Coping with loss: The relationship between childhood bereavement and later elements of worldview

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between bereavement in childhood and adolescence, and factors relating to personality in early adulthood. The research question of focus was: does bereavement in childhood relate to an early adult's present levels of depression, perception of experienced stress, and social support? Bereaved and non-bereaved participants were recruited through an undergraduate research system and answered several questionnaires measuring the above variables. Preliminary analyses found no significant differences between bereaved and non-bereaved individuals. However, upon sub-grouping the bereaved participants based on their self-identified coping strategies, the bereaved group that did not identify social support as their coping strategy was found to be significantly more depressed, and perceived less current social support than those who did receive social support. The results highlight the importance of social support in coping with bereavement and the possible development of a worldview that is affected, directly or indirectly, by bereavement experiences in childhood.

Résumé

Cette étude s'est penchée sur la relation entre le deuil durant l'enfance et l'adolescence, et les facteurs qui ont une incidence sur la formation de la personnalité au début de l'âge adulte. La question centrale de la recherche était : le deuil durant l'enfance a-t-il un lien avec la dépression au début de l'âge adulte, la perception du stress vécu et le soutien social? Des participants qui avaient vécu un deuil et d'autres qui n'en avaient pas vécu ont été choisis par l'intermédiaire d'un système de recherche de premier cycle et ont répondu à plusieurs questionnaires afin d'évaluer les variables proposées. Les analyses préliminaires des résultats n'ont indiqué aucune différence entre les deux groupes. Cependant, après répartition en sous-groupes des participants ayant vécu un deuil — sous-groupes établis en fonction des stratégies d'adaptation rapportées par chacun —, ceux qui n'avaient pas évoqué le recours au soutien social comme moyen de se remettre du deuil vécu se sont avérés beaucoup plus dépressifs et se sont vus comme étant moins soutenus par le milieu social que ceux qui avaient sollicité un tel soutien. Les résultats soulignent l'importance du soutien social pour se remettre de la perte d'un être cher, et le possible développement d'une vision du monde influencé directement ou indirectement par les deuils vécus durant l'enfance.

Introduction

Early loss of attachment, both physical and emotional, and its consequences on growth and development have been implicated as early as in Bowlby's developmental theory (Bowlby, 1963, 1973). Bereavement in children and adolescents is often correlated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other psychopathologies (Christ, Siegel, & Christ, 2002; Dowdney, 2000).

While previous studies of bereavement tend to focus on the coping processes and psychopathologies that could follow, Attig (2004) described bereavement as a process of relearning and reengaging with the world, "given that death has changed the world significantly" (p. 350). The experience of bereavement at an early age coincides with the development and consolidation of personality and worldview. Therefore, it is important to examine the potential differences in development between those who have experienced bereavement and those who have not encountered this type of stressor.

This study aims to examine bereavement through a comprehensive approach as suggested by Sanders (1989). Sanders's integrative approach to bereavement combines aspects of attachment with the appraisal and interpretation of stress (see Figure 1 below). Here, bereavement is conceptualized as an adaptive process that unfolds over time, with both internal and external moderators, which lead to various outcome trajectories including adverse effects on

Figure 1. Integrative theory of bereavement

Onset **Process** **Outcome**
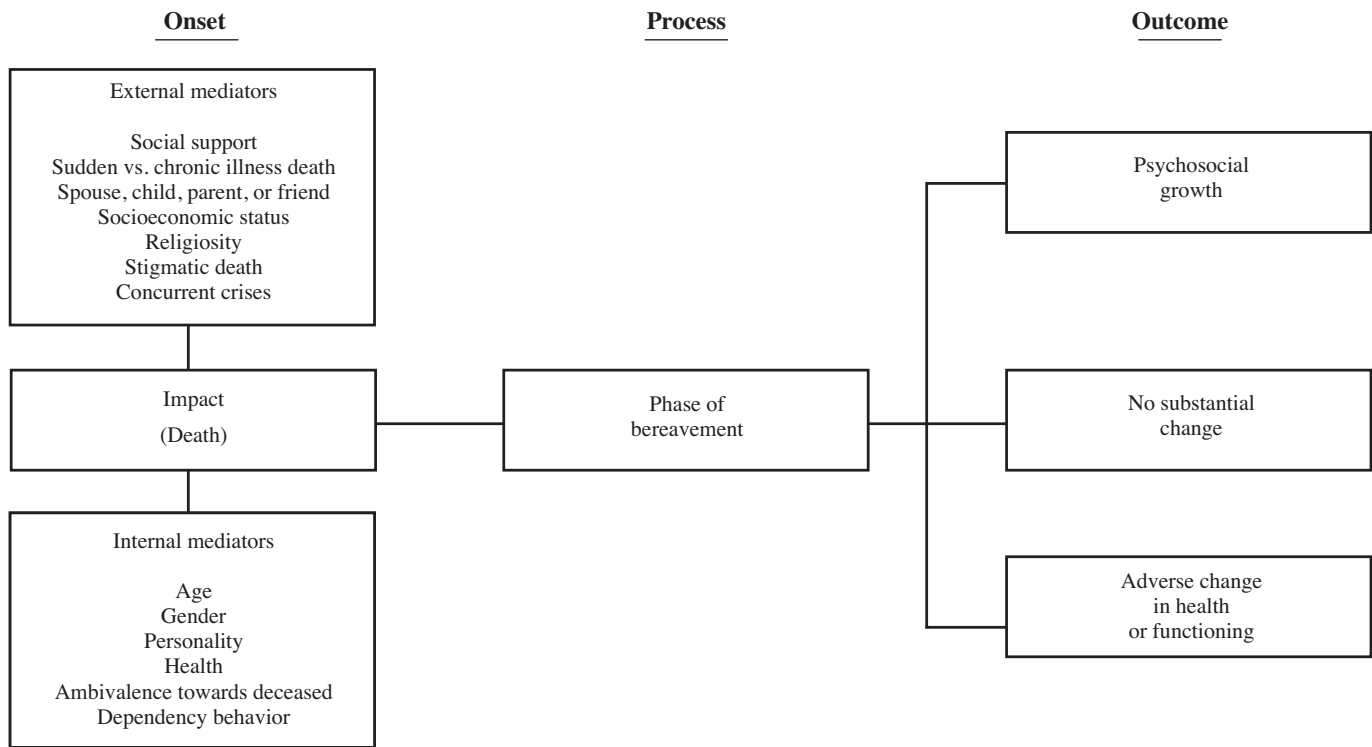
(Miller & McGown, 1997, p. 161; Sanders, 1989)

health and functioning, no changes in functioning, as well as post-traumatic growth (Sanders, 1989).

The purpose of this study was to look at the relationship between the experience of childhood and adolescent bereavement and elements of a worldview in a sample of university students to determine whether individuals who had been bereaved in the past developed a different worldview compared to those who had not previously experienced bereavement. Due to the difficult nature of identifying and measuring worldview, select variables of interest were chosen to represent three expressions of worldview. These variables were depression, perceived stress, and perceived social support. Given the lack of conclusive research on post-bereavement and worldview, no concrete predictions could be made with regard to the analyses, rendering the study exploratory in nature.

Method

Sixty-four undergraduate students ($N = 64$), including nine males and fifty-five females enrolled in an introductory psychology course, participated in this study. The participants' ages ranged from 17 to 35 years, with a mean age of 25 years. Participants were recruited through an online sign-up system, followed by a meeting with the experimenter in a psychology laboratory room on campus to obtain informed con-

sent and to complete a package of paper and pencil questionnaires.

Measures

Participants responded to a general demographics questionnaire constructed for the purposes of this study. The *Depression Inventory* is adapted from the revised *Beck Depression Inventory* (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, Ball, & Ranieri, 1996). This 21-item self-report measure is scored on a four-point Likert-type scale. This widely used measure has well-established reliability, with internal reliability scores ranging from $= 0.90$ (Segal, Coolidge, Cahill, & O'Riley, 2008) to $= 0.96$ (Basker, Moses, Russel & Russel, 2007), and a test-retest reliability of $r = 0.82$ (Basker et al., 2007). One item pertaining to sexuality was excluded, given the diversity of population culture and the age of some of the participants in the study. The *Perceived Social Support Scale* is adapted from Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet and Farley's (1988) *Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support*. This 12-item questionnaire demonstrates strong internal reliability of $\alpha = 0.93$ (Zimet et al., 1990). The *Perceived Stress Scale* is a 10-item scale developed by Cohen, with an internal reliability of $\alpha = 0.78$ (Cohen & Williamson, 1988). The *Bereavement Questionnaire* is composed of 10 items selected from the *Two-Track Model of Bereavement Questionnaire* (TTBQ) developed by Rubin and

colleagues (Rubin, 1981, 1999; Rubin, Nadav, Malkinson, Koren, Goffer-Shnarch, & Michaeli, 2009). In addition to the aforementioned questionnaires, one open-ended question ("Can you specify one thing/person/event that helped you cope with loss?") conceived by the first author was included in order to identify respondents' coping strategy.

Results

Out of the 64 participants involved in the study, 24 self-identified as having never experienced a prior bereavement (37.5%). Twenty-two respondents reported having experienced one prior bereavement (34.4%), and 18 endorsed having experienced at least two bereavements (28.1%).

A preliminary multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) test analyzing the effects of bereavement ($n = 40$) versus non-bereavement ($n = 24$) indicated no significant differences between these groups' scores on any of the various measures, $F(6, 57) = 1.074$, $p > .05$, ns. Further MANOVAs examining the effects of non-bereavement ($n = 24$), single bereavement ($n = 22$), and multiple bereavement ($n = 18$) also found no significant differences among the groups, $F(6, 57) = 1.831$, $p > .05$, ns.

MANOVA tests looking at the effects of identified coping strategies were executed based on the results of a content analysis grouping the bereaved participants as either bereaved and coping through social support ($n = 32$), or bereaved and coping through other strategies ($n = 8$). Independent ratings from four raters resulted in an overall inter-rater reliability of 80%. Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices confirmed that homogeneity of covariance was not violated at the $p < .001$ level. A significant effect of self-identified coping on various interpersonal measures was found, $F(3, 36) = 3.445$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .223$. Tests of between-subject effects indicated significant effects of self-identified coping on both depression, $F(1, 38) = 8.630$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .185$, and perceived social support, $F(1, 38) = 6.781$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .151$. The bereaved participants who felt that they had not received social support were found to be significantly more depressed ($M = 16.50$, $SD = 12.81$) than the bereaved participants who received social support ($M = 7.16$, $SD = 6.49$). Moreover, the bereaved participants who received social support at the time of grieving also perceived more social support in the present time ($M = 72.25$, $SD = 11.61$) than the bereaved participants who did not previously receive social support ($M = 59.75$, $SD = 14.28$).

Discussion

Based on the depression scores in the coping style groupings yielded by the analyses, bereaved individuals coping through strategies other than social support appeared more depressed than other groups. This is consistent with previous literature reporting higher rates of depression among bereaved populations (Tyrka, Wier, Price, Ross, & Carpenter, 2008). In addition, the significant differences among the groups in depression ratings may be rooted in participants' feelings of lacking social support regardless of whether or not they had experienced a prior bereavement. Past research also has found a positive relationship between lack of social support, feelings of loneliness, and depression (Yaacob, Juhari, Talib, & Uba, 2009).

Social support serves a variety of functions, all of which may facilitate the amelioration of stress across multiple situations, including bereavement. The feeling of being cared for, valued, and loved is helpful in reminding a person that other meaningful relationships are still available; the presence of a caring person to freely talk to allows one to explore one's thoughts and come to terms with the loss (i.e., meaning-making; see Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006; Kim, Kjervik, Belyea, & Choi, 2011). In this capacity, for example, a caring listener may provide new insights and perspectives that help a mourner to cope (see Wolchik, Coxe, Tein, Sandler & Ayers, 2008); supportive relationships may provide feedback such as validation (e.g., "No, I don't think you're crazy."), as well as material or physical help in adapting to a new life. Thus, social support may play a key role in post-loss perceptions, meaning-making, and beliefs regarding the world.

By perceiving less satisfaction with their social support, participants in this study may have felt more depressed and/or more stressed, which may contribute to a more pessimistic view of the world (Nolen-Hoeksema, Parker, & Larson, 1994). Also, Attig (2004) regarded the bereavement process as relearning the world through philosophical reflections. The relearning of the world as a more negative place, brought on by the experience of loss, may then lead to further negative beliefs and worldview, which may have resulted in higher scores on the depression measure within groups that have experienced a prior bereavement. Due to the complex nature of social support, further research is needed in order to explore the dynamic relationship between the role of social support, experience of trauma, and the idea of meaning-making and worldview. In addition, it would be interesting to explore whether the same results would be found in other sample populations.

The lack of differences across all variables in groupings based on non-bereavement and the number of times bereaved suggest that there is a high level of resiliency in childhood and adolescence when facing trauma and extreme stress, such as bereavement.

Perceptions of current psychological and situational states are often dependent on or shaped by interactions between past experiences, personality factors, and present situations (Hadad, 2012). Overall, this exploratory study highlighted the importance of the possible role of intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics in post-loss experiences. The variability in individual responses found in this study is indicative of the nature of the bereavement response and its uniqueness to each individual (Hadad, 2012; Sanders, 1989).

It is important to acknowledge the current study's limitations. This study is quasi-experimental in nature with a cross-sectional design. Many (potentially) relevant variables to this research, such as the age at bereavement, relationship with the deceased pre- and post-loss, the level of attachment to the deceased, and the actual bereavement 'trajectory' for the individual cannot be controlled nor manipulated by experimental means. Results can only be analyzed through correlational procedures, and are limited in how the relationships may be generalized. In addition, participants of this study were university students, a relatively distinct group that is not necessarily representative of the general population. Future studies that test our constructs of measure on other populations, and that use a longitudinal design, could serve to replicate and expand on some of the findings of this current study.

In spite of its limitations, this study emphasized the need to continue bereavement research in relation to subsequent experiences of depression and perceived social support. To this end, the study established links between certain variables and the idea of a worldview that should be examined more closely, ultimately adding to a growing body of evidence for exploring interpersonal and intrapersonal factors and their relationships in much more complex and dynamic ways.

In conclusion, the practical implications of this research suggest that social support may be an essential in coping with bereavement, especially in the population of post-secondary university students. The present study underscored the importance of social support, and serves as a springboard into future research exploring the role of social support in coping with loss. Its practical applications could include making social support more readily accessible to youths and adolescents when facing traumatic stressors through systematic delivery of services alongside education to bring public awareness to its purpose and utility.

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