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Marital split-up and widowhood in old age:
Differential impact on psychological and social well-being

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INTRODUCTION

Marital split-up and spousal loss are among the most stressful critical life events in adulthood. Whereas in old age bereavement is normative and can be anticipated, divorce is an "off-time" transition for older adults. In contrast to bereavement, which has been amply studied, research on later life divorce is still missing despite the increasing relevance of the topic due to the significant raise of divorce rates after long-term marriage.

AIMS

Based on an extended view of Amato's divorce-stress-adjustment model (2000), this contribution aims at exploring a) the differential impact of marital split-up and widowhood in older age on adaptation to these critical life events, namely on psychological (i.e. life satisfaction) and social well-being (i.e. social loneliness, and b) the role of intra- and interpersonal resources and contextual factors of loss or breakup as predictors for these outcomes.

METHODS

❖ Data from a questionnaire study 'Vulnerability and growth: Developmental dynamics and differential effects of the loss of an intimate partner in the 2nd life half' are presented, which is part of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research 'LIVES' (funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation).

❖ A randomized quota sample (age, gender, civil status) was supplied by the Swiss Federal Office of Statistics, additional participants were recruited by advertisements.

Table 1 Sample Description

	Divorced / Separated	Widowers	Married control group
Age (*M*) (Range 60-75)	64.6 years	68 years	67.7 years
Time since loss/breakup (*M*)	8.6 years	3.6 years	-
Duration of (ex-) marriage (*M*)	24.4 years	38.6 years	41.1 years
n (women/men)	251 (127/123)	270 (170/100)	221 (110/111)

RESULTS

Fig. 1 Group comparison of the two loss or breakup groups with the married controls regarding life satisfaction and social loneliness
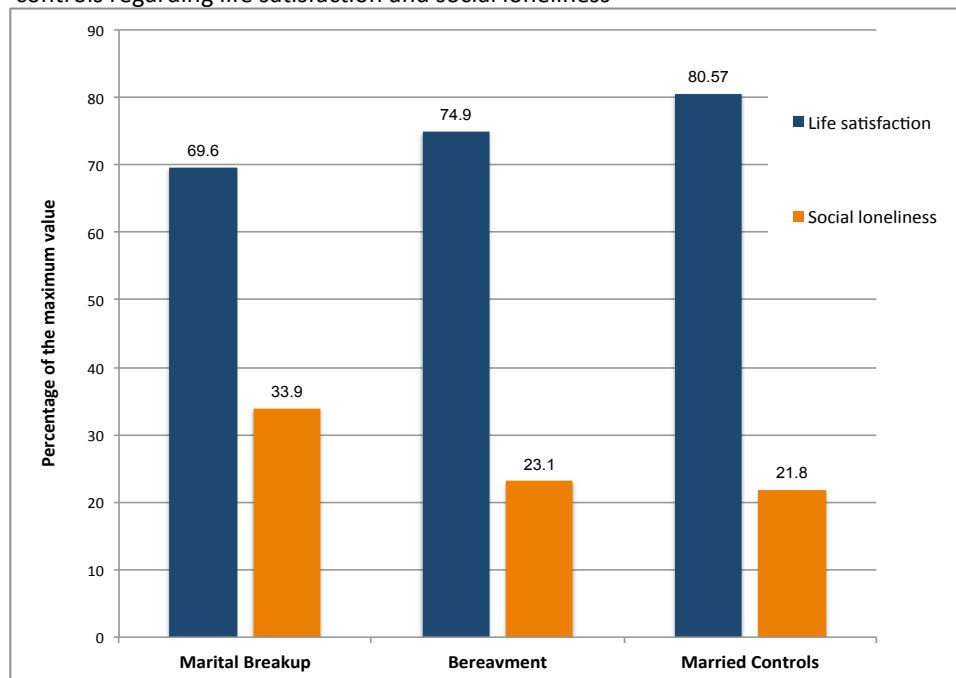
Analyses of covariance (covariates: age and gender) reveal:

- **Life satisfaction**: Individuals with a marital breakup reported significantly ($p < .001$) lower scores compared to bereaved individuals. Married controls showed significantly higher scores than individuals with a breakup ($p < .001$) as well as a spousal loss ($p < .01$).
- **Social loneliness**: Individuals who experienced a marital split-up had significantly ($p < .01$) higher scores compared to the bereaved ones. The latter group did not differ from the married controls.
- The covariate **gender** was significantly related to life satisfaction $F(1, 731) = 6.98$, $p < .01$, and social loneliness $F(1, 731) = 10.37$, $p < .01$.

Table 2 Predictors of life satisfaction in bereaved and divorced/ separated individuals (hierarchical regression analyses)

	Life Satisfaction	
	Divorced / Separated	Widowers
Socio-demographic variables		
Age	.13	.05
Gender	.09	.00
Financial resources [a]		
more than enough money	.50***	.27***
enough money	-.20	-.07
not enough money [b]		
Intrapersonal resources		
Extraversion	.07	-.01
Neuroticism	-.10	-.13[†]
Agreeableness	.02	-.09
Conscientiousness	-.07	.03
Openness	.05	.14*
Resilience	.24**	.20**
Interpersonal resources		
Currently in a relationship (0= no, 1 =yes)	.03	-.09
Social support (1= no, 2 =yes)	.02	-.05
Contextual factors ex-relationship		
Marital satisfaction in ex-relationship	.12	.21*
Emotional valence of loss	.30***	.23***
Time since spousal loss	.13	.04
Adjusted R^2	.39	.28

Notes. Standardized coefficients (*B*) are reported
[a] Dummy indicator (1= yes, 0=0), [b] Reference category
[†] *p* < .10. **p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

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DISCUSSION

- Individuals with a marital breakup show a lower adaptation than widowers regarding life satisfaction and social loneliness. This is in line with our assumption that marital split-up is an "off-time" transition in this age group and therefore it is more difficult to adapt.
- Compared to married controls, individuals with a marital loss or breakup show significantly lower scores in life satisfaction. However with regard to social loneliness, widowers do not differ from the married controls.
- Financial resources, resilience and the emotional valence of the loss are the most important predictors regarding life satisfaction in both loss groups.
- Regarding social loneliness, only intrapersonal resources (neuroticism and resilience) are significant predictors within the divorced/separated individuals.
- Openness and marital satisfaction with the ex-relationship are significant predictors for both indicators only regarding the bereaved sample.
- Results will be validated with longitudinal data gathered in the second wave of our project.