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## The impact of spousal loss on parent–child relations in later life: Are effects contingent upon the quality of the late marriage?

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We use data from the Changing Lives of Older Couples (CLOC) to examine (1) the effect of late-life widowhood on parent–child relations at 6- and 18-month follow-ups; (2) the extent to which effects are conditional upon three qualities of the late marriage (positive and negative interactions, and emotional dependence); and (3) pathways linking marital quality to parent–child relations. We focus on three aspects of parent–child relationships: support, criticism and dependence. Widowed persons report significantly less criticism from and more dependence upon children than do married controls, although effects are conditional upon characteristics of the late marriage. Among the bereaved, marital warmth is associated with high levels of support from children post-loss, whereas marital strains are associated with less emotional support from and dependence on children. Widow(er)s who were highly dependent on their late spouse report lower levels of criticism from children. We discuss implications for bereavement and intergenerational relations in later life.

**Keywords:** bereavement; family; parent–child relations; marital relations

Widowhood in later life is a stressful event which often requires psychological and behavioural adjustments (Carr, 2004; Utz, Reidy, Carr, Nesse, & Wortman, 2004). Older adults must adjust psychologically to the loss of their long-time companion and take on new responsibilities that were once handled by their spouse (Utz et al., 2004). Mounting research suggests that parent–child relationships also change significantly when the ageing parent loses a spouse (Ha, Carr, Utz, & Nesse, 2006; Ha & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2008), with much of this research focusing on practical aspects of the loss, including reliance on children for instrumental assistance. Parent–child relations are embedded in a larger web of family relationships; however, yet we know of no studies that explore systematically the complex ways that parent–child relationships post-loss are shaped by aspects of the bereaved spouse’s late marriage.

Parent–child relations post-loss may reflect long-standing family interactions, especially the extent to which the widow(er) and spouse depended upon and supported one another. Further, parent–child relations may change in complex ways as time elapses since the loss, reflecting the bereaved parent’s process of psychological adjustment to the death. We use multiwave data from the Changing Lives of Older Couples (CLOC) to examine (1) the effect of late-life widowhood on parent–child relations at 6- and 18-month follow-ups in a sample of widow(er)s and matched controls; (2) the extent to which these effects are conditional upon three aspects of the late marital

relationship (positive and negative interactions, and emotional dependence); and (3) potential pathways linking marital quality to parent–child relations among bereaved persons only. We focus on three conceptually and statistically distinct aspects of parent–child relationships: emotional support, criticism from child and parental dependence on child. Documenting the ways that parent–child relationships are affected by widowhood and long-standing patterns of spousal interactions carries important implications for understanding bereavement processes and intergenerational relations in later life.

### Widowhood and parent–child relations

The death of one’s spouse may alter the ways that older adults interact with their children, who may step in to provide the emotional and practical support once offered by the spouse. The hierarchical compensatory model proposes that older adults typically prefer to receive emotional and instrumental support from their spouse, yet when a spouse is not available they will turn to their children, followed by other relatives and friends (Cantor, 1979). Empirical studies confirm these rank-ordered preferences (Cantor & Brennan, 2000).

The pervasive cultural expectation that adult children should provide support to their bereaved parent can have negative implications for their relationship (Hogan & Eggebeen, 1995). One qualitative study found that older

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widows described their relationship with their children in both positive and negative terms, where the latter included dissatisfaction with the amount of help received, fears about burdening the children and emotional dependence (Talbot, 1990). A qualitative study of older widowers highlighted somewhat different challenges (Van den Hoonaard, 2010). Some widowed fathers described their daughters as nagging or being overbearing, as they tried to fill the void left by their mothers' deaths. Others praised their children for rallying around them initially, yet were disappointed when the relationship reverted 'back to normal' and support waned more abruptly than the widowers had expected.

Quantitative studies also document improvements and decrements in parent-child relations post-loss. An examination of CLOC data found that post-loss, parents increased dependence on children, yet children decreased dependence on parents (Ha et al., 2006). These results suggest that the newly bereaved parent may become more dependent on and less able to provide support to his or her children, or, conversely, that children are reluctant to burden a recently widowed parent. However, this study focused on short-term (i.e. 6-month) changes only, thus it is unclear whether such changes are a temporary or sustained adaptation.

Changes in support and dependence may be accompanied by emotional shifts in interactions. For example, Ha and Ingersoll-Dayton (2008) found that children's reduced dependence on their newly widowed parents accounted for a decline in parents' ambivalent feelings towards their children 6 months after the death. Taken together, quantitative and qualitative studies of parent-child relations suggest that adult children may be particularly willing to accommodate a bereaved parent, or that both generations are intent on being supportive rather than critical of each other in the period immediately following the loss. However, since prior studies focused primarily on ambivalence (i.e. the simultaneous experience of positive and negative emotions; see Pillemer & Suitor, 2002, 2008) rather than distinctive positive or negative aspects of the parent-child relationship, it is difficult to tease apart which dimensions are most strongly affected, and in which direction. Previous work has shown persuasively that parent-child relations are multi-faceted, encompassing both positive dimensions such as closeness, and negative aspects such as criticism (Ward, 2008). We extend prior work by assessing the short- and long-term (6- and 18-month) effects of widowhood on three aspects of parent-child relations: emotional support, criticism from child and parental dependence on child.

### **Marital quality, parent-child relations and bereavement**

Prior studies of parent-child relationships following spousal loss have focused exclusively on the bereaved

parent and children; ironically, these studies neglect the very person who has indirectly (via death) altered the course of these relationships – the decedent. The void created by the death, and the extent to which children feel compelled to step in, offer support, or encourage their bereaved parent to cope on their own, may be shaped by the widowed person's level of emotional closeness and conflict with, and dependence upon the decedent. Thus, we explore whether the effects of widowhood on parent-child relations are moderated by three aspects of the late marital relationship: positive interactions, negative interactions and dependence. These three dimensions capture two of the most important functions of marriage for older adults: intimacy and interdependence (Atchley, 1985).

The nature and quality of the widowed person's late marriage may have direct implications for parent-child relations. Although most research on family relations focuses exclusively on either marital or parent-child relations, a handful of studies suggests that parent-child interaction styles may be shaped by marital interactions. Empirical studies and meta-analyses suggest that negativity in marital interactions is related to significantly lower family cohesion, increased family negativity and decreased family warmth (Kitzmann, 2000; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988). Conversely, positive spousal relationships provide the emotional support necessary for healthy nurturing of children throughout the life course (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988). Through processes such as socialization and observational learning, children who witness warm, supportive relationships between their parents may go on to replicate a similarly positive interactional style in adulthood (e.g. Dadds, Atkinson, Turner, Blums, & Lendich, 1999). Similarly, parents who have a secure attachment style and strong relationships with their spouse may replicate and foster similar styles of attachment and relating among their children (e.g. Bowlby, 1988).

Drawing on this research, we expect that the effect of widowhood on parent-child relations will be less deleterious for persons who had high levels of positive and low levels of negative interaction in their late marriages. Further, we expect that positive aspects of marital relations will enhance positive parent-child interactions, whereas strained marital relations will be associated with strained parent-child relations among both bereaved persons and married matched controls in the CLOC study. However, we expect that the strength of association will be stronger for married controls than for widowed persons; in the latter case, the marriage has ended and may be a less powerful influence on the daily interactions of parents and children.

In the case of marital dependence, the literature has identified a pattern of compensation in social relationships (Cantor, 1979; Cantor & Brennan, 2000). As such, persons who had been highly dependent on their late spouse may become highly dependent upon their children after the death. For married controls, by contrast, dependence on one's spouse may be inversely related to dependence

on one's child, as one's spouse presumably fulfils one's emotional and instrumental needs (Cantor, 1979).

Characteristics of the late marriage also may affect a widow(er)'s relationship with his or her children indirectly, via psychological adjustment to the loss. The loss of high-quality versus poor-quality marriages has been found to trigger differential emotional responses among the widowed, and these responses in turn, may necessitate a realignment in parent-child relations. Attachment theory proposes that the loss of close and supportive relationships will be more distressing than the loss of relationships marked by conflict and low levels of interdependence (e.g. Archer, 1999). Empirical studies based on the CLOC study confirm that widowed persons with high-quality marriages experienced more frequent yearning for the deceased, whereas those with conflicted marriages yearned less (Carr et al., 2000). Persons who were highly dependent on their late spouses also reported elevated anxiety symptoms post-loss (Carr et al., 2000). Thus, we expect that the loss of high-quality and highly dependent marriages may affect parent-child relations indirectly via reactions to loss: the widow(er)'s yearning for the decedent and desire for altered levels of contact with one's child(ren).

The impact of both widowhood and pre-loss marital relations on parent-child relations may be spurious, however, reflecting a shared set of factors that affect each such experience. Thus, all analyses are adjusted for potential confounds including socio-demographic characteristics, physical and psychological health and structural aspects of parent-child relations including number and gender of one's children, and frequency of contact, because each is associated with both widowhood risk and parent-child interactions. Although an exploration of gender differences in the impact of marital quality on parent-child relations is an important source of inquiry, sample size precludes us from exploring this question.

## Methods

### Data

The CLOC is a prospective study of a two-stage area probability sample of 1532 married individuals from the Detroit Standardized Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA). Respondents were non-institutionalized English-speaking members of a married couple where the husband was aged 65 or older. Approximately, 65% of those contacted for interview participated, consistent with response rates from other Detroit area studies. Baseline face-to-face interviews were conducted in 1987 and 1988. After baseline interviews were completed, CLOC investigators monitored spousal loss by reading obituaries in three Detroit-area newspapers and using monthly death record tapes provided by the State of Michigan. The National Death Index was used to confirm deaths. Women were oversampled at baseline to maximize the number of participants who would become widowed during the study.

Widowed persons were matched with still-married persons from the baseline sample, by age, race and sex. The married matched controls were re-interviewed at three follow-up interviews at roughly the same time as their corresponding widowed persons: 6-, 18- and 48-months post-loss. This matched control-widow design enables researchers to explore the distinctive effects of widowhood. We use two analytic subsamples in this study. The first includes bereaved and non-bereaved respondents, to examine the effects of widowhood on parent-child relations, and whether these effects are conditional upon the nature of the late marriage. The widowed-control sample includes 272 persons with living children (193 widowed and 79 married), who participated in the 6-month follow-up interview, and the 191 persons (150 widowed and 41 matched controls), who also participated in the 18-month follow-up (matched controls were not available for all bereaved subjects because funding for the control sample was cut from the proposed budget). The second analytic sample includes widow(er)s only, enabling us to investigate the pathways linking marital quality to parent-child relations among the 193 bereaved persons with children who were interviewed at the 6-month follow-up, and the 150 persons who were also interviewed at the 18-month follow-up. The data are weighted to adjust for unequal probabilities of selection and response rate.

The CLOC has modest attrition; primary reasons for non-response at the 6-month follow-up were refusal to participate (38%) and ill health or death (42%). Supplementary analyses reveal that age and baseline anxiety increase the odds, and home ownership decreases the odds of attrition. Thus, the analytic sample is over-representative of slightly younger-old bereaved spouses who are residentially stable, and have lower levels of anxiety.

## Variables

### Dependent variables

We consider three aspects of parent-child relations: emotional support, critical interactions and dependence. Items are drawn from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). *Emotional support* is assessed with two items: how much do your children make you feel loved and cared for; and how much are they willing to listen when you need to talk about your worries or problems? Scale alphas are 0.70 (baseline), 0.64 (6 months) and 0.69 (18 months). We measured *critical interactions* with the single item 'How much are your children critical of you or what you do?'. The alpha levels for a two-item scale comprising criticism and the item 'How much do you feel they make too many demands on you?' were unacceptably low ( $\alpha < 0.50$ ). The 'demands' item may not be a valid relationship indicator for recently bereaved elderly study participants, upon whom few demands may be imposed. *Dependence on*

*children* is measured with three items: ‘how much do you depend on your children for emotional support; for help or advice with financial and legal matters; and for help with errands or other chores?’ Scale alphas are 0.60 (baseline), 0.51 (6 months) and 0.50 (18 months). These alphas are low, but are comparable with those found in other studies of parent–child dependence among bereaved spouses (e.g. Ha et al., 2006). Response categories range from 1 to 5 (not at all, to a great deal); scale scores equal the average of one’s responses.

### Independent variables

*Key predictors.* We focus on two main sets of predictors: widowhood status and marital relations prior to loss. *Widowhood* is a dummy variable indicating those who were widowed between the baseline interview and the 6-month follow-up.

Marital relations are assessed using the MSPSS (Zimet et al., 1988) and a modified version of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). *Positive interactions* ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ) are assessed with four questions: how much does your spouse make you feel loved and cared for; how much is your spouse willing to listen when you need to talk about your worries and problems; thinking about your marriage as a whole, how often do you feel happy about it; and taking all things together, how satisfied are you with your marriage? *Negative interactions* ( $\alpha = 0.79$ ) are assessed with a 6-item scale comprising the items: how much do you feel (spouse) makes too many demands on you; how much is (she/he) critical of you; there are some serious difficulties in our marriage; my (husband/wife) does not treat me as well as I deserve to be treated; how often would you say you and your spouse typically have serious disagreements or conflicts; and how often do you feel bothered or upset by your marriage?

*Emotional dependence* ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ) is assessed with three items: I would not know what to do if my (husband/wife) were away; if I could not talk to my (husband/wife) every day, it would really bother me; and I hate being home alone by myself. Responses are averaged and standardized, where higher scores represent higher levels of an attribute.

*Control variables.* *Demographic characteristics* include *age* (in years), *sex* (1 = female) and *race* (1 = black). *Socio-economic status* encompasses *education* (years), *home ownership* (1 = owns home) and *total household income* (natural log, to account for skew).

*Health characteristics* include depressive symptoms and self-rated health. *Depressive symptoms* are assessed with a subset of nine negative items from the 20-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CES-D) scale (Radloff, 1977). Alphas range from .81 to .83 across the three waves. *Physical health* is assessed with the question: ‘How would you rate your health at the present

time?’ Responses of fair or poor are coded as 1; good or better health is the reference category.

*Parent–child characteristics.* All analyses are adjusted for number of living children, frequency of parent–child contact, and gender composition of children. Given the highly skewed distribution of the frequency of contact measure, we use a dichotomous indicator signifying whether one has *weekly* (versus less than weekly) *contact*. To ascertain the gender composition of one’s children, we constructed measures based on a child roster and indicate whether one has: *daughters only*, *sons only*, or *both sons and daughters*. Models also are adjusted for each outcome measure at baseline to capture the changes in parent–child relations pre- and post-loss, and to account for the changes in parent–child relations due to ageing processes.

### Potential explanatory mechanisms

Two reactions to marital loss may account for the linkage between pre-loss marital quality and parent–child interactions among the bereaved: yearning, and a shift in one’s desire to interact with their children. *Yearning* ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ) includes four symptoms experienced in the last month: longing to have your spouse with you; painful waves of missing your spouse; intense pain or grief over the loss of your spouse; and feelings of grief, loneliness or missing your spouse? Response categories were ‘no, never’; ‘yes, but rarely’; ‘yes, sometimes’; and ‘yes, often.’ Items were drawn from widely used grief scales such as the bereavement index (Jacobs, Kasl, & Ostfeld, 1986). This measure was obtained at both the 6- and 18-month follow-up; we use the measure that is contemporaneous with our outcome measures.

*Changing interest in contact with one’s children* is assessed with the item: ‘Compared to when your spouse was alive, do you have more interest, less interest (reference category) or about the same amount of interest in having contact with your children.’

### Analytic plan

We use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to predict the continuous outcomes of emotional support and dependence, and ordinal regression to predict the ordinal outcomes of criticism from children. We first evaluate the effect of spousal loss on the three parent–child relationship indicators at the 6- and 18-month follow-ups and evaluate the extent to which this effect is moderated by characteristics of one’s late marriage. These analyses focus on the widowed-control analytic samples described above. We next examine the effects of baseline marital quality on parent–child relations among bereaved spouses only, with attention to the ways that social and emotional reactions specific to the lost marital relationship might affect parent–child relationships. We consider each marital quality item

separately, because of modest to high zero-order correlations among the three items (e.g. the correlation between positive and negative marital interactions is  $-0.68$ ). All models are adjusted for demographic, socioeconomic status (SES), child and health characteristics. All control variables are contemporaneous with the outcome measure. We adjust for each parent–child relationship attribute prior to loss, to distinguish changes due specifically to the loss, rather than the passage of time. For example, in models predicting dependence at 6 months, we control for dependence at baseline (pre-loss).

## Results

### *Bivariate analysis*

Descriptive statistics and the results of *t*-tests and chi-square tests contrasting the bereaved and married controls are presented in Table 1. Widowed persons report significantly less criticism and more dependence upon their children at 6 months, although these differences are no longer statistically significant at the 18-month follow-up. Widowed and married persons do not differ significantly with respect to emotional support received from children, at either wave. Most bereaved spouses (59%) would like the same level of contact with their child(ren) that they maintained prior to their spouse's death; one-third would like more and only 7% would like less frequent contact.

### *Multivariate analysis*

#### *Does widowhood affect parent–child relations?*

Table 2 presents regression results for models estimating the effect of widowhood status on parent–child relations 6-months post-loss. We found significant effects for two of the three outcomes only; we do not show results for the outcome of positive emotional support, as we did not find statistically significant effects. Further, we did not find significant effects of widowhood on any of the three parent–child relations at the 18-month follow-up, thus we do not show those regression models.

Consistent with the bivariate results, the multivariate results show that widowed persons report significantly lower levels of criticism from children, and higher levels of dependence at the 6-month follow-up only, relative to married controls. Ordinal regression models (in left-hand column of Table 2) show that the levels of criticism widowed persons receive from their children are significantly lower ( $b = -0.749$ ,  $p < .05$ ) than their non-bereaved counterparts. Similarly, OLS regression models (right-hand column of Table 2) show that widowed parents report levels of dependence on their children that are nearly .4 standard deviations higher than matched controls ( $b = 0.386$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Persons who have weekly or more frequent visits with their children report significantly lower levels of criticism

from them. The most powerful predictor of current criticism from children is their pre-loss level ( $b = 0.902$ ,  $p < .000$ ), suggesting a high level of stability in parent–child relations, even in the face of a major stressful event. Persons who see a child at least weekly report dependence levels that are significantly higher ( $b = 0.44$ ,  $p < .01$ ) than those with less frequent contact. Likewise, higher levels of dependence at baseline are a significant predictor of dependence at the 6-month follow-up ( $b = 0.324$ ,  $p < .000$ ).

#### *Are the effects of widowhood moderated by marital quality?*

The regression models presented in Table 3 evaluate two-way interaction terms between widowhood status and marital quality. In preliminary analyses, we estimated interaction terms of widowhood status by each marital quality indicator, for the three parent–child relations outcomes at 6- and 18-month follow-ups. A Bonferroni correction was used to account for multiple comparisons. Of the 18 possible two-way interactions, 3 were statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level. We present only those models yielding statistically significant effects in Table 3, and we plot the significant interaction terms (adjusted for all controls) in Figures 1–3.

Figure 1 shows that widowed persons (black line) report consistently lower odds of frequent criticism from their children than do married persons (grey line), although this advantage is far less pronounced among persons with the highest quality marriages. For persons with the mean level of positive marital relations at baseline, widowed persons are just 46% as likely ( $\exp(-.766)$ ) as married persons to report frequent criticism, yet this advantage narrows considerably among persons who report the most rewarding marriages. Additionally, among both married and widowed persons, the more positively one appraised their marriage at baseline, the lower the odds of frequent conflicts with children at the 6-month follow-up. However, the magnitude of this association is much stronger for married controls than for widowed persons; each 1-point increase in positive marital interactions at baseline is associated with a .65 decrease ( $\exp(-1.036) = .35$ ) in the odds of critical interactions for married controls, yet just a .33 decrease in the odds ( $\exp(-1.036 + .647) = .35 - 1 = -.65$ ) for widowed persons 6-month post-loss. These results suggest that the benefits of a highly rewarding marriage carry over into parent–child relations when one's spouse is still alive, yet the impact is far weaker post-loss.

Figure 2 shows that widowed parents (grey line) report significantly higher levels of dependence on their children at the 6-month follow-up, relative to married controls (black line), and this gap is most acute for those who were *least* dependent on their spouse at baseline. At the mean level of marital dependence at baseline, widowed persons' levels of dependence on children are 0.357 SDs higher than

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for all variables used in analysis, by widowhood status, changing lives of older couples study.

	Total sample	Widow(er)s	Controls
<i>Dependent variables</i>			
Emotional support from children, 6 months	.16 (.95)	.14 (.98)	.20 (.87)
Criticized by children, 6 months	1.61 (.97)	1.53 (.94)	1.81* (1.01)
Dependence on children, 6 months	.43 (1.15)	.59 (1.19)	.018*** (.92)
Emotional support from children, 18 months	.082 (.99)	.12 (.98)	-.068 (1.10)
Criticized by children, 18 months	1.86 (1.17)	1.86 (1.23)	1.89 (.88)
Dependence on children, 17 months	.29 (1.09)	.34 (1.15)	.11 (.81)
<i>Independent variables</i>			
<i>marital quality</i>			
Positive marital interactions, BL	-.09 (1.07)	-.15 (1.12)	.05 (.94)
Negative marital interactions, BL	.026 (1.06)	.029 (1.11)	.016 (.95)
Emotional dependence on spouse, BL	-.054 (1.04)	-.041 (1.05)	-.087 (1.01)
<i>Child characteristics</i>			
Emotional support from children, BL	-.034 (1.04)	-.087 (1.05)	.097 (.99)
Criticized by children, BL	1.89 (.96)	1.86 (.87)	1.91 (.99)
Dependence on children, BL	.14 (1.10)	.17 (.99)	.076 (1.05)
Number of living children, 6 months	3.14 (2.03)	2.91 (1.74)	3.70** (2.55)
Number of living children, 18 months	2.95 (1.98)	2.91 (1.82)	3.11 (2.56)
Weekly or more contact, 6 months	.69	.71	.64
Weekly or more contact, 18 months	.58	.56	.62
Has sons only	.18	.18	.17
Has daughters only	.20	.19	.22
Has both sons and daughters	.62	.61	.60
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>			
Age	70.02 (6.70)	70.41 (6.92)	69.05 (6.07)
Sex (1 = female)	.72	.71	.75
Race (1 = black)	.14	.14	.15
Education (years)	11.38 (2.89)	11.25 (2.89)	11.69 (2.89)
Owns home	.93	.91	.96
Total household income	22,039 (16,843)	21,189 (16,598)	24,121* (17,360)
Total household income (natural log)	1.36 (.51)	1.32 (.53)	1.45 (.46)
<i>Health</i>			
Self-rated health, BL (1 = fair/poor)	.30	.33	.47
Self-rated health, 6 months (1 = fair/poor)	.31	.29	.34
Self-rated health, 18 months (1 = fair/poor)	.20	.23	.12
Depressive symptoms (CESD), BL	.07 (1.02)	.093 (.98)	.01 (1.12)
Depressive symptoms (CESD), 6 months	.28 (1.19)	.44 (1.23)	-.12*** (.96)
Depressive symptoms (CESD), 18 months	.11 (.93)	.15 (.98)	-.024 (.66)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

	Total sample	Widow(er)s	Controls
<i>Potential explanatory mechanisms</i>			
Yearning symptoms		0 (1.00)	
Wants more contact with child(ren) since loss		.59	
Wants same level of contact with child(ren) since loss		.34	
Wants less contact with child(ren) since loss		.07	
<i>N</i>	272	193	78
%	100.0	71%	29%

Notes: Means (and standard deviations) are presented for continuous variables, and proportions are shown for categorical variables. Chi-square tests (categorical variables) and *t*-tests (continuous measures) were used to evaluate statistically significant differences between the widowed and control groups, where \**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001. Marital quality, parent–child relationships and depressive symptoms scores were standardized on the full CLOC sample; our analysis focuses on persons with living children only.

their married counterparts. Among persons with the very highest levels of spousal dependence, bereaved spouses actually report slightly lower levels of dependence on children than their married counterparts. The plotted lines show that among married controls, there is a strong positive association between dependence on spouse and children. With each 1-point increase in spousal dependence at baseline, dependence on children at 6 months increases by 0.210. By contrast, among bereaved persons, we see a weak inverse association ( $b = -.096$ ) between spousal dependence and dependence on children.

Finally, Figure 3 shows that marital support received at baseline has a negligible effect on widowed persons' positive support from children ( $b = -.006$ ), and a strong positive effect among married matched controls ( $b = 0.376$ ) at the 18-month follow-up. We found no main effect of widowhood on positive parent–child relations ( $b = 0.186$ , not significant), consistent with our bivariate analyses. Emotional support from children may be an enduring aspect of parent–child interactions and is not highly responsive to stressors such as the loss of a spouse or parent. However, for married persons, the support received from one's spouse 'spills over' to also enhance parent–child interactions.

#### *The impact of marital quality on parent–child relations among widow(er)s*

Table 4 shows the effects of marital quality attributes on parent–child relations; we estimated the effect of each marital quality attribute on each of the three parent–child outcomes at each of the two interview waves. None of the marital quality measures was a significant predictor of parent–child relations at 18 months. We present only those models yielding statistically significant effects. Positive marital interactions at baseline are associated with higher levels of emotional support (Model 1) and less frequent criticism from children (Model 4). Higher levels of marital conflict and strain are associated with lower levels of emotional support from (Model 2) and dependence on

children (Model 3), yet higher levels of criticism from children (Model 5). Higher levels of emotional dependence on spouse, however, are associated with lower levels of criticism from children (Model 6). Criticism from children (Models 4–6) is most highly responsive to baseline marital quality; each of the three marital quality indicators has a sizeable effect on the frequency of child criticism.

We estimated models both with and without the two potential explanatory pathways, and the effects of marital quality did not change appreciably when yearning and preferences for contact were controlled (full models shown only). Further, yearning – or one's desire to be with one's late spouse – is not strongly linked to post-loss parent–child relations. One's preference for contact with children is associated with all three aspects of parent–child interaction. Persons who want either more frequent contact or contact levels similar to those established pre-loss report significantly higher levels of emotional support from children, relative to those desiring less contact. However, only those who want to maintain pre-loss levels of contact report reduced levels of dependence on children.

#### **Discussion**

Upon the loss of a spouse, parent–child relations typically improve – at least in the short-term immediately following the loss (Ha, 2008; Ha & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2008). However, little is known about how these relationships unfold over time. Further, parent–child relations are typically studied in isolation, with little attention paid to the larger family system, including the bereaved spouse's pre-bereavement relationship with the now-deceased partner. Our study examined the long- and short-term implications of spousal loss on parent–child relations, and the ways that these effects vary based on the nature of the late marriage. Four major findings emerged.

First, widowed persons report significantly less criticism from and increased dependence upon their children, compared to married matched controls. However, these effects are significant in the short-term (i.e. 6 months) only.



Table 2. Multivariate analyses predicting parent–child relationships at 6-month follow-up, by widowhood status, changing lives of older couples study ( $N = 272$ ).

	Ordinal regression	OLS regression
	Critical interactions with children	Dependence on children
Widowhood (1 = widowed)	-.749* (.302)	.386** (.147)
<i>Child characteristics</i>		
Critical interactions with children, BL	.902*** (.146)	
Dependence on children, BL		.324*** (.000)
Number of living children, 6 months	.098 (.082)	.060 (.040)
Weekly or more contact, 6 months	-.532† (.291)	.441** (.140)
Has sons only	.588 (.414)	.005 (.185)
Has daughters only	.498 (.308)	.164 (.185)
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>		
Age	-.008 (.021)	.021 (.010)
Sex (1 = female)	.040 (.330)	.200 (.152)
Race (1 = black)	.053 (.387)	-.34*** (.186)
Education (years)	.033 (.049)	-.020 (.023)
Owens home	-.703 (.155)	-.604* (.247)
Total household income (natural log)	.268 (.289)	-.035 (.135)
<i>Health characteristics</i>		
Self-rated health, W1 (1 = fair/poor)	.503 (.315)	-.139 (.152)
Depressive symptoms (CESD), 6 months	.074 (.120)	.178** (.058)
Intercept		-1.09 (.928)
Adjusted (or Nagelkerke pseudo-) $R^2$	.240	.225
Chi-square; df	64,1; 14	

Note: Statistical significance denoted as † $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; and \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

By contrast, emotional support from children is not significantly affected by widowhood status; warmth and support may be an enduring aspect of parent–child interactions which is not highly responsive to stressors such as the loss of a spouse or parent. By contrast, parents' dependence on children changes starkly upon spousal loss. This pattern provides partial support for the hierarchical compensatory model, where older adults rely first on their spouse for support, but if a spouse is unavailable they will turn to children, followed by other relatives, then friends (Cantor, 1979).

Second, the effect of widowhood on parent–child relations is conditional upon the nature of the late marriage. Although widowed persons report consistently

less frequent criticism from their children than do married persons, this advantage is most pronounced for those with poor quality marriages, and least pronounced for those with high quality marriages. Among persons with historically good marriages, overall family conflict may be low, thus children may not feel a need to alter their critical behaviour in the face of loss.

Third, marital relations have lingering consequences for parent–child relations, although these effects are much larger among married persons than among widow(er)s. The levels of warmth, conflict and dependence in marriage carry over to one's relationship with children – although in somewhat unexpected ways. As expected, persons with high-quality marriages at baseline experience lower levels of conflict with their children at the 6-month follow-up, although the effect is much sharper for married controls. This is consistent with prior studies showing that positive marital relationships provide the emotional support necessary for healthy nurturing of children throughout the life course (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988), while negativity in marital interactions is related to problematic parenting and family relations (Kitzmann, 2000; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988). These patterns may reflect socialization processes or the development of secure attachments among those children who witnessed secure and positive marital interactions between their parents (Bowlby, 1988; Dadds et al., 1999). The positive effect of high quality marriages on high-quality parent–child interactions is strongest when both partners are still alive; the spouses' daily interactions may more directly spill over to affect parent–child relations.

However, marital dependence operated in unexpected ways. Among married persons, dependence on one's spouse was positively and strongly correlated with dependence on one's child at both the 6- and 18-month follow-ups. By contrast, dependence on spouse pre-loss was *inversely* associated with widowed persons' dependence on children 6-months post-loss (with a weaker, though comparable pattern at the 18-month follow-up). Similarly, while widowed persons typically reported higher levels of dependence on their children than married controls, this pattern reverses as levels of dependence on spouse increase. That is, widowed persons who were most dependent on their spouse are least dependent on their children. The pattern for married controls could reflect a personality style of dependence or a dynamic where one spouse relies on a coordinated family system – including both children and spouse – to assist with daily activities.

The pattern for widowed persons is surprising at first glance; theories of compensation would suggest that persons who were highly reliant on their spouse would then transfer their reliance to their children once their spouse has died (Cantor, 1979). We suspect that our finding reflects a pattern of personal growth and growing self-sufficiency among the bereaved. Prior research based on the CLOC finds that widow(er)s who had been most dependent on their spouse went on to enjoy the greatest improvements in

Table 3. Multivariate analyses predicting parent–child interactions, by widowhood status \*baseline marital quality, changing lives of older couples study.

	6 months		18 months
	Ordinal regression	OLS regression	OLS regression
	Critical interactions with children	Dependence on children	Emotional support from children
Widowhood (1 = widowed)	-.766* (.315)	.357* (.148)	.186 (.157)
Emotional support from spouse, BL	-1.04*** (.269)		.376* (.172)
Widowhood X emotional support from spouse, BL	.647* (.296)		-.382* (.175)
Emotional dependence on spouse, BL		.210† (.120)	
Widowhood X emotional dependence on spouse, BL		-.306* (.138)	
<i>Child characteristics</i>			
Critical interactions with children, BL	.860*** (.151)		
Dependence on children, BL		.342*** (.066)	
Emotional support from children, BL			.485*** (.064)
Number of living children, 6 months	.139† (.085)	.057 (.040)	-.004 (.039)
Weekly or more contact, 6 months	-.475† (.295)	.425*** (.141)	.309* (.138)
Has sons only	.450 (.426)	.041 (.186)	.208 (.176)
Has daughters only	.323 (.403)	.133 (.186)	-.330† (.174)
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>			
Age	.006 (.022)	.021* (.010)	-.008 (.010)
Sex (1 = female)	-.315 (.338)	.246 (.155)	.220 (.158)
Race (1 = Black)	.011 (.401)	-.767*** (.187)	.041 (.185)
Education (years)	.059 (.051)	-.021 (.023)	-.019 (.024)
Owns home	-.891† (.504)	-.629* (.246)	.104 (.235)
Total household income (natural log)	.572† (.37)	-.059 (.135)	.040 (.129)
<i>Health characteristics</i>			
Self-rated health, 6 months(1 = fair/poor)	.784* (.327)	-.112 (.153)	.149 (.153)
Depressive symptoms (CESD), 6 months	.047 (.12)	-.112 (.153)	-.078 (.074)
Intercept		-1.023 (.924)	.246 (.884)
Adjusted (or Nagelekerke pseudo-) $R^2$	.308	.234	.350
Chi-square; df	85.11; 16		

Note: Statistical significance denoted as † $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; and \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

self-esteem, personal growth and learning new skills post-loss (Carr, 2004). Part of this trajectory of personal growth may be seeking independence from children, especially

given the well-documented pattern where bereaved spouses fear becoming a burden to their children (Talbot, 1990).

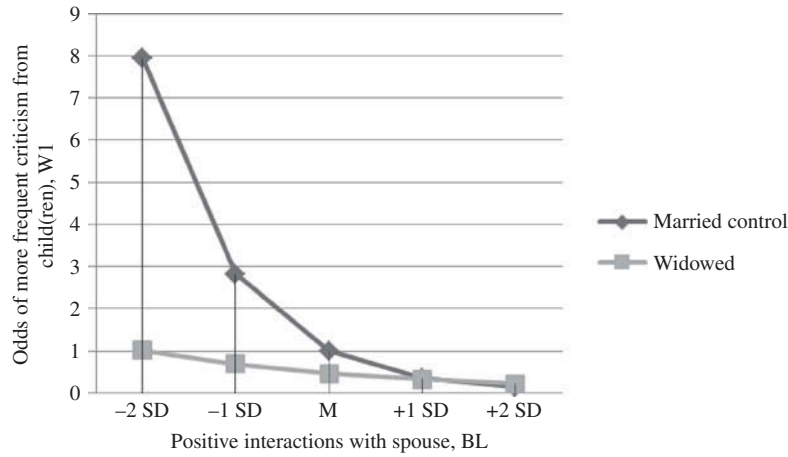


Figure 1. Critical interactions with children at 6-month follow-up, by widowhood status and positive marital interactions at baseline ( $N = 272$ ).

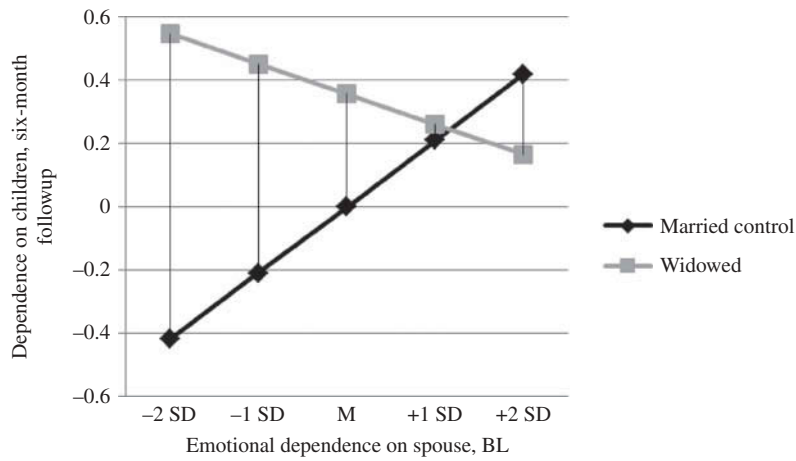


Figure 2. Dependence on children at 6-month follow-up, by widowhood status and emotional dependence on spouse at baseline ( $N = 272$ ).

Fourth, the impact of marital quality on widowed persons' parent-child relations is not accounted for by our two hypothesized pathways: yearning or a desire for more (or less) contact with one's child. However, even after yearning and the desire for contact were controlled, we found that high-quality marriages are associated with more support from and dependence on children, whereas conflictual marriages are associated with conflictual relationships with children. Further, the desire for more frequent contact with children is associated with significantly higher levels of emotional support from children, whereas the desire for stable levels of contact is associated with reduced levels of dependence on children. Because we are measuring these two concepts contemporaneously, it is possible that those who are least dependent on their children do not need or want the increased contact that other newly bereaved persons do. Those who desire levels of contact that are equal to

or greater than levels that were maintained prior to loss also report significantly less-frequent criticism from children, although this association may not necessarily be causal. Rather, persons who are not criticized by their children may desire frequent contact with these children.

**Limitations and future directions**

Our study is the first we know of to show how the impact of spousal loss on parent-child relations varies based on the nature of the late marriage, underscoring the complexity of family relations in later life. Our study has a number of limitations, however. First, relationship quality is assessed with a general appraisal referring to 'your children,' thus we cannot ascertain whether one is thinking about one particular child, or an 'average' across all children when evaluating their relationships. We also do not know whether

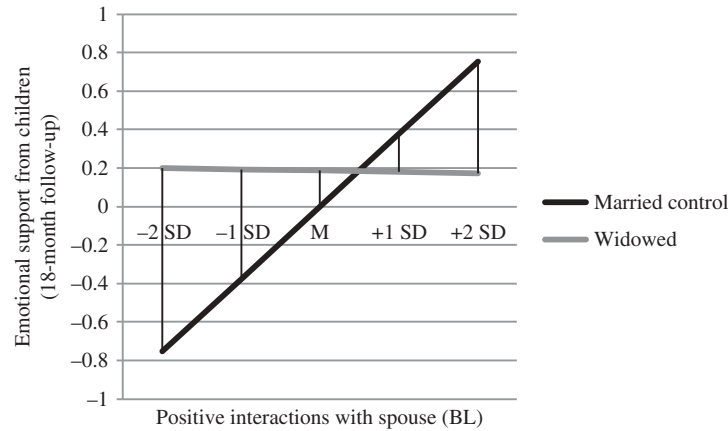


Figure 3. Dependence on children at 18-month follow-up, by widowhood status and emotional dependence on spouse at baseline ( $N = 190$ ).

Table 4. OLS regression predicting parent-child relationships among widow(er)s at 6-month follow-up, by pre-loss marital quality, changing lives of older couples study ( $N = 193$ ).

	OLS regression			Ordinal regression		
	Emotional support from children		Dependence on children	Criticism from children		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Baseline marital quality</i>						
Positive marital interactions	.190** (.060)			-.482** (.169)		
Negative marital interactions		-.180** (.058)	-.156* (.0750)		.383* (.167)	
Emotional dependence on spouse						
<i>Child characteristics</i>						
Emotional support from children, BL	.356*** (.062)	.370*** (.060)				-.521** (.199)
Critical interactions with children, BL				.771*** (.184)	.787*** (.183)	.817*** (.180)
Dependence on children, BL			.344*** (.077)			
Number of living children, 6 months	.007 (.043)	.007 (.043)	.099† (.057)	.304* (.122)	.320** (.122)	.340*** (.123)
Weekly or more contact, 6 months	.246† (.139)	.273* (.138)	.592** (.184)	-.799* (.414)	-.834* (.412)	-.747† (.420)
Has sons only	.044 (.167)	.043 (.168)	.214 (.222)	.892† (.534)	.925† (.531)	.966† (.534)
Has daughters only	-.113 (.166)	-.130 (.167)	.079 (.222)	.456 (.496)	.620 (.494)	.620 (.494)
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>						

(Continued)

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Table 4. (Continued).

	OLS regression			Ordinal regression		
	Emotional support from children		Dependence on children	Criticism from children		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Age	-.001 (.009)	-.005 (.010)	.029* (.013)	.047† (.027)	.054† (.028)	.023 (.028)
Sex (1 = female)	.323* (.147)	.264† (.145)	.310 (.189)	.687 (.459)	.779† (.448)	1.10* (.484)
Race (1 = black)	-.433* (.171)	-.364* (.172)	-.627** (.232)	.573 (.498)	.459 (.500)	.325 (.504)
Education (years)	.037† (.021)	.036† (.022)	-.018 (.029)	.076 (.068)	.071 (.067)	.088 (.067)
Owns home	.061 (.210)	.062 (.210)	-.572* (.282)	-.112* (.573)	-.992† (.575)	-.766 (.569)
Total household income (natural log)	-.018 (.123)	.024 (.122)	-.141 (.162)	.474 (.376)	.399 (.371)	.288 (.366)
<i>Health characteristics</i>						
Self-rated health, W1 (1 = fair/poor)	.004 (.140)	-.008 (.141)	-.260 (.189)	1.17** (.415)	1.12** (.416)	1.08** (.410)
Depressive symptoms (CESD), 6 months	-.056 (.057)	-.065 (.057)	.179* (.077)	-.067 (.162)	-.018 (.158)	.064 (.159)
<i>Potential explanatory pathways</i>						
Yearning, 6 months	.040 (.073)	.071 (.071)	.002 (.094)	.423† (.226)	.303 (.212)	.117 (.214)
Wants same contact with children	.864*** (.254)	.806** (.253)	-.916** (.340)	-1.62* (.665)	-1.47* (.658)	-.991 (.657)
Wants more contact with children	1.04*** (.260)	.990*** (.259)	-.455 (.346)	-1.72* (.686)	-1.51* (.675)	-1.02 (.679)
Intercept	-1.37(.853)	-1.09 (.864)	-.757 (1.16)			
Adjusted (or Nagelkerke pseudo-) $R^2$	.404	.402	.266	.320	.304	.313
Chi-square; df				61.49; 17	57.92; 17	59.91; 17

Note: Statistical significance denoted as † $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; and \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

one is referring to sons or daughters; this is an important concern given that gender shapes parent-child interactions (Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008). Future studies that obtain data on specific parent-child dyads could provide greater insights into parent-child relations following spousal loss, and whether these patterns are conditional upon one's late marital relationship. Second, the scale alpha for our measure of dependence was quite low (.50 to .61, across the three waves). Future studies should consider a wider range of measures of dependence, and could explore the distinctive consequences of spousal loss for instrumental, expressive and informational dependence upon children.

Third, our appraisals of marital quality and parent-child relations are based on a single reporter only, and provide a one-sided assessment of family relationships. Thus, the association between the marital and parent-child relations items could reflect an underlying personality trait or attachment style of the evaluator; however, all models

control for depressed affect at baseline. Fourth, sample size precludes a more fine-grained examination of subgroup differences, such as gender of both parent and child, geographic distance and/or co-residence between parent and child, health status, or race differences, in the ways that widowhood and marital quality affect parent-child relations.

Despite these limitations, our work is a step towards understanding the ways that long-standing patterns of family interactions affect bereaved older adults. Professionals who interact with older adults and their families, such as health care providers, geriatric social workers and clergy, should recognize that the social support and relationships bereaved persons possess (or lack) may be shaped by the long-standing patterns of family interaction. Family conflict or problem-solving styles prior to loss should be investigated, as practitioners develop strategies to help older widowed persons and their grown children adjust to their loss. Further, practitioners should recognize that the

boost to parent–child relationship quality post-loss is typically short-lived. Although grief interventions are typically targeted during the early stages of bereavement, our results suggest that older adults' social needs may increase in the longer-term, as early support from children returns to 'normal.' Widowed persons may thus be disappointed and in need when this period ends.

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