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Starting Over: A Tentative Theory Exploring the Effects of Past Relationships on Postbereavement Remarried Couples

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Using grounded theory methodology 24 participants were asked to discuss how the death of a previous spouse, either theirs or their partner's, was currently affecting their second marriage. Participants were interviewed individually and as a couple. The central category was memories of the deceased spouse. Six additional categories emerged from the data: past spouse on pedestal, current/past comparison, insecurity of current spouse, curiosity about past spouse/relationship, partner's response to curiosity, and impact on the current relationship. Existing literature, auditors, and participant feedback were all used to validate the results. Expanding on a tentative theory (Brimhall, Wampler, & Kimball, 2008), provisional hypotheses were developed, thus helping clinicians who work with complex issues involving remarried couples.

Keywords: Remarriage; Death; Grounded Theory; Bereavement; Couple Interaction; Divorce

INTRODUCTION

Over 30 years ago Cherlin (1978) wrote that remarriage was an incomplete institution. According to him, the existing literature lacked consistent norms for stepfamilies. Since that time, family scholars have systematically investigated step-family formation and remarriage (Bernstein, 2000; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997). The result is an expansive body of literature that has led scholars to report that, despite not being institutionalized, remarriage does have some clear expectations and norms (Coleman et al., 2000; Ganong & Coleman,

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2004; Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997). However, a closer look at the literature reveals that most of these expectations and norms, if not all, are centered on remarriage after divorce. Relatively few studies have been devoted to understanding how relational dynamics are different for postbereavement remarriages. Perhaps this lack of empirical attention can be attributed to a common belief found in the last comprehensive review on remarriage literature. Coleman et al. (2000) reported that “postdivorce stepfamilies were hard to ignore because unlike postbereavement stepfamilies, remarriage no longer reconstituted the nuclear family, and stepparents often were added ‘parent figures’ rather than substitutes for deceased parents” (p. 507).

It appears that most scholars, perhaps naively, assume that since the previous spouse is no longer living that it is easier for these families to adjust (Moss & Moss, 1996). However, some scholars theorize that the deceased spouse is an invisible figure that often significantly alters the triadic relationships between the couple and the family (Grinwald & Shabat, 1997; Marwit & Carusa, 1998). Based on these theories, scholars propose that new spouses might never measure up to the idealized image of the deceased spouse and always feel as if they are placed second, thus negatively influencing relationship satisfaction. While these theories are interesting most are anecdotal and conceptual. The little research that does exist (Gentry & Shulman, 1988) focuses exclusively on the experiences of women and calls for research using both partners. The purpose of this study was to explore, through the use of qualitative interviews, the experiences of postbereavement remarried couples.

METHODS

Grounded theory methodology was chosen based on its ability to explore participants’ experiences to discover new patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Given the lack of empirical knowledge regarding postbereavement remarriages it seemed appropriate to use this type of methodology. Semi-structured interviews gave participants the opportunity to explore their experiences and describe their relational dynamics rather limiting it by testing an existing theory.

Participants

The sample consisted of 12 couples ($n = 24$ individuals) in a second marriage, where at least one partner experienced the death of a spouse. A majority of the couples were married for 6 years or less ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 4.7$). Although one couple, who had been married for 18 years, was specifically included to determine if similar themes emerged in a couple who had been remarried for an extended period of time. Based on the length of marriage, caution should be used when reading the results. For these participants, the average length of marriage in their first marriages was 27.5 years and the average length of remarriage was 4.08. This discrepancy in length of marriage may have created a unique set of findings. Four couples were recruited from an electronic message sent to employees of a large university in the Midwest. The other couples ($n = 8$) were referred by a colleague who had several contacts in another Midwestern state. Arrangements were made for the second author to travel there to complete the interviews. All participants were Caucasian and heterosexual (see Table 1 for demographics).

TABLE 1
Demographic Information for Participants

Participant	Widowed or Divorced?	Years in First Marriage	Years Between Marriages	Length of Courtship	Years in Current Marriage	Previous Marriage Satisfaction ^a	Degree of Happiness in Current Marriage ^b
Albert (1H)	Widowed	40	1.5	0.25	2.5	5	35
Ruth (1W)	Divorced	33.5	8	0.25	2.5	c	35
Whitey (2H)	Widowed	43	2.5	0.83	0.5	10	20
Thelma (2W)	Divorced	26	3	1	0.5	5	15
Olaf (3H)	Widowed	48	.50	0.33	6.5	10	35
Marie (3W)	Widowed	46.5	.50	0.5	6.5	10	30
Gus (4H)	Widowed	56	3	0.25	5	10	15
Betty (4W)	Both	17	3	0.33	5	8	15
Howard (5H)	Never married	N/A	N/A	0.29	1.5	N/A	35
Ann (5W)	Widowed	28	2	0.25	1.5	5	35
Steve (6H)	Divorced	27	d	1.5	1	d	15
Cindi (6W)	Widowed	12	14	1.5	1	9	15
Dick (7H)	Divorced	17	14	7	4	d	25
Tori (7W)	Widowed	21	13	9	4	10	25
Zack (8H)	Widowed	20	1.25	1	1	10	20
Anna (8W)	Divorced	27	1.25	1	1	d	25
Bob (9H)	Divorced	8	d	3	3	d	35
Rachel (9W)	Widowed	8	5	3	3	10	25
Kevin (10H)	Widowed	12	6	2	0.25	10	25
Kristin (10W)	Never married	N/A	N/A	2	0.25	N/A	20
Mickey (11H)	Widowed	30	3.5	1.5	18	10	35
Jan (11W)	Both	34	4	2	18	5	25
Doug (12H)	Widowed	26	6	5	3	8	15
Elizabeth (12W)	Divorced	25	6	5	3	d	25

^aScale of 1–10, 10 = *being highly satisfied*.

^bQuestion 1 from MAT (Degree of Happiness; scores range from 0 to 35).

^cDid not respond but alias she picked for ex-spouse was “Hitler,” suggesting that perhaps she was dissatisfied.

^dMissing data (question specifically asked about satisfaction before death. As a result some divorced participants did not respond).

Procedures

Couples who met the criteria were invited to participate in an interview either at their home, the university, or a local business office. Based on a previous study, the authors determined that participants would be interviewed individually and as a couple (Brimhall et al., 2008). Interviewing participants separately allowed them to openly discuss experiences without feeling uncomfortable in the presence of their spouse while couple interviews provided the depth of multiple and joint perspectives. During the individual interviews, the nonparticipating spouse completed demographic questionnaires, which included a marital assessment regarding both relationships (Marital Adjustment Test, Locke & Wallace, 1959). Twelve interviews were conducted by the primary investigator (8 individual and 4 couple) and 24 interviews by the second (16 individual and 8 couple).

In order to maintain confidentiality, participants were asked to create pseudonyms for themselves as well as their previous partner. Each participant was informed that their answers would remain confidential and would not be shared in the couple interviews. The interviews ranged from 20 to 90 minutes, allowing participants as much time as necessary to answer each question. The questions focused on the past relationship, the death of their spouse, and its impact on the current relationship. Clarifying questions were asked to help participants expand on their experiences. In addition, participants were asked to identify similarities and differences between both relationships.

The goal of the couple interview was to provide each partner an opportunity to discuss how their partner's past relationship was influencing the current relationship. Consistent with grounded theory, some interview questions were altered to remain consistent with the emerging themes. Modifications were made based on previous interviews, postinterview notes, and discussions between investigators (Charmaz, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data began after the first interview and ended once saturation occurred (Charmaz, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Both authors independently conducted a preliminary analysis of each interview. Preliminary analyses consisted of reading every transcript ($n = 36$) and highlighting any *in vivo codes*, defined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as "catchy terms that immediately draw our attention to them" (p. 115). Both of these analyses were integrated into one document and sent to the respective participant. Participants received copies of their individual and couple interview by mail or email (based on participants' preference). Participants were asked to correct any inconsistencies and encouraged to include information that emerged since the interviews. Investigators called the participants and asked for feedback, which was incorporated into the ongoing analysis.

The remaining three stages of data analysis began once each participant confirmed the initial analysis. All stages were conducted by the first and second author. Focusing on the participants' words, a line-by-line analysis was completed that resulted in a list of themes (open coding). Next, a within and across participant analysis was conducted to identify which themes were most consistent. Once categories were established, the dimensions and subcategories (axial coding) were defined. Selective coding was used to integrate and refine the emerging theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE RESEARCH

Establishing trustworthiness is a critical step of qualitative research. Including participant feedback and research auditors (internal and external) help ensure the results being presented emerged directly from the participants' experiences rather than any preconceived ideas from the researchers.

Participant Feedback

The preliminary analyses, conducted by both authors, were sent to each participant and their partner ($n = 24$). Of those 24 individuals, feedback was received from 18. According to their reports, the analyses were consistent with their experiences. Attempts to contact the remaining 6 were made but were unsuccessful. In addition, the final results were sent to 8 couples ($n = 16$). All of these couples responded, reporting they felt the model accurately captured their experiences.

Internal/External Auditor

Both investigators met on a regular basis to discuss the interviews, the emerging data, and their impressions regarding the interviews. In addition to coding his interviews, the primary investigator coded each of the secondary investigators interviews and vice versa. Together they incorporated all of their independent codes into a preliminary analysis that was sent to each participant for feedback. Based on this internal audit it was concluded the categories were consistent, they were supported by the participants, and a logical path from the data to the results was provided (Charmaz, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In addition, all of the transcripts, the preliminary analyses, a complete list of codes, and the final results were sent to an external auditor. She randomly selected two participants and reviewed their materials (six transcripts, preliminary analyses, member feedback, and final results). According to her report the model was clear, logical and sufficiently captured the participants' experiences.

RESULTS

One central category and six main categories emerged from the analyses. Based on these categories, the following diagram was developed (see Figure 1).

Memories of the Past Relationship—Central Category

The purpose of the central category is to capture the essence of the research in a few short words. To be considered a central category, all participants must discuss it, it must be connected to most of the data, and it needs to help explain some of the variation that exists among participants (Charmaz, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Memories of the past relationship fulfilled these requirements. According to one participant, *there are always ghosts when somebody dies. There are always memories.* Rachel further described the impact of these memories, stating, *It's really hard to take those memories away. You just can't because that was your life . . . you just can't erase that.* Cyndi described how these memories influenced how she viewed her current partner by saying, *You can't mold someone to be what Paul was. And I really try not to do that but you do unconsciously, you have memories . . . memories that pop up.* Finally, Kristin, the spouse of a widowed man, said, *Her memory is always there, no matter*

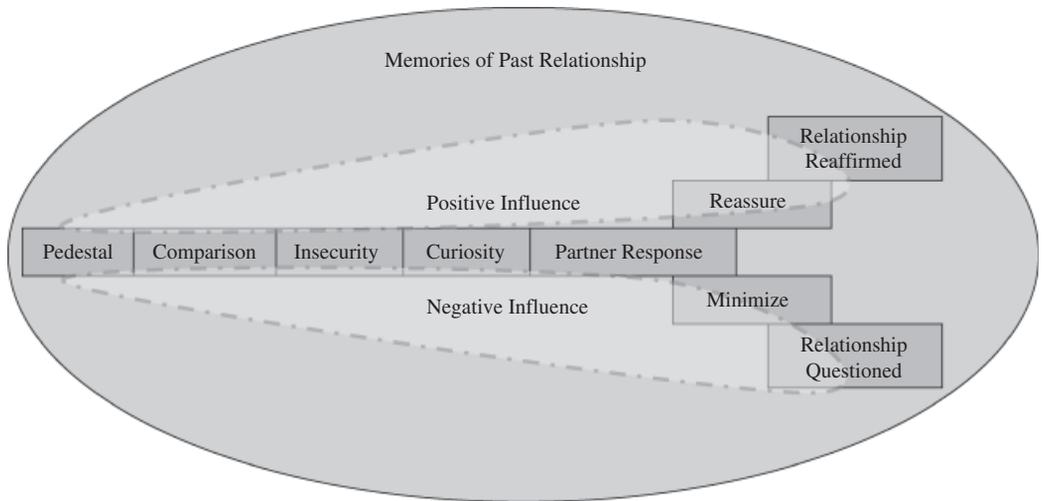


FIGURE 1. Theoretical model for memories of past relationships.

what. Although each participant discussed the memories they had, the intensity and the frequency of these memories varied based on four factors. These factors included: (a) children from the previous marriage; (b) special dates; (c) the type of death; and (d) living arrangements.

Children from the previous marriage

According to participants, the intensity of these memories was specifically influenced by having children from a previous relationship. Kevin described how he had *completely detached from Dollie [deceased spouse]. The exception is, and this attachment will remain for as long as I am alive, is when the kids do something. I still get really emotional. . . . I feel bad that she doesn't get that*. Kristin, his current wife, elaborated by saying, *That is his kid's mom. He sees her every day in them*. Another participant (Ann) said, *He does come up. . . . I think because I have kids with him, it's always going to be that way*.

Special dates

Participants also described how the dates associated with significant events in the previous relationship influenced the intensity and the frequency of the memories surrounding their deceased spouse. Kevin described how, *I feel like it is more apparent . . . like things should be remembered, like on her birthday and when she died and on holidays and stuff*. Cyndi discussed the same concept in a relational context. She said, *special days, anniversaries, anniversary of his death, weddings, confirmations, special times, it naturally pulls it back. You kind of wish their father could have been here for these special deals*.

Type of death

The type of death also seems to influence the way memories arose in the current relationship. For many, the death was unexpected. For others, the death was a grueling process that took an extended period of time. The frequency and intensity of past memories appeared related to the time available to grieve. For those who lost their

spouse unexpectedly it seems the memories were more frequent, more intense, and more painful. Cyndi, who lost her husband in an automobile accident, reported: *I talk a lot about it.* Others went through a long process of grieving, which seemed to temper the intensity and frequency of the memories. According to Mickey, *I went through a year and a half of her dying every day and after it was over with, it was over.*

Living arrangements

The last factor influencing the intensity and the frequency of the memories was the living arrangements of the new couple. Some, like Jan, decided to move to a new location. She said, *I want to get away from the memories. . . . This is where I lived with Jerry and I would rather start out fresh in another house with another husband.* Others remained in the same house, increasing the likelihood of encountering memories. Thelma described how *Everything in that home speaks of his first marriage.* Cyndi reinforced this idea when she reported that *we are building a modular home together. Starting something together where it is not Paul's.*

While memories of the past relationship were consistent with all couples, data suggests having children from the previous relationship, special dates, losing the spouse unexpectedly, and living in the house originally inhabited by the deceased spouse increased the frequency, and perhaps more importantly, the intensity of the memories. It is important to understand what factors influence memories of past relationships because couples described how these memories often influenced how they interacted around the past. These interactions are captured in the six major categories (past spouse on pedestal, current/past comparison, insecurity expressed by new spouse, curiosity about past relationship, partner's response, and impact on current relationship). Each of these categories will be described in greater detail.

Category 1—Past Spouse on Pedestal

Participants described how the death of a partner often resulted in placing that person on a pedestal, a process described as highlighting the good and overlooking the bad. Doug said, *When a long marriage ends with death you tend to glorify the person in the marriage and put them on more of a pedestal than you really should . . . you tend to focus only on the good things that the person did. You don't think about the low points or the arguments you had with her or the times she was critical.* The strength of this process is magnified when you read Albert's description of his deceased spouse, *my first relationship was harsh and argumentative and I often experienced violence from my wife.* And yet, according to him, *I don't want to say anything disparaging about her because I still love her. . . . I believe in promoting the good and not dwelling on the bad . . . it may appear that I am giving her an undue amount of reverence . . . but I have no reason to beat up on her.* Not only was this process acknowledged by the participants but it was also described by their partners. Kristin said, *The memory of her is so positive . . . when someone dies that is the stuff you remember. You don't remember if they are a [jerk] or if they screwed over somebody. You just say oh they were a great person and that is all you ever hear.*

Category 2—Current/Past Comparison

Current spouses reported that hearing only positive recollections of the previous spouse led them to make comparisons, both individually (between spouses) and

relationally (between relationships). According to them, hearing only the good increased their own expectation to be perfect. Kristin, continuing her comment from above, said, *I feel like I have to live up to that. That is difficult. . . . If she were still alive and they didn't get along I would at least know [that] they obviously can't stand each other and that is okay because we can. . . . I think sometimes I would rather deal with an actual person than this big positive light.* This feeling was reinforced by Elizabeth, who said, *I had a lot to live up to. . . . [I'd ask questions about her] because then maybe she would feel more human to me instead of somebody that I would never be able to be like.*

Category 3 — Insecurity Felt by Current Spouse

Feeling insecure was a common outcome described by the current spouses as they compared themselves with the deceased spouse. During the interviews, this insecurity was expressed both directly and indirectly. For example, Elizabeth said, *I would like to know a little bit more about Dutchess. . . . I don't know if I would have wanted to a couple of years ago. Because I think I felt more insecure.* Mickey described his experience when he said, *it makes me uneasy . . . when the kids start talking like he [the deceased spouse] is a much better man than you are, some crap, that is what is going through my mind.* Finally, Kristin said the following:

[It] is some insecurities about how he really feels about me or how his family really feels about me. I told her the story about you going to the cemetery by yourself and I freaked out. What did I do? Is he mad at me? Does he still love her? Does he not love me? What did I do? He is totally not over her. . . . Just a whole lot of insecure thoughts.

Kevin, Kristen's husband, said, *there are times when she gets insecure. . . . She thinks she is not as good as Dollie. She thinks she will never live up to that expectation . . . everybody has that streak of insecurity . . . it's real easy to express that insecurity because it is not something I can prove.*

While many directly discussed feeling insecure, some described it indirectly. Thelma shared the following:

He had her picture on the wall in the living room. I asked if I could take it down and put it away. He kind of looked at me and said, "why do you want to do that?" Well I said I know how much you cared about Tiny but she is gone now and I'm here . . . sometimes I feel like [long pause] I don't want to say temporary . . . it's like I feel temporary.

Category 4 — Curiosity about Past Spouse/Relationship

In response to feeling insecure, current spouses described how they would often ask questions about the deceased spouse and the past relationship. According to them, they would ask these questions because they were curious about the past and if it was really as good as they were told. Describing this process Marie said, *I might be curious sometimes. . . . Once in a while you are curious about did Teresa ever do this and that? Or what would have Teresa said?* Kristin reinforced this tendency when she said, *Some days it is like I ask a lot of questions about her. Like what happened? What was she like? If I were to meet her would we get along?*

Not only was this pattern described by the current spouses but it was also recognized by their partners. Doug mentioned how, *She asked me things like what was*

Dutchess like and what was our life together like and she even asked me, how was your sex life? In describing her curiosity, Elizabeth said, I kind of would like to know . . . what their relationship was like. Whitey described how his new wife was the one who seemed curious. He said, I don't know if I ever brought it up. She was the one that usually asks the questions about Tiny or about our relationship. While many of the current spouses reported asking questions about the past relationship, some discussed how they were afraid to discuss it because they did not want to cause undue pain. According to Elizabeth, I would like to ask him but I am not sure . . . if I would be opening something that maybe is painful for him.

Category 5 — Partner's Response to Curiosity

Participants described two reactions to the insecurity expressed by the new spouse. The first reaction was to openly discuss the past in an attempt to reassure the new spouse. The other was to minimize the past and request that it not be discussed; for them, it was the past and it should remain there. The following section will highlight data that support these two reactions.

Reassurance through openness

Ann reported that, We were real honest from the beginning. I tried to tell [him] everything that I can remember. . . . Something comes up and it makes me remember . . . but I never did try to hide anything once we got together. Jan said, All we did was talk about our former mates. . . . I wasn't holding anything back. Kristin, who expressed strong feelings of insecurity, described her husband's response in more detail. She said, he always figures out the right thing to say at the time. "If she were to come back I would not want to go back to her. Things are way different now. I am with you. I love you." According to Kevin, he responded that way because he understood that It is the reassurance that she needs.

Minimize the past

While some participants were open regarding their past relationships, others reported (or their partners reported) they tried to minimize the past. Doug reported he *didn't tell* [his current spouse] *everything* and that he *downplayed it a little bit*. His wife Elizabeth agreed. She said, *I don't think Doug is very open . . . he says 'that is in the past.' I don't know . . . he may not have the right words or maybe . . . he wants to keep it there. If he does I guess I should honor that.*

Whitey reported there was *no sense of mentioning* [his deceased spouse] because *that is in the past*. His current wife Thelma discussed her reaction to this response. She said:

You are not married 50 years to someone and not care about that person. . . . I just think he has put that behind him and he just wants to go on with his life . . . if he has feelings still I can't see them. And he doesn't let me see them. He won't let me see them.

Category 6 — Impact on Current Relationship

It appears these responses influenced how the current partners felt regarding the relationship. Participants that reassured their partners seemed to simultaneously

reaffirm the relationship; whereas those that minimized the past seemed to introduce insecurity. For example, Howard, who is Ann's partner, reported he *never had any jealousy. . . . I guess I should but I never did.*

Mickey, Jan's husband, supported this idea when he said, *That was really when I started loving [Jan] is when she was so open about her husband.* Finally, Kristin, referring to Kevin's reassuring response, reported, *things like that kind of make me feel better.*

In contrast, participants that minimized the past appeared to introduce a sense of doubt into the current relationship. Gus reported that his conversations about the past are *very limited. . . . We don't talk about it, neither of us talk about our previous marriages. . . . I do everything I can . . . my world is getting so small that sometimes I'd like to leave it.* This comment was reinforced when reviewing his marital satisfaction score. When asked about his overall satisfaction he said he was *very unhappy* and that he might *consider marrying someone else.* It is interesting to note that his partner also reported that at times she felt *insignificant.*

This pattern was similar to the pattern described by Thelma and Whitey.

Thelma If you had it to do over again would you remarry?

Whitey I think I told you one time that I said *What the hell am I doing in this situation. . . . Probably so. I mean how can I say I wouldn't, sitting here with you?*

Thelma No, no this is just an open question. You are not going to hurt my feelings one way or the other because I think we are married and I think we find that we are glad that we are married, we enjoy each other. But if you had it to do over again, when you think about it?

Whitey Well I think about everything.

When combined with Thelma's comments about *feeling temporary* and the fact that Whitey *won't let me see [his feelings]*, Whitey's response to this inquiry highlights how partners might begin to question the relationship. While psychometric instruments only provide descriptive data in qualitative research, it is interesting to note that the three couples that reported minimizing the past almost exclusively are the three couples that recorded the lowest marital satisfaction scores. This observation should be treated tentatively and certainly requires further research.

RESULTS IN THE EXISTING LITERATURE

Using the existing literature as another source of trustworthiness/credibility is important for two reasons: it helps confirm the findings; and it highlights areas where the existing literature only partially explains the phenomenon, is incorrect, or is simplistic (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Memories from the past relationship, and the factors that trigger these memories, are consistent findings throughout the literature (Davidson, 2002; de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Grinwald & Shabat, 1997; Moss & Moss, 1996). Moss and Moss (1996) punctuate the importance of this central category when they explain, "memory provides the major link between the widowed person and the deceased spouse . . . [it] holds together past and present and gives continuity to human life" (p. 165). What is perhaps minimized, however, is the

depth in which these memories permeate the relationship. This is captured by the following quote:

Although the new pattern of companionship in the second marriage may be seen as providing some of the similar rewards as in the first marriage, commitment to a new relationship generally does not replace commitment to an earlier one. . . . A widowed person may tend to see his or her identity as rooted deeply in the relationship with the first spouse . . . the widowed person may continue to find meaning in the long term relationship. (Moss & Moss, 1996, p. 174)

The reality of this statement might be reinforced by the fact that four participants specifically stated, despite the fact they were currently married to someone else, they still plan on being buried next to, or with, their deceased spouse; an undirected response that participants gave willingly. It is unknown if more respondents may have shared a similar decision if asked specifically. However, it should be noted that the sample consists heavily of older couples that experienced long first marriages ($M=27.5$), and relatively short remarriages ($M=4.08$). It is unclear whether the current findings are a function of the length of previous marriage or, as Grinwald and Shabat (1997) observe, society's desire to preserve the relationship. They write, "When a spouse dies, the one remaining is known as 'her' widower or 'his' widow. A phrase that implies an ongoing belonging"(p. 106). Additional research is needed to understand whether or not this dynamic would change in couples whose length of remarriage equaled the length of their first marriage.

Similar to other literature, it appears this sample of widowed individuals tried to avoid comparisons between their new spouse and their deceased spouse. The literature describes this process as using a "protective silence" (Moss & Moss, 1996), in which the widowed partner does not verbally compare spouses. Despite this protective silence, a majority of the current spouses reported feeling insecure, whether directly or indirectly. These insecurities often led to specific questions regarding the deceased spouse and the past relationship. According to the literature this feeling is common because new spouses often enter the relationship being identified as the second partner, as an outsider to the spouses' family. This often leads to an identity as the second partner within an existing triad (Davidson, 2002; Grinwald & Shabat, 1997; Moss & Moss, 1996). In the words of Bernard (1969), the new spouse constantly has to "box with a phantom" (p. 464); a sentiment that is surprisingly similar to Kristin's comment about dealing with a *big positive light*. Some studies indicate divorced men will avoid dating widows because they "cannot compete with such perfection" (Hunt, 1996 as cited in Lopata, 1996, p. 152).

While the current literature does a good job capturing some of the major categories of this study (putting the deceased spouse on a pedestal and feeling insecure; Carr, 2004; Davidson, 2002; Grinwald & Shabat, 1997; Moss & Moss, 1996), it fails to capture the relational dynamic between couples when discussing these past experiences. Although tentative, these findings provided an important clarification. In considering this model (see Figure 1), it appears that the first four major categories are similar for most, if not all, couples. The critical point, however, seems to be how partners respond to the curiosity of their current spouse. In these cases, offering reassurance seemed to decrease the insecurity felt by current spouses and increase their relationship satisfaction; whereas minimizing or ignoring these questions seemed to increase insecurity and negatively influences relationship satisfaction. Highlighting this difference might

help remarried couples and clinicians who work with postbereavement remarried couples understand the importance of balancing the need to know (new spouse) with the desire to protect (widowed spouse).

One final observation seems noteworthy. In a study of couples who remarried after a divorce, Brimhall et al. (2008) found that participants transitioning from what they classified as a “bad first relationship” to a “satisfying one” reported they were proactive about making sure they did not make a similar mistake. Several participants described how they made lists regarding what they wanted in a new spouse and how they did not tolerate similar behaviors in their new relationships. It appears this process was similar for those whose partner died. For example, Albert reported he *made a list*, he looked for somebody that *didn't have these propensities*, and he *crossed them off* if they appeared anything like his deceased spouse. Despite taking precautions to prevent him from marrying somebody similar to his deceased spouse, Albert reported a very different emotional response. Participants in the Brimhall et al. study (2008) discussed how they resented their partners and how it was difficult to trust again. Those whose partners died talked about how they could not, and should not, speak ill of the dead (see Albert's comment about *undue reverence*).

As a result, the anger and animosity often associated with ex-spouses was not reported by widowed participants. Instead the anger was replaced with a reluctance to talk poorly of the deceased and an ability to *feel love* toward that individual. This contrast seems clinically important since there is a large body of literature that describes the ex-spouse relationship as one of the most hostile relationships that exist. In this case, although the widowed partner was treated *harshly*, and experienced the deceased spouse as *argumentative* and *violent* (all three characteristics Albert used to describe his past relationship) the fact that the relationship ended in death, as opposed to divorce, changed his emotional reaction to the relationship, thus allowing him to move through his anger and arrive at a feeling of love. Perhaps the emotional transformation experienced by Albert is reserved for those whose partner died. However, it appears that merit exists in discovering ways in which divorcing partners might undergo a similar transformation, thus decreasing the amount of hostility that currently exists in that relationship. To do so, additional research exploring the differences between pathways to remarriage is critical.

VARIATION AMONG PARTICIPANTS

Through the use of qualitative interviews, the experiences of postbereavement remarried couples were explored. While understanding each specific category is important, it is not sufficient. Grounded theory requires that researchers highlight where variation occurs among concepts. This study provides two important areas where variation occurs. First, as described previously, the intensity and frequency of past memories vary based on several factors, many of which are outside the participants' control (i.e., children, special dates, type of death, and, for some, living arrangements). These memories trigger a relational interaction that was similar, although not equally intense, across participants. Length of marriage (first marriage vs. remarriage), although not specifically identified by participants, is another variable when looking at this specific sample that might increase the intensity and frequency of memories from the past relationship.

The second major variation occurred during the course of the interaction. According to the participants, the first four steps of the interaction were the same

(participants highlighted the positive aspects of the deceased spouse and the past relationship; current spouses compared themselves with the deceased spouse; comparisons led to feelings of insecurity, and feelings of insecurity often instigated inquiries about the deceased spouse and the past relationship). Although the initial steps of the interaction were similar, how participants responded to these inquiries appeared to alter the course of the interaction. Either participants would openly discuss the past, reassuring their partners in the process, or they would minimize the past and maintain, or in some cases, increase their partner's level of concern. Thus, how the participants responded to their partners' curiosity appeared to play an important role in the marital interaction and the overall satisfaction of the relationship.

The variation of this response is illustrated when you compare the experiences of Kristin and Kevin to Thelma and Whitey. Both Kristin and Thelma moved into the home where the deceased spouse lived previously and both reported that they felt *insecure* and *temporary*. In fact, based on her description, readers might assume that Kristin felt more insecure (see quote under insecurities). However, after Kevin said, *If she were to come back I would not want to go back to her . . . I am with you. I love you* Kristin reported that she felt *better*. Although Thelma reported similar feelings, Whitey's verbal response that there is *no sense of mentioning* [his deceased spouse] because *that is in the past*, along with his nonverbal responses (hesitancy to remove pictures of his deceased spouse from the living room wall), left Thelma wondering if Whitey would marry her again if given the chance.

PROVISIONAL HYPOTHESES

Understanding variation among categories leads to provisional hypotheses. From this study, four provisional hypotheses emerged. Caution should be used in viewing these hypotheses as linear. As with all couple interactions one response influences the other and is interrelated. The same is true of these hypotheses; to understand the magnitude of one, it is necessary to understand the others. They are reciprocal in nature and interdependent. Exploring one, while not considering the others, provides an incomplete picture of the dynamic. Also, all of these hypotheses are tentative and should be treated as such. First, the more factors present in postbereavement remarried couples (i.e., children, living arrangements, etc.) the more memories from the past relationship they will experience. Second, the more frequent and intense the memories the more likely the widowed spouse will use "protective silence" to avoid comparing partners. This protective silence, it appears, often leads to increased insecurity and inquiries about the past spouse and the past relationship. How this curiosity is addressed influences the couple interaction. For those partners who reassure their spouse, insecurities decrease and relationship satisfaction increases. For those who minimize the past, insecurities may increase and relationship satisfaction decrease, to the point where couples may question their decision to remarry. Additional research is necessary to confirm or deny each of these hypotheses.

TREATMENT IMPLICATIONS

Although several findings from this study have the ability to influence clinical work, this section will focus on the suggestions that emerged from the data. First, clinicians should be familiar with, and able to assess, the factors that influence memories of the past relationship and their impact on the current relationship. While it is important to

assess each factor, specific attention should be given to the couple's living arrangements, since presumably they have more control over this decision than children, special dates, and other common triggers.

Next, clinicians should be careful to not fall into the trap that postbereavement remarried partners are merely substitute spouses or parents, as cited in Coleman et al. (2000). Rather clinicians must understand the complex relational dynamic specifically described by these remarried couples. Being the most important person in a partner's life is a common expectation of marital relationships (Johnson, 2008). For postdivorce remarried couples, this expectation is rarely, if ever, challenged. In most cases, the remarried couple unites against the ex-spouse, who is often seen as the enemy, and reassurance comes through their partner's hostility toward the ex-spouse. Even if triangulating the ex-spouse only creates a false sense of closeness, which is often the case in triadic relationships, the new spouse generally does not question their significance.

In postbereavement remarried couples, however, this dynamic appears to be more delicate. Instead of feeling certain about their importance, new spouses might question it. They may wonder if they, or their current relationship, are living up to their partner's past. As such, they may seek reassurance from their partner. Feeling stuck between their desire to honor the dead and reassure their partner they may opt for protective silence, which might be interpreted by the new spouse as confirmation of their concern. Therefore, it seems important that clinicians try to highlight certain aspects of this dynamic to each partner.

In regards to the widowed spouse a clinician may find him/herself in a difficult situation. Although a strong empirical link has not been established with this population, theoretically the sanctification of the deceased spouse may create high expectations for the widowed spouse, for their new partner, and for the relationship (Carr, 2004; Lopata, 1981). This would suggest that clinicians need to help widowed partners establish a more balanced view of the past relationship. And yet, attempts to balance this perception may trigger feelings that they are dishonoring the dead. These feelings may be experienced by the widowed partner, the new spouse, and at times, the clinician. Divorced individuals are often encouraged to create a balanced perspective of their past relationship, acknowledging the weaknesses but also recognizing the positive aspects of the relationship. It is assumed that a more balanced understanding of their relationship will help them, and their children, adjust more effectively (Emery, 2004). It appears that a similar suggestion exists for postbereavement individuals only in reverse. Creating a more balanced recollection of the past will not only help the widowed partner respond appropriately to the relational needs of his/her new partner but it may also help the new partner openly express feelings of curiosity and insecurity without worrying about reopening their partner's pain. To do so, clinicians may need to help the widowed partner understand that doing so is not dishonoring the dead but rather creating a living legacy that is balanced and realistic.

Likewise, clinical work with the new spouse should focus on helping them openly express their curiosity and any insecurity that stems from it; and creating space for their partner to grieve the past. As partners express their insecurity, clinicians should help the widowed partner respond reassuringly and avoid attempts to minimize the past or to silently protect their partner. However, they should also help the new spouse accurately interpret their partner's response. During their interview Kevin and Kristin had the following exchange. Kristin said, *I don't feel like you are com-*

pletely over her. You are not. You told us in the very beginning I will always love her. That is not over her is it? It appears this response stems from her expectation that Kristin should be the most important person in his life, the only woman that he should love. Kevin's response was, *I have had filet mignon and I won't settle for less and the person I am with is not less. I think through my actions of living with her and marrying her I have proven that. If that doesn't do it then I don't know what else to do.* Rather than hearing Kevin's response as reassuring, Kristin reported hearing it as confirmation that Dollie was great. Clinical attention might need to be spent on helping new spouses hear these comments as both/and rather than either/or.

Also, the likelihood of reassuring responses may increase if the new spouse provides the widowed partner with space to mourn the past, reassuring them that providing this space will allow the widowed partner to respond more openly to their needs rather than less. One of the couples in the study discussed how they visited the grave site of the deceased spouse on every anniversary of his death. This ritual, according to the widowed partner, allowed her to focus her memories on that event and as a result helped her to respond positively to her new spouse on a consistent basis. Some widowed partners expressed how they did not want their new spouses to visit the grave, but these were the ones that generally minimized the past and reported lower levels of marital satisfaction.

IMPROVING CURRENT THEORY

The purpose of this research was to expand the tentative theory presented by Brimhall et al. (2008). While the current project addressed one of the key limitations from that study (it looked at another type of remarriage) additional research is needed. Specifically, research is needed that explores cultural differences in remarriage. Both of these samples were Caucasian. Efforts should be made to interview remarried couples from other ethnic backgrounds to see if the process is similar or different. Also, these findings suggest there is a potential relationship between a partner's response to inquiries about the past relationship and current satisfaction. Large-scale quantitative analyses are needed to further explore this possible link. Finally, although a long-term remarried couple was purposefully included to highlight potential differences based on length of marriage, caution should be used when considering these results. The sample consisted of participants from relatively long first marriages and relatively short remarriages. This fact alone could have easily altered the experience reported. A follow-up study that looks at couples who have been remarried as long as, or longer than, their first marriage might yield different results. Although tentative, these findings can be used to improve clinical work with remarried couples, thus allowing clinicians to respond sensitively to the complexities inherent in this population.

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