The Core Emotion Themes of Conjugal Loss

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Previous studies have associated emotion and appraisal with long-term bereavement outcome. The present study extended this research by coding conjugal bereavement narratives for core relational themes (CRT) that served as emotional summaries of unique combinations of appraisal features. A range of CRTs was evidenced at 6 months after loss, with positive CRTs, such as love/affection and pride, occurring most frequently. As a way to examine competing models of coping with loss, CRTs were grouped by goal-congruence (positive/negative) and appraisal features (self/interpersonal) into four thematic categories, and they were compared with 6-, 14-, and 25-month outcome. Results contradicted the traditional "grief work" perspective, but they were consistent with the alternative view that recovery is fostered by identity continuity and a continued emotional bond with the deceased. With initial symptoms and Dyadic Adjustment Scale scores controlled, enhanced self themes (e.g., self-pride) and interpersonal affirmation themes (e.g., pride in the deceased) were each associated with improved functioning over time, whereas interpersonal discord themes (e.g., anger at the deceased) were associated with chronic grief.

What does it mean to endure the death of one’s spouse? By most accounts, the loss of a spouse is among life’s most distressing events (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Yet, there appear to be considerable individual differences in how people experience conjugal loss, and in how long they grieve (Bonanno, Keltner, Holen, & Horowitz, 1995; Lehman, Wortman, & Williams, 1987; W. Stroebe & M. Stroebe, 1987). Recent research has demonstrated predictive links between emotion (Bonanno &
Keltner, 1997; Bonanno et al., 1995; Bonanno, Znoj, Siddique, & Horowitz, in press) and cognitive appraisal (Field, Bonanno, Williams, & Horowitz, in press; Stein, Folkman, Trabasso, & Christopher Richards, 1997) in the early months after conjugal loss and long-term bereavement outcome. In the present study, we extended this line of research by measuring core relational themes (CRTs; Lazarus, 1991) that summarized unique combinations of appraisal features associated with specific emotions. We coded the CRTs from recently conjugally bereaved individuals' narrative descriptions of their lost relationships, obtained at the 6-month point in bereavement, and we then assessed whether particular categories of themes were associated with later grief and health over 25 months of bereavement.

APPRAISAL, EMOTION, AND LOSS

The death of a spouse tends to occupy the thoughts and feelings of the surviving spouse for many years after its occurrence (Lehman et al., 1987). How bereaved individuals experience and express grief-related emotions in the early months after a loss has been found to influence the recovery process (Bonanno & Keltner, 1997; Bonanno et al., 1995; Bonanno et al., in press), at least in part by influencing social interactions with other people (Keltner & Bonanno, 1997). Related to these findings, cognitive appraisal has also been shown to mediate the severity of conjugal bereavement over time. Field et al. (in press) demonstrated a link between appraisals of helplessness, self-blame, and blaming of the deceased, and increased grief and distress later in bereavement. Stein et al. (1997) showed that bereaved gay men who early in bereavement made positive appraisals, such as a positive attitude toward death or a belief in self-growth from difficult events, had better morale, more positive states of mind, and less depression 12 months after the loss.

A related but as yet unexplored aspect of meaning during bereavement is the role played by higher-order combinations of appraisal associated with specific emotions. Although there has been considerable debate as to whether appraisal is necessary for the occurrence of emotion (Frijda, 1993; Lazarus, 1984; LeDoux, 1989; Scherer, 1993; Zajonc, 1984), most emotion theorists agree that specific emotions usually occur in the context of specific types of cognitive appraisal (e.g., Ekman, 1993; Frijda, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Leventhal, 1984; Oatley & Jenkins, 1996; Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). A number of theoretical frameworks are available for examining this relationship. In the present study, we utilized an approach developed by Lazarus (1991) because it is conceptually well developed and provided clear operational definitions that could be easily adapted to the situational context of bereavement. Lazarus (1991) proposed an integrative list of core themes that associate specific emotions with their typical primary and secondary appraisal components. Primary appraisal components include the extent to which the person has some personal