show that spousal bereavement in old age is characterised by lower life satisfaction, higher rates of loneliness, global stress, more depressive symptoms, and physical health problems - particularly in men - compared to married peers. The psychological and physical symptoms are typically most intense in early bereavement, followed by a decrease of symptoms in time, and the majority of bereaved individuals seem to recover and successfully adapt to spousal loss. Nevertheless there is great interindividual variability in psychological adaptation, and a minority of individuals has problems to adapt and may show lingering negative consequences of bereavement. This fact seems to be related not only to various personal resources, but also to biographical markers and contextual factors. Potential time period and cohort effects have been neglected in the current state of research and it's not clear if and to what extent they are relevant.

Aims of the Doctoral Thesis & Planned Papers

Based on data collected in LIVES IP 12 & IP 13, the present doctoral thesis aims to investigate the following aspects of spousal bereavement:

- Within and between group differences in psychological well-being and subjective health in a group of bereaved individuals and an age-matched continuously married group.
- Impact of intra- and interpersonal resources and contextual factors on psychological adaptation.
- Impact of marital biography and other past biographical events on psychological and physical well-being from a life-course perspective.
- Cohort and period effects in the adaptation to bereavement: comparison of data with surveys conducted in 1994 and 1979.

Conforming to the guidelines of the Faculty of Human Sciences, University of Bern, a cumulative thesis should consist of in average 2-5 peer-reviewed published research papers, from which 1-2 the doctoral candidate should figure as first author. For my doctoral thesis the following articles are foreseen (working titles):

- Taking stock of challenges following spousal bereavement: Time period and gender effects (In preparation; Authors: Spahni, Höpflinger, Perrig-Chiello)
- Constancy and change in psychosocial adaptation to spousal bereavement across three time periods (In preparation; Authors: Perrig-Chiello, Spahni, Höpflinger)
- **Psychological adaptation to spousal bereavement: Impact of valence and expectedness of loss, marital happiness and the role of time** (In preparation; Authors: Spahni, Hutchison, Perrig-Chiello)
- Patterns of psychological adaptation to spousal bereavement in old age (Defining a typology of bereaved individuals using Latent Class Modeling)
- Loss of a spouse in a life course perspective (Defining typical life trajectories of bereaved individuals using Sequence Analysis; in collaboration with IP 14)

Preliminary Analyses: Psychological Adaptation - Group Comparisons and Predictors

Data of IP12 1st Wave, collected Feb - June '12

Subsample of widow(er)s and married controls:

Widows/widowers (n = 268)
Age: 65-89 years (M = 77.06; SD = 5.84),
who were married for more than 10 years,
who experienced the loss 0-5 years ago,
who do not have a new partner

Married Controls (n = 506)
Age: 65-89 years (M = 75.82; SD = 6.93)
who have been married for more than 10 years,
who never experienced a spousal loss

Table A. Group comparisons with regard to various indicators of psychological adaptation

	Widowed (M (SD))		Married (M (SD))		Group Comparisons ^a				
	n	Women	n	Men					
Life Satisfaction ¹	140	5.31(1.00)	105	5.39(.92)	232	5.52(.80)	238	5.69(.74)	a, d
Loneliness ²	141	1.81(.77)	108	2.04(.77)	239	1.67(.63)	239	1.69(.59)	a, c
Depression ³	112	1.63(.42)	89	1.63(.41)	193	1.45(.34)	189	1.41(.32)	a, b

^a Significant difference (p < .05) between a) widowed men and married men b) widowed women and married women c) widowed women and men d) married women and men

Instruments: ¹Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), ²Loneliness Scales (De Jong Gierveld & Kamphuis., 1985), ³Center for Epid. Studies Depression Scale (CES-D, Radloff, 1977),

⁴Posttraumatic Personal Growth Inventory (PTGI-SF, Cann et al., 2010), ⁵Big Five Inventory (BFI-10, Rammstedt & John, 2007), ⁶Resilience Scale (RS-11, Wagnild & Young, 1993), all validated German versions.

Table B. Predictors of psychological adaptation to spousal loss

	Life Satisfaction ¹ (n = 210) R	Loneliness ² (n = 213) R	Depression ³ (n = 177) R	Personal Growth ⁴ (n = 212) R
Intrapersonal Resources				
<i>Sociodemography</i>				
Age	.15	-.09	-.07	.00
Gender (w/m)	.02	.15 [*]	.00	.00
<i>Personality</i>				
Extraversion ⁵	.19 ^{**}	-.19 ^{**}	-.11 [†]	.10
Neuroticism ⁵	-.03	.11	.32 ^{***}	.18 [*]
Agreeableness ⁵	.02	-.21 ^{***}	-.10	.09
Resilience ⁶	.28 ^{***}	-.26 ^{***}	-.27 ^{***}	.11
Interpersonal Resources				
Social Support (w/m)	-.04	-.04	-.02	-.31 ^{***}
Relationship				
Marital happiness (-1 to +10)	.05	.02	.12 [†]	.10
Time spent married (years)	.02	.04	.03	.02
Loss Aspects				
Time since Loss (years)	-.07	-.06	-.08	.08
Emotional Valence (-1 to +10)	.14 [*]	-.22 ^{***}	-.26 ^{***}	.01
Expectedness (un- vs. expected)	-.09	-.01	.06	.05
R²	.20	.31	.40	.18

[†]p < .10, ^{*}p < .05, ^{**}p < .01, ^{***}p < .001

Discussion & Further Steps

First results show that while widowers report significantly higher rates of loneliness than widows, they do not differ with regard to life satisfaction and depression. In comparison with their married controls, widowed men fare significantly worse in more areas of psychological adaptation than widowed women. While widowers show significantly lower life satisfaction and higher loneliness and depression, widows differ significantly from their married controls only in depression. Men's social network and contacts are mostly regulated by their wives and this fact might increase the risk of men's social isolation after spousal loss. It also needs to be noted that men tend to enter a new relationship more frequently and also earlier than widows, and that they tend to benefit more than women from this new relationship with regard to their psychological and physical well-being. The fact that this sample was limited to bereaved individuals without a new partner may therefore partly account for the above mentioned results.

Focusing on the predictors of different well-being measures, there could be shown that in general intrapersonal resources and the experience of loss are most relevant. While the personality traits and the emotional valence of loss experience play an important role in explaining the interindividual variability in depression, loneliness and life satisfaction, personal growth is best explained by social support.

Further steps: Future analyses will examine potential differences between single and repartnered widows and widowers. Furthermore, analyses using Structural Equation Modeling are planned with the aim of testing how the predictors and the well-being measures are related amongst themselves and to each other.