Change in Marital Satisfaction Following the Death of a Parent in Adulthood: Do Intergenerational Relationships Matter?

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CHANGE IN MARITAL SATISFACTION FOLLOWING
THE DEATH OF A PARENT IN ADULTHOOD:
DO INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS MATTER?

a thesis

by

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I examine how preloss relationship quality with a deceased parent and pre- to post-loss change in relationship quality with a surviving parent influence adult children’s marital satisfaction over time. I also test gender interactions. Analyses are based on married or cohabiting adults who experienced the death of a parent ($N = 316$), drawn from the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG), a longitudinal study of three-plus-generation families from Southern California. Three-level multilevel modeling (MLM) techniques reveal that improved relationship quality with a surviving parent is related to improved marital satisfaction. High preloss relationship quality with a deceased mother is related to improved post-loss marital satisfaction only for sons. These results support theories of linked lives and role context, and suggest that sons who lose mothers are particularly vulnerable relationally and may be especially sensitive to perceived support from their wives.

Keywords: bereavement; parent death; marriage and family; multilevel modeling
Marriages do not exist in isolation, nor are they unaffected by social context and relationships (Milardo & Lewis, 1985; Reczek, Liu, & Umberson, 2010). In particular, relationships with parents influence marital quality well into adulthood (Reczek et al., 2010). The loss of social relationships through death has effects not only on an individual’s health and mortality (Rostila & Saarela, 2011), but also on families and family relationships (Umberson, 1995). Rarely are these two insights examined in conjunction with one another. I take this focus in the present research to improve understanding of family relationships across the life course.

Research examining the effects of bereavement on relationships (Ha, 2008; Ha & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2008) centers upon widowhood. This is understandable, since widowhood is a particularly distressing life transition (Carr, 2004; Holmes & Rahe, 1967), yet it overlooks the fact that widowhood experiences in an intergenerational family context are also experiences of the loss of a parent (or grandparent) for other family members. The death of a parent in adulthood is an increasingly common experience, and is now typical in the developed world (Marks, Jun, & Song, 2007). In fact, the death of a parent is the single most common bereavement experience in the West (Umberson, 2003), yet it has received comparably little attention. Research examining adult filial bereavement typically uses individual rather than relational outcomes, such as mortality and depressive symptoms (Rostila & Saarela, 2011; Marks et al., 2007). The present research addresses these gaps in the literature.

I pose two primary research questions. First: When a parent dies, how does change in the quality of an adult child’s relationship with his/her surviving parent
influence his/her marital satisfaction? Second: When a parent dies, does the quality of an adult child’s relationship with that deceased parent influence the person’s marital satisfaction following loss? Further, do these two effects vary by gender? Using multilevel models and longitudinal data, I examine the influence of intergenerational family relationships on adult children’s marital satisfaction following the death of a parent. These findings help bridge the literatures on interrelationality and bereavement, as well as contribute to understanding of extended family relationship during traumatic life transitions.

BACKGROUND

*The Continued Importance of Family Relationships*

I use the intergenerational solidarity model in this research, which asserts that both the importance of the family and family members’ commitment to it persist (Lowenstein, Katz, Prilutzky, & Melhousen-Hassoen, 2001). Closely related with this perspective is the increasing importance of multigenerational bonds, described by Bengtson (2001) as the shift from “pyramid” to “beanpole” families. This model takes as its central focus family relationships across generations, rather than the nuclear family alone. The ambivalence model (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998) posits the inherent intermingling of positive and negative relationship characteristics. Though ambivalence remains central in the field (Fingerman, 2008; Pillemer & Suitor, 2008; Ward, Dean, & Spitze, 2008), the effectiveness of indirect measures of ambivalence is debated (Gilligan, Suitor, & Pillemer, 2012; Hartnett, Birditt, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2012; Lowenstein, 2007),
whereas the use of measures of intergenerational solidarity continues to be supported (Hogerbrugge & Komter, 2012).

The intergenerational solidarity model situates “the family” broadly by taking as its focus the extended rather than the nuclear family. Relationships may change in quality and character over time, yet they remain salient across the life course. For instance, Sarkisian and Gerstel (2008) find that marriage weakens intergenerational ties for both men and women. Gallagher and Gerstel (2001) find that parenthood has a positive effect on kin support, and Monserud (2008) observes that a third (grandchild) generation can mediate relations between adult children and their parents. Reczek et al. (2010) note the continued influence of parent-child relations on adult children’s marital quality, and Ward (2008) and Byers, Levy, Allore, Bruce, and Kasl (2008) examine the effects of parent-child relationship quality on older parents’ depression and well-being. Intergenerational relationships are complex and ever-changing, but they retain salience for family members across the generations, and across the life course.

Research about the effects of family relationships on members of different generations enlightens another concept of import here: interrelationality. What I mean by this term is that relationships do not simply affect individuals, but also influence individuals’ other relationships. For example, Suitor et al. (2009) discuss how perceptions of maternal favoritism in childhood influence sibling relationships in later life; mother-child relationship quality does not merely affect individual children, but also affects children’s relationships with one another. Recent developments in family sociology have emphasized the importance of interrelationality and the centrality of intergenerational
relationships across the life course. Family members’ relationships continue to matter for one another well into adulthood and old age, often in complex and unanticipated ways. In this research, I apply the insights of intergenerational solidarity and interrelationality to examine how parent-adult child relationships influence adult children’s marital quality following the death of a parent.

_Bereavement in the Family Context_

The rich literature on family relationships makes clear their importance across the life course. In particular, the role of bereavement in affecting family relationships—and vice versa—has not been fully examined. Umberson (1995) decried the lack of research into the effect of parental deaths on family relationships nearly two decades ago, but her advice has been left largely unheeded. Current research on families, however, lays crucial foundations for any examination of death within the context of the family, and on the impact of family relationships on the bereavement process.

There is a limited literature on death within the context of the family. The majority of this research focuses on widowhood, but offers insights into the role and effects of other family deaths on relationships. For example, Carr (2004) finds that for both men and women a high level of dependence on a spouse who has since died is related with higher self-esteem and greater personal growth following the death of that spouse. The quality and characteristics of an intimate familial relationship prior to death have a strong effect on an individual’s psychological response to the loss of that loved one. Ha (2008) investigates some of the complex social results of widowhood, and finds that widowed persons are less likely than married persons to have a confidant but receive
more support from children, relatives, and friends; thus, widowhood produces varied outcomes, including increased familial support. Ha and Ingersoll-Dayton (2008) discuss the varied effects of widowhood on intergenerational ambivalence. The growing recognition that family relationships and bereavement processes are closely intertwined is a positive development, and helps set the foundations for my own research into intergenerational relationships, the death of a parent, and change in marital satisfaction.

The focus on widowhood, though enlightening, has resulted in researchers overlooking the fact that widowhood in a family context is simultaneously the loss of a parent, sibling, and/or grandparent for other family members. Widowhood examines only one of numerous possible relationships with the deceased. This results from the tendency to focus on dyadic relationships and the nuclear family, as opposed to interrelationality and extended multigenerational family relationships. Moreover, bereavement research often emphasizes more traumatic, exceptional loss experiences, rather than the typical, even normative experience of the death of a parent in adulthood. This is both understandable and regrettable, and the present research seeks to address this gap in the literature.

Bereavement research also often utilizes individual rather than relational outcomes, examining the effects of loss on physical and mental health, mortality, and psychological growth (Armstrong & Shakespeare-Finch, 2011; Carr, 2004; Rostila & Saarela, 2011), with less emphasis on the effects of loss on relationships and families. I incorporate both relational predictors and a relational outcome into my research to address this deficiency. Carr and Moorman (2011) further note the recognition that
personal, subjective interpretations of one’s relationships are more crucial for well-being than are numbers of ties. This is of particular interest for my research, which seeks to extend this insight as it relates not only to individual well-being, but to the well-being of relationships, as well.

The use of relational predictors in bereavement research is certainly promising, yet the dearth of research into relational outcomes poses major challenges moving forward. My research addresses this lack and should help to improve comprehension of both family relationships and interrelationality, on the one hand, and bereavement processes and outcomes, on the other.

**Role Context & The Life Course**

Life course theory and the concept of interrelationality are both central to my research. Life course theory approaches issues within the context of historical, social, and biographical life trajectories, examining the ways in which earlier life experiences impact later life experiences, relationships, and dynamics (Elder, 1998). Interrelationality, as stated, asserts that an individual’s relationships mutually influence one another. This is related to the concept of “linked lives” in the life course theory literature (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003), but focuses on relationship quality specifically.

Wheaton’s (1990) concepts of role context and role stress are also important for my research. Wheaton has noted that not all life transitions are alike—not every death of a spouse or loss of a job is an inherently negative or stressful experience. Further, the extent to which one’s prior experience in a particular role was stressful or negative affects one’s responses to that loss. The death of a spouse is not the same for a widow with a
very close versus a highly conflictual relationship with a deceased spouse. Similarly, the
death of a parent who has long dealt with a chronic, terminal illness will likely be
experienced differently than a more sudden death of a parent. This highly intuitive
finding is foundational for my research: Not every death of a parent will be experienced
in similar ways by adult children. Moreover, the concept of interrelationality may further
extend—or perhaps complicate—Wheaton’s insight by emphasizing the various
simultaneous role contexts one embodies as at once a child, spouse, sibling, et cetera.
Unlike Wheaton, I do not focus on prior role stress. My focus is on the quality of adult
children’s various relationships, with both parents as well as a spouse. These roles can be
stressful, supportive, or both. Use of relationship quality as a measure of role context
shifts the focus from role stress per se, and allows for multiple roles to be viewed as a
potential resource as well as a potential strain. Moreover, I measure the quality of various
relationships at multiple time points. Role context applies, after all, both before and after
bereavement. This adds another layer of complexity to Wheaton’s framework, as roles
and relationships may change over time, especially following an event such as
bereavement.

Gender

Gender is a primary focus of the intergenerational family literature, yet it has not
received much attention as regards parent-child relationships in connection with adult
children’s marital quality (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Reczek et al., 2010). Gender of
both the parent and child are important factors in their relationships, and may impact
adult children’s responses to the death of a parent, as well. Chodorow (1978; Marks et al.,
emphasizes the importance of same-gender pairings, as a result of culturally dominant patterns of socialization and child-rearing, and Fingerman (2001) notes the comparative closeness of the daughter-mother dyad. Reczek et al. (2010) mention that daughters have closer ties with parents than sons, and mothers offer more emotional support to daughters than to sons (Suitor, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2006; Umberson, 1992; Ward & Spitze, 1998). Rostila and Saarela (2011) note the greater impact of a mother’s death on child mortality, as well as the greater vulnerability of bereaved sons compared with daughters. The present study builds off of these insights by examining whether parent-child gender pairings influence the effects of parent-child relationship quality measures on adult children’s marital satisfaction over time.

Marital Satisfaction as a Relational Outcome

The use of marital satisfaction following the death of a parent as an outcome measure is an intentional theoretical choice, as well. The use of individual outcome measures such as depression and mortality (Rostila & Saarela, 2011; Wheaton, 1990) is both sensible and enlightening, but also limited. Individuals exist—and grieve—in social contexts, in relation with others around them. Just as prior role context is crucial for understanding responses to transitions, so too is one’s relational context following such transitions vital for better understanding bereavement processes. Relational context in the current study involves structural and affective measures concerning adults’ parents and spouses, in keeping with Bengtson’s (2001) perception of the increasingly multigenerational nature of contemporary families. As Sarkisian and Gerstel (2012) note, current research often limits itself to a “narrow emphasis” on nuclear families,
overlooking the growing importance of extended family networks. Although adult children’s relationships with parents may change, or even weaken, once they marry (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008), the new nuclear unit does not exist in isolation from the intergenerational family unit. In fact, Reczek et al. (2010) note the impact that adults’ relationships with their parents have on their marital satisfaction throughout the life course.

The present study addresses and extends the insights of Umberson (1995) and Reczek et al. (2010) regarding marital quality following the death of a parent and the effects of relationships with parents on marital satisfaction. I merge these approaches by investigating the associations between parent-child relationship quality and marital satisfaction in the context of filial bereavement. I address the extent to which relationship quality with a deceased parent impacts marital satisfaction following that death, as well as how one’s relationship with a surviving parent impacts marital satisfaction after the loss. Moreover, I examine the extent to which these dynamics are affected by gender. Umberson (2003) found consistent declines in marital quality following the death of parent, largely due to a perceived lack of emotional support from one’s spouse. It is possible, however, that other social support factors—including extended family networks and relationship quality with a surviving parent—may help to mitigate that effect and positively influence marital satisfaction after a parent’s death. Closer examination of role context, interrelationality, and intergenerational family relationships following the death of a parent in adulthood will advance the understanding of these concepts both empirically and theoretically. In the present research, I test the following hypotheses:
Hypothesis 1: Higher relationship quality with a parent will result in a decline in marital satisfaction following the death of that parent.

Hypothesis 2: Change in child-surviving parent relationship quality will be positively related with change in marital satisfaction, illustrating the interrelationality of intergenerational family relationships following bereavement.

Hypothesis 3: The child-parent gender pairing will influence the effects of both adult child-deceased parent relationship quality and change in adult child-surviving parent relationship quality on adult children’s marital satisfaction.

METHOD

Data

I use data from Waves 3-8 of the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG) from the University of Southern California. Waves 1 and 2 have been excluded due to a 14-year gap between the first and second survey waves, and the absence of survey questions crucial to this project in Wave 2. Waves 3-8 occurred regularly at approximately three-year intervals from 1988-2005.

Data were originally collected in 1971 from 300 three-generation Southern California families, selected randomly from a California Health Maintenance Organization. Non-mortality attrition patterns indicate that older participants, males, minorities, and the less educated were somewhat more likely to drop out of the study. The response rate for Wave 2 (1985) was 73%, and longitudinal response rates averaged 80% from 1985 onwards (Gans & Silverstein, 2006). The data set sample is reasonably
representative of white, economically stable middle- and working-class families (Silverstein, Parrott, & Bengtson, 1995), although it is not nationally representative.

The analytic subsample consists of adult children (Generations 2 through 4) who reported (a) experiencing the death of a parent, and (b) being married or cohabiting in the survey waves immediately prior to and following the death of a parent. Adult children who separated or divorced between the same waves as a parent’s death, or who married between the same waves as a parent’s death, are not included. First generation (G1) respondents are included only as parents, not as adult children, since I do not have information regarding their relationships with their own parents. I excluded 12 cases whose loss experience could not be determined as first or second, as well as 6 cases who were missing data for marital satisfaction. My final analytic subsample consists of 316 experiences of a parent’s death, nested within 281 persons, nested within 160 families.

Measures

Change in marital satisfaction—The outcome variable is change in marital satisfaction for continuously married or cohabiting adults following the death of a parent. This is measured using a ten-item marital satisfaction scale (α ≥ .85), generated as a mean-score scale. Married and cohabiting respondents were asked the following questions, with responses ranging from 1 (hardly ever) to 5 (almost always): “When you are with your spouse or partner: You calmly discuss something together,” “One of you is sarcastic,” “You work together on something,” “One of you refuses to talk in a normal manner (e.g., shouting, or not talking),” “You laugh together,” “You have a stimulating exchange of ideas,” “You disagree about something important,” “One of you becomes
critical and belittling,” “You have a good time together,” “One of you becomes angry.” Response values have been coded so that higher values indicate greater satisfaction. The marital satisfaction scale has been transformed using the square of the original scale, to account for significant negative skewness. Change in marital satisfaction is measured as a difference score of before and after the loss of a parent.

*Change in depressive symptoms*—The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Inventory (CES-D) is a 20-item scale used to determine an individual’s depressive symptoms both before and after the loss of a parent (α ≥ .84) (Radloff, 1977). Response categories ranged from 1 (*rarely or none of the time*) to 4 (*most or all of the time*) on a variety of items. The items are combined into a mean-score scale, which has been transformed using the natural log to account for significant positive skewness. Change in depressive symptoms is measured as a difference score of before and after loss of a parent.

*Child-deceased parent relationship quality*—A six-item affectual solidarity scale is recorded at each wave of the LSOG and is used to determine relationship quality between the adult child and the deceased parent at the wave prior to the parent’s death (α ≥ .86). Respondents were asked the following questions about their mother and father independently, with responses ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*extremely*): “Taking everything into consideration, how close do you feel is the relationship between you and your parent at this point in your life?,” “How is communication between you and your parents—exchanging ideas or talking about things that really concern you at this point in your lives?,” “In general, how similar are your opinions and values about life to those of
your parent at this point in time?,” “Overall, how well do you get along with your parent at this point in your life?,” “How well do you feel your parent understands you?,” and “How well do you feel that you understand your parent?” The solidarity variable is constructed using a mean-score scale, and has been transformed by squaring the distribution to account for significant negative skewness.

*Change in child-surviving parent relationship quality*—The same affectual solidarity scale is used to determine relationship quality between the adult child and the surviving parent both prior to and following the other parent’s death ($\alpha \geq .86$). This variable is also a mean-score scale that has been squared to account for significant negative skewness. Change in child-surviving parent relationship quality is measured as a difference score of before and after the loss of the other parent. Since this measure applies only to first loss experiences, dummy variable adjustment is utilized for adult children who experience a second loss (Allison, 2001; Cohen & Cohen, 1985). For these cases, the mean value of the change score is imputed and the adjustment is signaled by the inclusion a dichotomous variable indicating first vs. second loss.

*Second loss*—A dichotomous variable for first v. second parent death (1 = second loss, 0 = first loss) is used to analyze any differences between first and second bereavement experiences. It is also used as a signal variable for mean-imputed change in child-surviving parent solidarity scores.

*Age*—Adult child’s age at the time of loss is included as a continuous measure. Adulthood is a broad and diverse period in the life course, and bereavement may be
experienced differently at different ages. Adult child’s age at the time of loss ranges from 35 to 81.

Family size—An aggregate variable for overall size of the family as determined by number of LSOG respondents from each family code (i.e., including extended family who are directly descended from the G1 parents) is used as a measure of the larger multigenerational family context within which the bereavement experience occurs. The family size predictor has been transformed logarithmically to account for significant positive skewness.

Time between loss experience and survey—I control for time (in years) between parent’s death and survey response, as the trajectory of the bereavement process and its effects is expected to change over time.

Parent-child gender pairings—Dummy variables are used for the cross-level interaction of deceased parent’s gender and adult child’s gender, in order to ascertain gendered effects. Four dummies are created to categorize sons who lost mothers, sons who lost fathers, daughters who lost mothers, and daughters who lost fathers. Sons who lost mothers serves as the reference group. Two additional dummies were coded for sons and daughters who lost both parents between the same two waves; the group size for each (n=7) is too small for interpretable results to be produced, so both have been recoded as the loss of a mother. This was done to produce more conservative estimates for the mother-child pairings.
Analytic Strategy & Missing Data

I use multilevel modeling (MLM) to address my research questions. The data are clustered in a three-level model of loss experiences nested within individuals nested within families. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression is inadequate in this case and would incorrectly calculate standard errors, resulting in significant bias. This is due to non-independence in the data, since the LSOG includes both multiple respondents from the same families and responses from the same individuals at different points in time. Due to the structuring of the 3 levels, there are not sufficient degrees of freedom to estimate random slopes. Intercepts at each level are modeled randomly, with slopes for level-1 and level-2 predictors modeled as fixed.

The analyses are performed using a before/after design, using the death of a parent as the focal point. This means that regardless of the parent’s year of death, measures are included from the wave immediately prior to and immediately following the adult child’s loss. This allows for my analyses to focus directly on the bereavement context and evaluate the relative influence of different factors on bereaved adult children’s marital satisfaction.

Stata/SE 12 was used to conduct data screening and analyses. Missing data were addressed using multiple imputation by chained equations (ICE), in order to avoid biases resulting from listwise deletion of cases. Of the 334 potential cases in the analytic subsample, 82% have complete data for all measures. The greatest level of missing data is for the child-deceased parent relationship quality measure, which has 7.1% of cases missing data. Dummy variable adjustment is utilized for data missing due to its
inapplicability; in the present case, change in relationship quality with a surviving parent is not applicable for respondents who have lost a second parent. Imputation enhances final sample size, but does not substantially affect any findings compared with listwise analyses (see Appendix).

Model 1 addresses Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. It includes the independent variables of interest—child-deceased parent relationship quality and change in child-surviving parent relationship quality—as well as all control measures. Model 2 addresses Hypothesis 3. It includes all of the independent variables included in Model 1, and adds interaction terms for child-deceased parent relationship quality x parent-child gender pairings. Supplemental analyses (not included) include all of the independent variables in Model 1 and add interaction terms for change in child-surviving parent relationship quality x parent-child gender pairings. No significant findings resulted, so these analyses have been excluded for parsimony.

FINDINGS

Descriptive statistics for all variables are shown in Table 1. The gender pairings are of roughly the same size, ranging from 60 to 90, along with an approximately even split of first and second loss experiences (169 and 147, respectively).

Table 2 shows the results of the multilevel linear regression models. Model 1, the main effects model, includes significant results for two independent variables. Change in depressive symptoms is negative and highly statistically significant ($B = -5.68, p<.001$), as expected. This means that increases in depressive symptoms following the death of a parent are related with decreases in marital satisfaction. Change in relationship quality
between adult children and a surviving parent is positive and significant (B = 0.14, p<.01), indicating a significant correlation between adults’ parental and spousal relationship quality changes following the death of a parent. Relationship quality with the deceased parent prior to loss is not significant. Further, all three gender-pairing dummy variables were non-significant, indicating no significant differences between the reference group (sons who lost mothers) and any other group. Supplementary analyses (not shown) confirm that there are no significant differences among any of the four gender-pairings in this sample. The second loss variable is negative but non-significant, indicating that there is no significant difference in the marital satisfaction change of those who experienced the death of a second parent compared with those who experienced a first loss and had average relationship quality change with their surviving parent. All other control variables were also non-significant.

Model 2, which contains interaction effects between relationship quality and each gender-pairing, garners slightly different results. Change in depressive symptoms remains negative and highly significant (B = -5.87, p<.001). Change in relationship quality between adult children and a surviving parent remains positive and significant (B = 0.12, p<.01). Each of the gender-pairing main effects remains non-significant. Since child-deceased parent relationship quality is centered and interaction effects are included, this can be interpreted as a lack of significant differences between each gender pairing and the reference group (sons who lost mothers) at average relationship quality. Second loss, age, family size, and years between loss and survey response all also remain non-significant. Relationship quality with the deceased parent prior to loss, however, is positive and
significant (B = 0.11, p<.05). This indicates that better relationship quality with a deceased mother is associated with significantly more positive (or less negative, depending) change in marital satisfaction for sons who lost mothers. Interaction terms for relationship quality x daughter-father and son-father pairings are negative and significant, while the interaction term for the daughter-mother pairing is negative but non-significant. This indicates that relationship quality with a deceased parent is significantly different for the daughter-father and son-father pairings as compared with the son-mother gender pairing. The coefficient sizes for all three interaction terms are sufficiently large as to eradicate the effect seen for the son-mother gender pairing. Supplemental analyses (not shown) confirm that child-deceased parent relationship quality is non-significant for every gender-pairing aside from sons who lost mothers.

Interactions between child-parent gender pairings and change in child-surviving parent relationship quality were tested, with no significant effects found. These analyses have been excluded from the present study in the interests of parsimony.

DISCUSSION

These analyses shed light on a few independent phenomena involved in change in marital satisfaction following the death of a parent. Together, they underscore the importance of relationships and role context, not only for individuals but for their other relationships, as well. The results of this study improve our understanding of intergenerational relationships across the life course, particularly following the death of a parent during adulthood, and offer support for theories of linked lives and interrelationality. Moreover, these findings illuminate the salience of gender for family
relationships and call for further examination of the role of gender in shaping
intergenerational relationships.

*Child-Deceased Parent Relationship Quality*

Child-deceased parent relationship quality is not a significant influence on change in marital satisfaction overall, as the main effects model indicates. This is contrary to my expectations in Hypothesis 1. I had hypothesized that better relationship quality with a deceased parent would be related with lower marital satisfaction following loss. This was an extension of Wheaton’s (1990) findings regarding role context, wherein the loss of a stressful relationship can be experienced as a relief, while the loss of a close and affectionate relationship would likely be experienced as traumatic or upsetting. The lack of significance in the main effects model may indicate that post-loss factors such as family and social support are more influential than pre-loss role context.

The interaction effects model, however, reveals that child-deceased parent relationship quality does significantly influence change in marital satisfaction for sons who lose mothers. This offers support for Hypothesis 3, though the results are not exactly as expected by the literature. Same gender parent-child dyads were not exceptional; rather, the mother-son pairing was unique in comparison with all others. In all, my analyses offer limited support for Hypothesis 1. Child-deceased parent relationship quality does not significantly influence change in marital satisfaction for bereaved adult children overall, but does for sons who lose mothers. Pre-loss role context may not be as influential as post-loss social support, but it can and does have a significant impact under certain circumstances.
Child-Surviving Parent Relationship Quality

Change in child-surviving parent relationship quality is a significant and positive predictor of change in marital satisfaction in both the main effects and interaction effects models. This offers support for Hypothesis 2. In the case of marital satisfaction change following the loss of a parent, one’s relationship quality with the deceased parent appears to be less influential than how a surviving parent responds relationally to the adult child following the death. When child-parent relations improve following the loss, so does the child’s marital satisfaction; when child-parent relations decline, so does the child’s marital satisfaction. This offers support for the concept of interrelationality. Individuals’ relationships are not independent of one another, and they influence not only the individual him/herself, but also influence his/her other relationships. This finding also coheres with Reczek et al.’s (2010) findings concerning parents’ influence on their children’s marital quality well into adulthood. Unlike Reczek et al., however, I find no differences in this effect by gender of the parent or child, nor by gender pairing (supplemental analyses not shown).

These results support the theory that improved child-parent relations may help to “spread the burden” of support around, easing the responsibility placed on the bereaved child’s spouse and thereby improving marital satisfaction. It should be noted that surviving parents are also widows/widowers, and that they are also recently bereaved; thus, the support mechanism discussed here is likely not unidirectional. In the case of bereavement, the influence of interrelationality may be due to a process of shared grief. It may not be that widowed parents support adult children, nor vice versa, but that their
shared process of grieving a mutual loss together will improve their relationship quality while simultaneously lowering the burden of grief placed on the child’s spouse. It is not necessarily the surviving parent’s support that positively influences an adult child’s marital satisfaction, but rather the improved relationship between the two that does. Since both measures are recorded at the same time points, use of causal language is speculative. Moreover, interrelationality posits that one’s relationships are interdependent. Reciprocity may be more plausible than unidirectionality in this case. Longitudinal analyses are required to further examine the directionality of the association shown here, as well as isolate its mechanisms. The present analyses, however, offer solid support for the hypothesis that child-parent and spousal relationships are significantly and positively related to one another.

*The Influence of Gender*

The present analyses offer limited support for Hypothesis 3. On the one hand, gender of both the parent and child is an important factor in determining the salience of child-deceased parent relationship quality for adult children’s marital satisfaction change. On the other hand, gender appears to have no impact on the influence of change in child-surviving parent relationship quality on adult children’s marital satisfaction change. Moreover, the uniqueness of sons who lose mothers deviates from some of the expectations grounded in the literature. Chodorow (1978), Marks et al. (2007), and Fingerman (2001) all emphasize same-gender pairings, and the mother-daughter pairing in particular. Rostila and Saarela (2011), however, anticipate the present findings in their research. Using mortality rates as an outcome measure, they find that the loss of a mother
is more impactful than the loss of a father, and that sons are more vulnerable following the death of a parent than are daughters. Correspondingly, my findings suggest that sons who lose mothers are unique, and that sons’ relationships with their deceased mothers can influence their marriages following bereavement. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship.

At higher levels of relationship quality with a deceased mother, sons experience greater marital satisfaction changes; at lower levels of relationship quality with a deceased mother, sons experience more negative marital satisfaction changes. Since child-deceased parent relationship quality is not significant for any of the other gender pairings, I can also state that at higher levels of relationship quality with a deceased parent, sons who lost mothers experience greater marital satisfaction changes than any of the other gender pairings, while at lower levels of relationship quality with a deceased parent, sons who lost mothers experience more negative marital satisfaction change than any of the other gender pairings.

There are a few possible explanations for this phenomenon. Wives may be better than husbands in terms of offering emotional and other support following bereavement. Past research indicates that wives exert greater social control on husbands than vice versa (Carr & Springer, 2010; Duncan, Wilkerson, & England, 2006) and may also offer more protective health benefits to husbands than vice versa (see Carr & Springer, 2010; Gardner & Oswald, 2004; Johnson, Backlund, Sorlie, & Loveless, 2000), so it would not be surprising if they do so during and after bereavement, as well. Furthermore, wives may be better at providing needed support after the death of a particularly close mother, whose role the wife may be better equipped to fill than a father’s (Umberson, 2003). The
gender pairing—rather than the gender of the child alone—is important because wives can take care of their husbands, emotionally and physically, following the death of a mother in such a manner as to *fill the void* left by that mother’s death; this may be far more difficult in the case of wives “filling the void” of a husband’s deceased father.

This explains the improvement in marital quality for bereaved sons who were close to their mothers, but not the decline in marital quality for sons who lost mothers with whom they were not close. Rostila and Saarela’s (2011) findings on mortality rates after the death of a parent offer clues to this puzzle. Rostila and Saarela demonstrate not only that the death of a mother is more impactful than the death of a father, but also that men are more vulnerable than women. In fact, sons who lose a mother show the worst long-term mortality risk. The significance of sons’ relationship quality with their deceased mothers for their marital satisfaction may not be solely about their wives. The vulnerability of sons who have lost mothers may also suggest a unique *sensitivity* to spousal support. Wives are better equipped to offer emotional support and “fill in for” deceased mothers following their husbands’ bereavement, but the motivation to provide empathic support is often lacking following the death of a difficult parent (Umberson, 2003). The positive changes in marital quality experienced by sons who lost a close mother and the negative changes in marital quality experience by sons who have lost a more distant mother may both be due to the sons’ heightened vulnerability and sensitivity to slight shifts in spousal support.

This is a complex explanation for the results found in these analyses, and a speculative one to be sure. The importance of son-mother relationship quality for marital
satisfaction may also be due in part to mother/daughter-in-law relationships, or to men’s difficulties requesting emotional support and receiving less of it following losses perceived as less impactful. Future research ought to focus on the dynamics of mother-son relationships, as well as on marital relations following sons’ loss of a mother, in order to further parse out the mechanisms for this effect.

Limitations & Future Directions

My findings clearly bolster the view that the relationships adults have with their parents and spouses are interrelated, particularly following a major life event such as the loss of a parent. This coheres with the emphasis Bengtson (2001) and Sarkisian and Gerstel (2012) place on the extended rather than the nuclear family, as contemporary families are increasingly multigenerational. The present research also offers support for Reczek et al.’s (2010) findings concerning parents’ influences on children’s marital quality. My examination of these relationships following the death of a parent uniquely contributes to that conceptual framework. In this case, positive change in an adult’s relationship with a surviving parent following the loss of a first parent is significantly related with positive change in that child’s marital satisfaction, while negative change in the former is related with negative change in the latter. As goes one’s relationship with a surviving parent following the loss of the other parent, so goes one’s marital satisfaction. This sheds further light on intergenerational relationships and filial bereavement, and calls for future research into causal mechanisms.

My findings concerning relationship quality with the deceased parent prior to loss support Wheaton’s (1990) emphasis on role context and illustrate differential gendered
effects. Relationship quality between bereaved sons and their deceased mothers prior to
death can have a significant impact upon sons’ marital satisfaction, despite the fact that
child-parent relationship quality prior to that parent’s death is not significantly related to
changes in children’s marital satisfaction for any other gender pairing. This complicates
Wheaton’s framework—since greater stress, not solidarity, prior to death would be
expected to positively influence marital satisfaction—yet it further underscores the
importance of role context, both relationally and structurally, including the structural
framework of gender pairings.

The present findings support theories of linked lives, interrelationality, and role
context. The literature in family sociology and bereavement has not yet given sufficient
attention to these issues. Future research should investigate the interdependence of family
relationships, including after bereavement, with a focus on expanding the scope of “the
family” to include not only parent-child and spousal relationships, but adult sibling, in-
law, and grandparent/grandchild relationships as well.

There are important limitations to the current study, however. First, the sample is
not a nationally representative one. Rather, it is representative of white, economically
stable middle- and working-class families (Silverstein et al., 1995) and was originally
limited to Southern California families. Therefore, I am unable to examine the potential
influence of race/ethnicity, class, and/or religion. Future research should seek to test the
findings of the current study in other populations. My measures of structural support
variables are also incomplete. The “family size” indicator is constructed using family
members included in the data set, which may result in an overestimation of the size of
cohesive families, as well as underestimation of disconnected families. Were this the case, though, one would expect the effects of this “structural” support variable to more closely resemble the effects of affectual support variables, which they do not. Concepts such as “fictive kin” could not be incorporated, since the data was collected for biological and step-family members, rather than for self-defined “relatives.” Measures of support from friends, neighbors and confidantes could also not be incorporated. The intergenerational family examined in this study is limited to two generations, and also does not include sibling relationships. Future research should incorporate both structural and affectual measures of relationships with members of a third generation (i.e., the grandchildren of the deceased), as well as among siblings and in-laws. The affectual relationship measures included here are only from the individual adult child’s reports; future research will need to incorporate parents’ and spouses’ perceptions of the same relationships. Lastly, it is possible that some of the findings in this study could be explained by extraneous factors; while the inclusion of controls such as change in depressive symptoms mitigates the risk of misspecification, further research is needed to validate the present findings.

Despite these limitations, the present study exhibits many significant strengths. First, it addresses an understudied area in family sociology, the loss a parent during adulthood. Second, it incorporates affective measures of support and relationship quality with both living and deceased relatives across generations, to assess role context and interrelationality. Third, the use of a relational outcome measure broadens the scope of bereavement research by focusing on the bereaved’s close relationships rather than
his/her individual mental or physical health. This also contributes to the literature on marriage and marital satisfaction, centering on the empirical context of the potentially distressing yet ubiquitous transition experience of filial bereavement. Lastly, this study uniquely contributes to the literature on intergenerational family relationships, role context, and gender in a family context, and offers intriguing findings that warrant further research and discussion.

Future research ought to center upon replicating and extending the present findings, in addition to collecting original data more precisely focused on bereavement issues and utilizing a nationally representative sample population. Further incorporation of complex familial and social (inter)relationships will contribute to knowledge of bereavement processes in a family context, not only for “traumatic” losses, but also for more typical loss experiences such as the death of a parent during adulthood.
REFERENCES


<table>
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<tr>
<th>Continuous Measures</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
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<tr>
<td>Marital Satisfaction (Change)</td>
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<td>0.44</td>
<td>-1.51</td>
<td>1.70</td>
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<td>1.00</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>Percentage</td>
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<td>Daughter-Father</td>
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<td>Son-Father</td>
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<td>53.5%</td>
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<td>Second loss experience</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>46.5%</td>
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*NB: Descriptive statistics are reported for untransformed versions of the variables.*
Table 2. Change in Marital Satisfaction† Following the Death of a Parent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixed Effects</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressive Symptoms (Change) †</td>
<td>-5.68***</td>
<td>-5.87***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child – Surviving Parent Relationship Quality (Change) †</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
<td>0.12**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child – Deceased Parent Relationship Quality†‡</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter – Father</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>-0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter – Mother</td>
<td>-0.64</td>
<td>-0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son – Father</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Quality x Daughter/Father Pairing</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.13*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship Quality x Daughter/Mother Pairing</td>
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<td>-0.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship Quality x Son/Father Pairing</td>
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<td>-0.15*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second loss experience</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age at loss</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family size†</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years between loss and survey</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.55</td>
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Random Effects

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<th></th>
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<tr>
<td>Level 1: Loss experience</td>
<td>2.98***</td>
<td>2.95***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2: Individual</td>
<td>7.70e-10</td>
<td>7.93e-11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 3: Family</td>
<td>8.40e-11</td>
<td>2.04e-11</td>
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<tr>
<td>(R^2)</td>
<td>9.72%</td>
<td>11.43%</td>
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</table>

(N = 316)

† p<.10 * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001
† transformed variable, ‡ mean-centered variable

Reference group is son/mother pairing (NB: Analyses using each other pairing as reference group reveal that Child- Deceased Parent Relationship Quality is significant only for the son/mother pairing)
Figure 1. *Relationship Quality with a Deceased Parent and Marital Satisfaction Change*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Quality with Deceased Parent</th>
<th>Change in Marital Satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Quality</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average Quality</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>High Quality</td>
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</table>

NB: All covariates are set to their mean levels.
Table 3. *Multilevel Linear Regression Using Listwise Deletion*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome: Change in Marital Satisfaction†</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressive Symptoms (Change) †</td>
<td>-4.46**</td>
<td>-4.76**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child – Surviving Parent Relationship Quality (Change) †</td>
<td>0.12**</td>
<td>0.12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child – Deceased Parent Relationship Quality†‡</td>
<td>0.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daughter – Father</td>
<td>-0.81</td>
<td>-0.86</td>
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<td>Daughter – Mother</td>
<td>-0.72</td>
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<td>Years between loss and survey</td>
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*(N = 274)*

† p<.10 * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

†transformed variable, ‡ mean-centered variable

Reference group is son/mother pairing (NB: Analyses using each other pairing as reference group reveal that Child- Deceased Parent Relationship Quality is significant only for the son/mother pairing)