PSYCHOLOGICAL ADAPTATION TO SPOUSAL LOSS IN OLD AGE
THE ROLE OF PSYCHOSOCIAL RESOURCES AND LOSS CONTEXT

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OVERCOMING VULNERABILITY: LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVES

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Problem, Aims, and Theoretical Background

- Spousal bereavement is a normative transition in old age - especially in women - but also known as one of **the most stressful life events**.
- Numerous studies have shown the **detrimental impact** of widowhood on individual's **psychological, social, physical, and economical well-being**.

➔ However there are huge **interindividual differences**, which can be **explained by personal as well as by contextual factors**. To date these factors have mostly been studied separately.

- The aim of this study is to test how different **socio-demographic and personality factors**, along with **factors concerning the relationship with the deceased** and **the context of loss** are predictive for various **indicators of psychological adaptation: depression** (emotional dimension), **loneliness** (socio-emotional dimension) and **life satisfaction** (rational dimension). This approach should allow examining the distinct predictive power of personal and contextual factors on different dimensions of psychological adaptation, which is highly relevant for designing interventions for bereaved persons.
- We hypothesise that personal and contextual factors are interrelated and that after controlling for personal factors – especially for personality traits – the amount of variance explained by contextual factors is comparatively small.

Method

- Data of the first wave (2012) of the ongoing longitudinal **self-report questionnaire study** 'Vulnerability and growth: Developmental dynamics and differential effects of the loss of an intimate partner in the second life half',which is part of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research 'LIVES – Overcoming vulnerability: life course perspectives' (Swiss National Science Foundation).
- **Random sample** (persons with a loss within the last 2-5 years), addresses supplied by the Swiss Federal Office of Statistics, **and advertisements** (loss within the last 2 years) via different media.

Bereaved Persons (*n* = 380)
Age 60-89 (*M* = 74.36; *SD* = 7.19)
217 women, 163 men
spousal loss within the last five years
married on average 45.38 years (*SD* = 8.51)
non-institutionalised

Instruments

Center for Epid. Studies Depression Scale (CES-D)
(Radloff, 1977) (Cronbach's α .84)

Loneliness Scales
(De Jong Gierveld & Kamphuis, 1985) (Cronbach's α .84)

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)
(Diener et al., 1985) (Cronbach's α .86)

Big Five Inventory (BFI-10)
(Rammstedt & John, 2007)

Resilience Scale (RS-11)
(Wagnild & Young, 1993) (Cronbach's α .87)

Self constructed items for **marital happiness**, received **spousal support** in own development**, social support** after bereavement, **emotional valence** of loss experience

Results

Predictor	Depressive symptoms				Loneliness				Life satisfaction			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Personal factors												
Age	.01	-.08	-.10	-.03	-.01	-.10+	-.10+	-.05	.08	.17**	.17**	.15*
Gender (1, female; 2, male)	-.06	-.08	-.09	-.04	.16*	.13*	.13*	**.17****	-.05	-.00	-.02	-.02
Educational Level (1 - 6)	-.08	-.04	-.04	-.06	-.02	.05	.06	.03	.09	.02	.00	.02
Extraversion (1 - 5)		-.08	-.09	-.10		-.17**	-.17**	**-.17****		.16**	.16**	**.15***
Neuroticism (1 - 5)		.34***	.34***	**.31****		.15**	.15**	**.13***		-.09	-.08	-.08
Agreeableness (1 - 5)		.01	.00	-.03		-.15**	-.15**	**-.16****		.01	.01	.01
Conscientiousness (1 - 5)		-.15**	-.15**	**-.12***		-.02	-.01	-.01		.01	-.01	.00
Openness (1 - 5)		.10	.10	.05		.06	.06	.03		.06	.05	.08
Resilience (1 - 7)		-.28***	-.29***	**-.24****		-.32***	-.32***	**-.29****		.29***	.27***	**.25****
Contextual factors												
Marital happiness (1 - 10)			.15*	.12+			.05	.02			-.10	-.06
Spousal support (1 - 5)			-.05	-.09			-.05	-.08			.21**	**.23****
Expectedness (1, sudden; 2, foreseen)				-.01				-.03				-.03
Emotional valence (1 - 10)				**-.17****				**-.21****				**.20****
Social support (1, yes; 2, no)				.00				-.04				-.01
Time since loss				**-.20****				-.09				.00
R²	.01	.31	.32	.38	.02	.27	.27	.32	.02	.20	.23	.27
Adjusted *R²*	-.00	.28	.29	.34	.01	.25	.24	.29	.01	.18	.20	.23
Change in *R²*	.01	.30	.02	.06	.02	.25	.00	.05	.02	.19	.03	.03
F (change)	.88	16.97	2.63	5.29	2.30	16.31	.50	5.70	1.51	11.09	5.91	3.17
df	3, 242	6, 236	2, 234	4, 230	3, 299	6, 293	2, 291	4, 287	3, 293	6, 287	2, 285	4, 281
p	.455	.000	.074	.000	.077	.000	.606	.000	.212	.000	.003	.014

Standardized coefficients (*B*) are reported. *** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .06.

Conclusion

- Our results reveal the centrality of personality factors for explaining psychological adaptation to spousal loss. Personality factors account for much more variance in all three indicators than the other groups of factors.
- But the effect of factors concerning the relationship with the deceased and the context of loss play also a significant role.
- There are personal as well as contextual risk factors:

➔ Low scores in resilience are related to worse scores in all three indicators of psychological adaptation.

➔ Low scores in extraversion are related to higher loneliness and lower life satisfaction.

➔ High scores in neuroticism are related to more depressive symptoms and higher loneliness.

➔ The reported emotional valence of loss experience is a crucial factor in bereavement: a negative emotional valence is related to higher depression rates, higher loneliness and lower life satisfaction.

➔ Widowed men are more vulnerable for loneliness after spousal loss than widowed women.

➔ Reported low support by the deceased spouse is related to lower life satisfaction.

➔ Depression is the only indicator of psychological adaptation effected by time: While depression decrease with time passed since loss, loneliness and life satisfaction are time-independent.

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