TIME HEALS SOME WOUNDS: PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT AFTER THE BREAK-UP OF A LONG-TERM MARRIAGE

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The break-up of an intimate relationship is among the most common but also most incisive psychological and social stressors. Divorce rate in Switzerland increased in the last decades, particularly that of long-term marriages. Numerous studies have investigated the effects of divorce, mostly focussing on adults with younger children. However, little is known about the specific ways of adaption to divorce after a long-term partnership and the large variation concerning the patterns of adaptation. According to the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, the process of divorce sets into motion numerous stressful events. Severity and duration of negative outcomes depend on the presence of a variety of moderating factors such as intra- and interpersonal resources. A central question in this context is whether divorce is an acute or rather a chronic stressor. According to the idea of adaptation it has been suggested that divorce represents a temporary crisis to which most people adapt within two or three years. In contrast, other research results suggest that divorce entails chronic stress. Using data gathered in wave 1 of IP12 we want to investigate whether our data support the crisis or the chronic state approach.

Aims and Hypotheses:

The aims of this presentation are:

- To compare 3 groups of middle aged individuals (45-65 years) who experienced a marital break-up after a long-term relationship (10 > years) at different times. Members of group 1 experienced a break-up within the last 24 months and are currently not in a relationship, group 2 members had a break-up 2-5 years ago and are also currently single, and group 3 underwent a break-up within the last 5 years and are at present repartnered. A group of age-matched married individuals with no history of marital break-up served as control group with regard to various indicators of psychological adaptation such as life satisfaction, depression, and subjective health.
- To study the role of *time passed since marital break-up* as predictor of psychological adaptation along with other variables, namely sociodemographic variables, personality, ex-relationship and break-up circumstances, and social environment.

Based on the status quo of research, we hypothesize that:

- Individuals with a marital break-up within the last 24 months show a poorer psychological adaptation than those who experienced it 2-5 years ago. Both groups show less life satisfaction, lower subjective health and a higher depression scores than the married controls.
- Psychological adaptation to marital break-up is predicted primarily by time passed since separation, and secondarily by intra- and interpersonal resources.
- Individuals with a marital break-up having a new partner show a better psychological adaptation than those who are not repartnered.

METHODS

Sample Description

Table 1. *Sample 1ˢᵗ wave 2012, participants in the German-speaking part of Switzerland*

	Marital break-up			Married
	Group 1 n =99 (76 w/ 23 m)	Group 2 n= 64 (53 w/11 m)	Group 3 n= 62 (30 w/32 m)	Control Group n = 337 (193 w/143 m)
Age (years)	45-65	45-65	45-65	45-65
Time passed since Break-up (years)	< 2	2-5	≤ 5	No marital break-up
New Partner?	No	No	Yes	-

Variables and Instruments (Questionnaire):

Indicators for Psychological Adaptation:
- **Life Satisfaction:** Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985).
- **Depression:** CES-D (Radloff, 1977).
- **Subjective Health:** Item from Swiss Household Panel.

Predictors of Psychological Adaptation:
- **Neuroticism, Extraversion:** BFI-10 (Rammstedt & John, 2007).
- **Resilience:** Resilience Scale (Wagnild & Young, 1993).
- **Time passed since break-up:** self-developed Item.
- **Happiness in ex-relationship:** self-developed Item.
- **Duration of ex-relationship:** self-developed Item.
- **Initiator break-up:** self-developed Item.
- **Marital status:** self-developed Item.
- **Currently relationship status:** self-developed Item.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Group comparisons (means):

- Life Satisfaction
  Group 1, 2 <* Group 3, Married
- Depression:
  Group 1, 2 >* Group 3, Married
- Subjective Health:
  Group 1, 2 <* Married <* Group 3
  Group 2, Married <* Group 3

* indicates a significant difference (p < .05)

Life Satisfaction

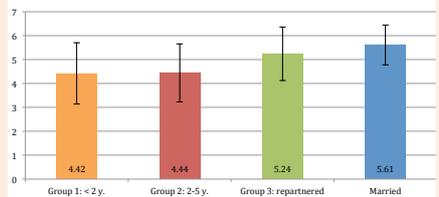| Group 1: < 2 y.	Group 2: 2-5 y.	Group 3: repartnered	Married
4.42	4.44	5.24	5.61

Figure 1. *Life Satisfaction of individuals with a marital break-up compared to married controls*

Table 2. *Predictors of psychological adaptation (Life Satisfaction, Depression and Subjective Health)*

Variable	Life Satisfaction (n = 226) β	Depression (n =165) β	Subjective Health¹ (n = 227) β
Sociodemographic Variables			
Age	.05	-.18*	.13†
Gender (1= women, 2= men)	.07	-.12	.08
Educational level (6 levels)	-.03	-.03	.00
Personality			
Extraversion	-.08	.02	-.06
Neuroticism	-.28***	.29***	-.13†
Resilience	.38***	-.09	.35***
Time			
Time passed since marital break-up	.05	-.17†	.01
Ex-Relationship and Break-up Circumstances			
Happiness in ex-relationship	.07	.11	-.02
Duration of ex-relationship	-.03	.05	-.13†
Initiator of separation (1=ex-partner, 2=both, 3=me)	.11†	.05	.01
Marital status (1=divorced, 2= separated)	.05	-.02	-.02
Social Environment			
Current relationship? (1= yes, 2= no)	-.20**	.21*	-.25***
R^2 total	.40	.31	.32

Note: *p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. † marginally significant, ¹scale 1-5 (5 = very well)

DISCUSSION AND FURTHER STEPS

- Group comparisons of currently single participants show that those who experienced a marital break-up 2- 5 years ago do not differ from that ones who experienced the break-up more recently (< 2 years) regarding life satisfaction, depression and subjective health.
- Regression analysis shows that time passed since marital break-up is not a significant predictor for the various indicators of psychological adaptation. The most relevant predictors are neuroticism as well as resilience and the relationship status (single or repartnered).
- Both analyses demonstrate the benefit of a new romantic relationship. Repartnered people who experienced a marital break-up do not differ from the married regarding life satisfaction and depression. The subjective health of repartnered is significantly higher than that of the married.
- Further analyses including different indicators of psychological adaptation such as alcohol consumption and medication intake are planned. Also, SEM will be applied with the aim of considering how predictors and indicators of psychological adaptation are related among themselves and each other.

According to the guidelines of the University of Bern (Phil.-Hum. Faculty), the thesis will be comprised of 2-5 peer-reviewed published research papers. Following articles are planned (working titles):

- Time heals some wounds: psychological adjustment after the break-up of a long-term marriage. (In preparation. Authors: Knöpfli et al.)
- Vulnerability after the break-up of a long-term partnership- temporary state (crisis) or enduring distress (chronic strain). (In preparation)