

IMPACT OF BEREAVEMENT ON THE SELF-CONCEPTIONS OF OLDER SURVIVING SPOUSES

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The purpose of this longitudinal study was to assess the extent to which the social anchorage dimension of the self-concept is impacted by the death of a spouse among a sample of older surviving spouses. Social anchorage was measured by the Twenty Statements Test (TST) in mailed questionnaires and consisted of self-statements that signify important social relationships and group memberships. As hypothesized, the 42 bereaved persons had lower social anchorage scores than the 72 nonbereaved controls. This significant effect was evident as early as three to four weeks following the death, and it persisted through five more measurement periods that covered the first two years of bereavement.

The purpose of this article is to report on some of the findings of a longitudinal study of bereavement among older adults, which specifically dealt with the impact of the loss on the surviving spouses' self-conceptions. The larger study investigated the effects of spousal bereavement on the physical, emotional, and social well-being of an aging sample. One important aspect of this study was to assess the stability, or changes or both stability and changes in the social anchorage dimension of the self-concept that follow the death of one's spouse.

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There is accumulating evidence that bereavement adversely affects a person's general well-being. This has been well documented by mortality, morbidity, and social psychological data (Osterweis et al. 1984). Much less is known, however, about how bereavement specifically influences the self-conceptions of older surviving spouses.

The interactionist perspective has long contended that a person's self-concept, particularly the social anchorage dimension, arises from and is maintained by social interactions and relationships with significant others (Cooley 1912; Mead 1934; Blumer 1969; Kuhn 1964). Because the death of a spouse eliminates an important source of interaction, it is likely to result in changes in the surviving spouse's self-conception. Berardo (1970) described bereavement for men as being a cumulative role loss that frequently results in an identity crisis. Lopata (1973) found that widows also experience an identity crisis that may go unresolved or, in the case of role-oriented women, may result in taking on new roles outside of the home. Being a widow changes the basis of self-identity especially for women who define themselves primarily in terms of their roles of wife and mother. Troll et al. (1979) reported that it is not uncommon for these older widows "to consult" their dead husbands about whether they were "doing the right thing" ten years after they died.

There is also accumulating evidence that identity changes are necessary for other subsequent bereavement adjustments. According to Gut (1974), part of the coping process calls for the realization that the loss is more or less total and final and that successful mourning requires a far-reaching reorientation and reintegration of the surviving spouse's personality or "inner image." Saunders (1981) also reported that the resolution of bereavement is incomplete until the surviving spouse is able to develop an "uncoupled identity." This identity transition to that of a single person is uneven and gradual. These and other investigators and clinicians (Bowby 1980; Gerber et al. 1975; Glick et al. 1974; Parkes and Weiss 1983; Weizman and Kamm 1985; Worden 1982) have emphasized the importance of identity changes to the management of bereavement.

Bereavement has been found to impact the social relationships that the surviving spouse has with other people, which also can influence their self-conceptions. Osterweis et al. (1984) summarized much of the empirical research on this topic by saying that the death of a spouse is likely to alter a person's social role and standing in the community, for they are frequently excluded from the sociability of couples. They suggested that bereavement ushers in a time of social marginality, and for elderly persons, it often leads to social isolation. More specifically, a number of investigators have reported that interaction with family members decreases after the death of the spouse (Bock and Webber 1972; Gut 1974; Troll et al. 1979). Lopata (1973, 1979) found that familial interaction increased during early bereavement but that it declined over time. Ferraro and Barresi (1980) indicated that although interaction with family members decreases for those widowed over four years, there is an increase in the frequency of contact with neighbors. Others report that there is often an increase in the importance of friendships for the widowed (Lopata 1975; Arling 1976) even though widows may report less interaction with their married friends (Troll et al. 1979). Pihlblad and Adams (1972) also reported that the death of a spouse had detrimental effects on the social relations of the elderly.

Because of the potential disruption of social roles, relationships, and interactions that widowhood often brings about, it is likely that bereaved persons would manifest these changes in altered self-conceptions. It is presently unclear, however, if self-conceptions

are changed, to what extent changes are made, and if the changes are temporary or persistent. The present investigation addresses these questions.

Specifically, the hypotheses addressed in the study are the following:

HYPOTHESIS 1. Recently bereaved older adults will have lower levels of social anchorage than nonbereaved older adults.

HYPOTHESIS 2. Bereaved older adults will continue to have lower levels of social anchorage through the first two years of bereavement than nonbereaved older adults during a similar two-year period.

METHODS

The data utilized in this investigation were part of a longitudinal descriptive study of bereavement among older adults. The study was completed in 1983 in the Salt Lake metropolitan area (the University of Utah study). Bereaved and nonbereaved respondents were asked to complete questionnaires at six time periods during the course of two years. A detailed description of the methodology can be found in Lund et al. (1986), Lund et al. (1985), or Caserta et al. (1985).

Sampling Procedures

Recently bereaved spouses age 50 and over were identified through the use of local newspaper obituaries in order to complete the first interview/questionnaire as early as three weeks following their spouses' deaths. Official mortality data obtained later from the State Department of Health Statistics revealed that this procedure missed only 9% of the actual deaths for those in the same age category. No significant gender, age, or socioeconomic differences were found between those whose obituaries were published and those whose obituaries were not published.

All potential bereaved participants were randomly assigned to either a home interview ($N = 104$) or a mailed questionnaire group ($N = 88$) in order to test for an interviewer effect. No major interviewer effect was observed (for details, see Caserta et al. 1985), and so the two samples have been combined into one sample for further statistical analyses. A total of 192 bereaved people participated in the study.¹

Nonbereaved elderly were identified through the use of the public voter registry data and were selected on the basis of their sex, age, and socioeconomic area of residence. In order to reduce the number of matching procedures, a matched nonbereaved person was selected only for each of the 104 bereaved respondents in the interview group.²

Samples Utilized for Statistical Analyses

Important methodological and theoretical considerations required the elimination of some bereaved and nonbereaved participants from the statistical analyses.³ The administration procedures of the TST can influence the number of statements that respondents make and to some extent the contents of the statements (Spitzer et al. 1971). All research participants were instructed by either the interviewer or on the questionnaire itself to limit themselves to five minutes to complete the TST. In this particular case, the presence of an interviewer might influence the number of statements completed through the

monitoring of the time restriction and subtle informal communications that could either motivate the respondents or distract them from the task. Because none of the nonbereaved participants were personally interviewed, the only legitimate comparisons to bereaved persons would be those who also were not interviewed. Therefore, the 104 bereaved persons who were in the interview subsample were not included in the statistical analyses in this investigation. The need to drop these interview participants was further substantiated by statistical tests that compared them with the bereaved who were not interviewed. MANOVA tests with repeated measures revealed that the interview group consistently made fewer statements than the noninterview sample.⁴

The theoretical rationale of this investigation focuses on the dynamic versus the stable aspects of self-conception. Therefore, it is critical that the statistical analyses be based only upon those research participants who completed all six of the measurement periods. Otherwise, the observed differences in social anchorage scores might be associated with the unique composition of the respondents who completed each of the time periods. Although this results in further reductions in sample sizes, it provides greater clarity theoretically and methodologically. The total number of respondents meeting these criteria were 43 bereaved and 72 nonbereaved older adults.

Instruments

The bereaved and nonbereaved respondents included in this investigation completed all six of the questionnaires in the larger study according to the following time schedule: 3-4 weeks (T_1), 2 months (T_2), 6 months (T_3), 1 year (T_4), 18 months (T_5), and 2 years (T_6) after the death, or in the same intervals in the case of the nonbereaved. With the exception of the demographic variables measured at T_1 , all six questionnaires were essentially the same within each sample.⁵

Following the suggestion of Mulford and Salisbury (1964), the TST was placed at the beginning of all six of the questionnaires to minimize the possibility of contamination by the other survey items. The social anchorage dimension of the self-concept was measured through the TST by counting the number of consensual statements or references. These references are anchoring in nature because they solidify a person's identity in social positions, relationships, and group memberships. The specific coding procedures outlined by Spitzer et al. (1971) were utilized in this study.⁶

Respondent Characteristics

Even though the respondents in this investigation were actually subsamples from the larger study, they did not differ from the others with respect to any of the major sociodemographic characteristics. It is also noteworthy that the nonbereaved participants included in this study did not differ from the bereaved with respect to the same sociodemographic characteristics.

Of the 43 bereaved respondents, 81.4% were female, 81.4% were at least high school graduates, 64.3% were not employed, and 98% were Caucasian. Of the 72 nonbereaved respondents, 79.2% were female, 81.7% had graduated from high school, 68.6% were not employed, and 100% were Caucasian. Both samples were equally representative of the lower-, middle-, and upper-socioeconomic areas within the Salt Lake metropolitan area. At the beginning of the study, the mean age of the bereaved respondents was 67.8 years,

with the youngest being 55 and the oldest 80. The nonbereaved ranged in age from 51 to 85 years, with a mean of 66.3 years. Respondents in both groups had been married almost 39 years (mean). Although most of them were of the Mormon religious affiliation (76% of the bereaved and 70% of the nonbereaved), extensive statistical comparisons revealed that religious membership and activity did not appreciably influence the bereavement process (Lund et al. 1984).⁷

RESULTS

The first hypothesis suggested that older adults would have lower social anchorage scores as an outcome of bereavement when compared to those who were nonbereaved. The second hypothesis maintained that this effect would persist during the two years of measurement.

A multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) with repeated measures was utilized in order to test the hypotheses. Three effects are tested in this procedure. The first is a test for an initial difference between the bereaved and the nonbereaved at T_1 (Hypothesis 1). In addition, the MANOVA also tests for changes over time in social anchorage both for the total sample and, more important (as pertaining to Hypothesis 2), if any change in social anchorage is dependent upon bereavement status. This latter test is of the interaction between bereavement status and time.

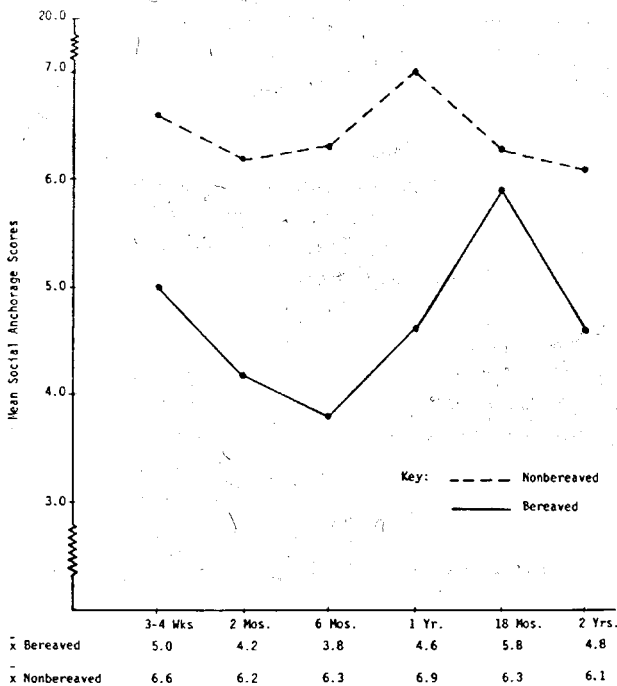


Figure 1.
Social Anchorage Scores over Two Years: Bereaved vs. Nonbereaved

The MANOVA did yield statistically significant results in testing for initial differences in social anchorage between the bereaved and the nonbereaved at T_1 , $F(1,113) = 3.73$, $p = .05$. As indicated in Figure 1, the nonbereaved scored significantly higher in social anchorage ($\bar{x} = 6.6$) than did their bereaved counterparts ($\bar{x} = 5.0$). On the average, the bereaved had one and one-half fewer social anchorage statements on the TSTs than the nonbereaved respondents. The first hypothesis was therefore confirmed—there was an initial impact on social anchorage because of bereavement in that the death of one's spouse tends to lower that component of the self concept.

As expected, once bereavement produced an initial impact on social anchorage, there were no significant changes over time. The test for these changes did not yield statistical significance, either with time, as a main effect, or interacting with bereavement status. In essence, this means that, first, social anchorage for the sample as a whole did not significantly change through the six measurement periods, which points to the relative stability associated with this construct. In addition, given the failure of the interaction between time and bereavement status to attain statistical significance, it can be concluded that any change (or stability) in social anchorage was experienced similarly by both groups. Therefore, the difference in social anchorage that was detected at the first three to four weeks of bereavement generally persisted throughout the remaining two years. This finding confirms the second hypothesis.

Upon examining Figure 1, one notices (consistent with the MANOVA results) that the nonbereaved respondents' mean social anchorage scores consistently remained higher than those of the bereaved, giving further support to Hypothesis 2. It must also be acknowledged, however, that although the nonbereaved social anchorage scores were fairly stable throughout the two years, there was more variation among those in the bereaved sample. Although the nonbereaved social anchorage scores always remained higher than the bereaved, the magnitude of the difference varied throughout the two years. The largest difference appeared at 6 months ($\bar{x}_B = 3.8$; $\bar{x}_N = 6.3$), but the scores for the two groups came within one-half of one point of each other at 18 months ($\bar{x}_B = 5.8$; $\bar{x}_N = 6.3$). The bereaved began to show an increase in social anchorage between 6 months and 18 months, but at the time of the final measurement taken at 2 years, their mean score was within 0.2 of their T_1 measurement ($\bar{x}_{T_2} = 4.8$). Therefore, as the MANOVA indicated, the bereaved respondents, although showing more variability than the nonbereaved, had almost the same levels of social anchorage after 2 years of bereavement that they had soon after their spouses died. The findings indicate that these older adults experienced a loss of social anchorage with the death of their spouses and that the loss was still evident 2 years later. Further MANOVA analyses with gender as a covariate showed that the impact of bereavement on social anchorage was the same for both widows and widowers.

A closer inspection of specific references on the Twenty Statements Test helped to provide examples of stability and changes in social anchorage. Among the nonbereaved participants, the most common and stable sources of anchorage were spouse and family relationships, occupations, gender, and religion. Typical of the nonbereaved inventories was a 69-year-old female who made references at each time period to four specific sources of anchorage, "wife, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother." Similarly, throughout the two years, a 64-year-old male made anchorage statements to being "a man, husband, citizen, and Christian." The TSTs of a 62-year-old bereaved female showed

stability in references to being a mother and grandmother but early anchorage statements about being a friend and member of a community disappeared six months after her spouse's death. At one year she listed, "neighbor," but no further references to "friend" were included. At T₁ a 65-year-old-bereaved male made anchorage references to being retired and a member of a church, but both were not included in any subsequent TSTs. He continued to make statements about church activities but did not describe himself as the "member" that he had mentioned earlier. These qualitative comments appear to support the contention that as interactions are altered as a result of the spouse's death, there are subsequent modifications in social anchorage.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The major findings of this investigation were consistent with the previous bereavement literature and with the symbolic interactionist perspective and they add empirical evidence regarding the timing and extent of changes in social anchorage among older surviving spouses. The bereavement literature suggested that the sudden cessation of interaction with a spouse can have both immediate and long-term consequences, and our data supported this view.

Because the findings of this study revealed that bereaved older adults had significantly lower levels of social anchorage, it is highly likely that they were associated with the loss of an important source of continued and consistent interaction that they had developed during many years of marriage. Many people experience a degree of social anchorage from their marital relationship and in some cases, as Saunders (1981) suggested, part of their self-concept includes a "coupled identity." The death of the spouse, particularly after an average of 39 years of marriage, also can adversely affect the social anchorage dimension of one's self-concept because other role relationships and groups memberships were associated with the "coupled identity." For example, social activities with other couples can become less frequent, and memberships in specific clubs and groups may be disrupted because they involved "couple" activities. For those who do not replace these cumulative losses in their social anchorage with new relationships and important group memberships, their interactions in significant relationships might deteriorate to a point where they become socially isolated.

Although the mean social anchorage scores of the bereaved respondents in this study do not suggest that they were socially isolated after two years, the impact of bereavement was still noticeable at that time. The differences between the social anchorage mean scores of the bereaved and the nonbereaved varied over the two years from 0.4 to 2.5. This implies that the bereaved respondents had lost from one to two sources of social anchorage. The present analyses did not permit an identification of what specific sources were lost, but it is likely that one of them was spouse related. Our findings support the contention that continued social interactions with significant others are important to the stability of the self-concept or at least the social anchorage dimension.

These losses in social anchorage might be viewed as an unraveling of the "threads of connectedness" that Lofland (1982) discussed in relation to human attachment. With the loss of such a major role relationship, other aspects of our connectedness are affected. The way other people perceive and interact with us and validate who we are is influenced by many factors, including our marital status.

Symbolic interactionism is highly relevant to the study of bereavement. Some of the most fundamental concepts in symbolic interaction (e.g., the self, self-concept, significant others, and social anchorage) are of primary importance to an understanding of bereavement processes, coping strategies, and outcomes. The Twenty Statements Test, which is well grounded in symbolic interactionism, is a promising measurement tool for assessing a variety of these bereavement-related variables and is highly recommended for future investigations. In this study it was used to measure a specific outcome of bereavement, but it can be coded in almost unlimited ways to assess other outcomes, processes, and predictors of adjustment.

Because the self-concept can influence subsequent behavior by becoming a "plan of action" (Kuhn and McPartland 1954) there are clear implications for predicting long-term bereavement adjustments. If bereavement results in lowered social anchorage, other bereavement processes and outcomes might be influenced by those losses. There is a need for additional research utilizing social anchorage and self-concepts as independent variables predicting the experiences associated with widowhood.

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NOTES

1. Because of the early assessment and the longitudinal design, 61% of the potential bereaved participants refused to participate. The most common reasons for refusal were too busy, too upset, poor health, and advice from adult children. A one-year follow-up telephone interview with a random sample of 111 of those who had refused indicated that their self-reported health was slightly lower than those who had participated. They did not differ, however, in age, gender, socioeconomic status, perceived coping, perceived stress, and rate of remarriage. It should not be inferred that the participants were experiencing the bereavement process in the same way, but they were similar with respect to several important considerations.

2. The refusal rate for this sample was 50%, and the major reasons for refusal were too busy and not interested. The first two questionnaires for each of the nonbereaved participants were delivered by a research assistant according to the same procedures as those used in the bereaved mailed questionnaire group. In both samples, the respondents completed the questionnaires without the assistance of an interviewer and returned them by mail.

3. The methodological issue is related to the need for similar TST administration procedures in the bereaved and nonbereaved samples in order to make the statistical comparisons valid and meaningful. The theoretical issue deals with the need to focus on those who completed TSTs at all six time periods so that the assessments of change/stability in social anchorage are those that deal with the same respondents over time.

4. This probably stemmed from the fact that an interviewer was not present to monitor the amount of time they used to complete the inventory. The mean number of statements made by the interview group through the six time periods were 12.7, 12.4, 13.0, 14.2, 13.9, 15.0, compared with the following means of those who were unassisted by an interviewer: 14.9, 15.1, 14.9, 15.0, 14.5, 16.0.

5. The questionnaires for the bereaved group were slightly longer because they included items specific to their coping strategies and grief resolution. It took on the average of 90 minutes to 2 hours for the bereaved to complete their questionnaires compared with 45 to 60 minutes for the nonbereaved. The TST was presented on a page by itself with the following directions printed at the top:

There are twenty blanks on the page below. Please write twenty answers to the simple question "Who am I?" in the blanks. Just give twenty different answers to this question. Answer as if you were giving the answers to yourself, not to somebody else. Write the answers in the order that they occur to you. Don't worry about logic or "importance." Go along fairly fast, for time is limited (5 Minute Time Limit). In other words, describe yourself in 20 different words or sentences. Anything that you want to write is an acceptable answer.

6. During the course of the study, seven graduate research assistants were employed to code the questionnaires and the TSTs for computer analyses. All of the assistants received extensive training in the scoring procedures for social anchorage, which included reading articles on the TST, studying the coding procedures by Spitzer et al. (1971), and practicing on selected TSTs. At the end of the training period, the interrater reliability for the social anchorage scoring was 95% agreement. A random sample of coded TSTs was later compared for interrater reliability, and it was found to be 96%.

7. Because the sample is largely homogeneous with respect to racial characteristics, caution is advised in interpreting the study findings accordingly. As Lofland (1985) suggests, careful and precise depictions of grief experiences are recommended over sweeping generalizations. Our data may reflect some unique aspects of bereavement and social anchorage that are not consistent with the experiences of all ethnic and racial groups.

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