

Loneliness and well-being after partner loss: A large cross-sectional study.

M.R. Grimmelikhuijzen - 3159477

University Utrecht

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Guided by Drs. E. C. B. Verspui

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Dutch abstract

Het doel van deze studie was inzicht te verschaffen in hoe civiele status gerelateerd is aan eenzaamheid en subjectief welbevinden. We hebben ons daarbij gebaseerd op Weiss (1973) zijn onderscheid tussen emotionele en sociale eenzaamheid en hieraan gerelateerd bespreken we mogelijke sekseverschillen. Het onderzoek is gebaseerd op gegevens van het LISS panel (CentERdata), waarbij een representatieve steekproef van de deelnemers (N = 4573; van 21 tot 93 jaar) een online vragenlijst heeft ingevuld. Resultaten tonen aan dat de aanwezigheid van een intieme hechtingsfiguur geassocieerd is met hogere niveaus in subjectief welzijn en lagere niveaus van emotionele eenzaamheid, vergeleken bij het verlies van een intieme hechtingsfiguur. In dat geval is het weduwschap geassocieerd met sterkere gevoelens van enkel emotionele eenzaamheid, terwijl een scheiding geassocieerd is met sterkere gevoelens van zowel emotionele als sociale eenzaamheid. Tegen onze verwachtingen in bleek een scheiding gepaard te gaan met de laagste niveaus in subjectief welbevinden, terwijl er geen verschil in de sterkte van het emotionele verlies tussen weduwen en gescheiden is gevonden. Wat betreft sekseverschillen vonden we dat met name de mannen emotionele voldoening halen uit de aanwezigheid van een intieme hechtingsfiguur, maar hogere niveaus van sociale eenzaamheid ervaren indien deze is verloren. Tot slot vonden we dat emotionele eenzaamheid sterker gerelateerd is aan subjectief welzijn dan sociale eenzaamheid. Op deze manier heeft onze studie het belang aangetoond om een differentiatie aan te brengen in zowel het type eenzaamheid als type partnerverlies.

Abstract

The aim of the present study was to provide insight into how civil status was related to experienced loneliness and reported subjective well-being. Thereby, we drew upon Weiss' (1973) distinction between emotional and social loneliness and made specific notions about possible gender differences. The study was based on data of the LISS panel (CentERdata), where a representative sample of participants (N = 4573; age 21 to 93) filled out an online questionnaire. Results indicate that the presence of an intimate attachment figure is associated with higher levels of subjective well-being and lower levels of emotional loneliness, compared to when an intimate attachment figure is lost. In that case, widowhood was accompanied by stronger feelings of only emotional loneliness, while divorce was accompanied by stronger feelings of both emotional and social loneliness. Although contrary to our expectations, we found that the divorced reported the lowest levels of subjective well-being, while no differences in the strength of the emotional experience of losing an intimate attachment figure through death or divorce was found. Regarding gender differences, we found that especially men seem to find emotional fulfilment in the presence of an intimate attachment figure, while more socially lonely when this attachment figure is lost. At last we found emotional loneliness to a greater extent related to subjective well-being. Thereby, the current study demonstrated the importance of making a differentiation in type of loneliness and type of partner loss.

Introduction

Loneliness is more and more considered as a growing disease of modern times, and alleviation of loneliness is a central issue in the construction of people's well-being and quality of life (de Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 2010). One of the most important determinants of loneliness is civil status (De Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 2006; Peters & Liefbroer, 1997). Although civil status has been studied in relation to loneliness, it can be suggested that the determinant revolves around the fact that marriage allows for an important attachment figure to be present in someone's life (Weiss, 1973). Indeed, an intimate attachment figure can provide basic needs like emotional closeness and support (Bowlby, 1977). On the other hand, losing an attachment figure like one's partner, is said to be one of the most difficult life events one can experience, often accompanied by severe feelings of loneliness and a deteriorated state of well-being (Gove and Shin, 1989; Gove, Style, & Hughes, 1990; Pinquart, 2003). Nowadays, one can not only lose a partner by death, but it is also a common possibility that someone loses a partner by means of divorce. Indeed, the fact is that within half a century the divorce rate has more than quadrupled (CBS, 2012). Although prior research highlighted the painful circumstance in which widowers are subjected to enduring feelings of emotional loss (Stroebe, Stroebe, Abakoumkin, & Schut, 1996), the question remains whether the same holds true for partner loss through means of divorce, given the differences in both events. For example, while widowhood marks an irreversible and deeply felt loss, a divorce is often the endpoint of an unhealthy relationship that is surrounded by prolonged tension and stress (Gove & Shin, 1989; Peters & Liefbroer, 1997). Therefore, the overall purpose of the current research is to investigate how civil status is related to experienced loneliness and reported subjective well-being.

Although loneliness has been described as a general subjective and negative emotional state (de Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 2010), Weiss (1973) pinpointed at the existence of two

facets of the construct for already forty years ago. More particular, he made a distinction between *emotional loneliness*, coherent to the loss of an intimate attachment figure and *social loneliness*, coherent to the loss of a wider social network of family and friends. Based on Weiss' distinction in loneliness, the contribution of the current study is twofold. First is investigated how the loss of an intimate attachment figure, either through death or divorce is related to emotional and social loneliness. In addition, based on the notion of dissimilar gender advantages gained from marriage (Gove, 1972), an accompanying goal is to examine the differences between men and women in the linkages between civil status and loneliness. Secondly, it is investigated how civil status and loneliness are related to well-being.

In the following overview, we begin with an elaboration on loneliness and it's relation to attachment theory. From there, we expand our expectations about the linkages between civil status and loneliness, where gender differences are taken into account as well. At last, we discuss both civil status and loneliness in relation to subjective well-being.

Loneliness and attachment theory

Weiss' distinction between emotional and social loneliness is based on the attachment literature and suggests that the provisions of attachment are distinct from those of social integration and that neither can be substituted for the other (Weiss, 1973). Indeed, while people need a social network to provide engagement they also need an attachment figure for the provisions of security and belonging. Yet, when someone loses an important attachment figure through widowhood or divorce, the compensation for emotional isolation can only be achieved by the integration of another important attachment figure (Stroebe et al., 1996). If this is not accomplished, the intense feelings of emptiness and abandonment may persist. This aversive emotional state stands apart from the dissatisfaction or boredom that someone can experience by lacking a wider social network of friends to share common interests with. By

this distinction, it can be explained how it is possible to be surrounded by family and friends while still, at the same time, feeling completely alone (Stroebe et al., 1996).

Weiss (1973) stipulated that the presence of an intimate attachment figure wards off against emotional loneliness. Indeed, it is an established finding in the literature that people who are bonded with a partner are better protected from loneliness in comparison to those living alone (Wenger, Davies, Shahtahmasebi, & Scott, 1996; Peters & Liefbroer, 1997; de Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 2006). Yet, living alone is often the consequence of a relationship that has been dissolved through divorce or widowhood (de Jong Gierveld, van Tilburg, & Dyksta, 2006). The expected differences in these two events can be explained in more detail by contrasting specific types of loneliness that may develop after partner loss. The study of Stroebe et al. (1996) revealed that, in concordance with attachment theory, bereavement affected emotional loneliness but not social loneliness. They found that the support from family and friends protected the widowers from social loneliness, while this couldn't compensate for the loss of an intimate attachment figure resulting in emotional loneliness.

In case of divorce, the individual not only separates from an intimate attachment figure, the separation process may also be accompanied by changes in the person's social support network. Terhell, Broese van Groenou and van Tilburg (2004) explain that losing a partner may end in a 'network crisis', causing changes in both personal relationships and social engagement. Indeed, not only does someone lose their partner, shared family and friends are also involved in the separation process (Terhell et al., 2004). This way someone's social network may be destructed, causing a substantial decrease in social support. Making it plausible that in addition to the impact a divorce can have on feelings of emotional loneliness, feelings of social loneliness may arise.

Accordingly, our first hypothesis is that the presence of an intimate attachment figure is accompanied with lower levels for emotional loneliness, opposed to when an intimate

attachment figure is lost through divorce or widowhood. In that case, we hypothesize that divorce leads to higher levels of both emotional and social loneliness, while widowhood is marked by higher levels of mere emotional loneliness. Moreover, due to the intensity and depth of feelings when someone loses his beloved to death (Gove & Shin, 1989; Guiaux, van Tilburg, & Broese van Groenou, 2007), we expect to find higher levels of emotional loneliness among the widowed compared to the divorced.

Loneliness and gender differences

Prior research has reported gender differences in the relation between civil status and loneliness (Gove, Hughes, & Style, 1983; Peters & Liefbroer, 1997; Pinqart, 2003; Dykstra & De Jong Gierveld, 2004). Gove (1972) pointed out that men seem to benefit more from an intimate relationship than women do and that men experience more difficulties in the absence of a partner. It is proposed by Peters and Liefbroer (1997) that men have more difficulties to adjust when a partner is lost and that they lose more social contacts when their relationship gets dissolved. In addition, the authors stipulated that men are more dependent on women to organize a household and to comply with a structured life-style. Moreover, it seems that in accordance with the attachment literature, for men the absence of a partner means lacking an important attachment figure, whereas women are more inclined to rely on other important figures, such as their children, family and friends for the provisions of emotional fulfilment and support (Pinqart, 2003). As a consequence, men without an intimate attachment figure report higher levels of emotional loneliness than women (Dykstra & De Jong Gierveld, 2004).

Based on previous research we formulate the following hypotheses: it can be expected that in the presence of an intimate attachment figure, men report lower levels of emotional loneliness than women. Otherwise, we expect men to report higher levels of emotional loneliness when an intimate attachment figure is lost. Furthermore, we expect that with the

loss of an intimate attachment figure, men become more isolated from extended family and friends, while women maintain stronger ties with for example their children and related family members. Therefore, we expect lone men to exhibit higher levels of social loneliness than women who lost an intimate attachment figure. We have no reasons to assume that these gender differences will be different with respect to the divorced and the widowed.

Civil status, loneliness and subjective well-being

We have already noted that alleviation of loneliness is a key component in the maintenance of mental health (de Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 2010). Moreover, research on well-being revealed the existence of notable differences in people's well-being between categories of civil status (Peters & Liefbroer, 1997). Beyond the protection that an intimate partner bond can provide against loneliness, it is well documented that the presence of a partner is associated with higher levels of mental health and well-being such as happiness and life satisfaction (Hughes & Gove, 1981; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). In addition, research has shown that losing a partner can have severe negative consequences for levels of mental health and well-being, including poor mood, lower self-esteem, dysphoria and anxiety (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Cacioppo, Fowler, & Christiakis, 2009). Therefore, in line with our hypotheses about civil status and loneliness, we expect to find that the presence of an intimate attachment figure is associated with higher reports of subjective well-being. With the loss of an intimate attachment figure, we expect the widowed to be the worst of, due to the intensity of the loss suffered (Gove & Shin, 1989; Guiaux, Tilburg, & Broese van Groenou, 2007). Yet, what is currently unknown is whether the two types of loneliness are differently related to aspects of well-being. Weiss (1973) addressed that both types of loneliness are accompanied by a different set of feelings. While emotional loneliness is expected to produce feelings of complete solitude, anxiety and feelings of abandonment,

social loneliness is expected to produce feelings of dissatisfaction and boredom. Moreover, it is generally assumed that the quality of contacts is of higher importance than the quantity of contacts for people's well-being (Pinquart, 2003). This could mean that the experience of emotional loneliness by the lack of an intimate attachment figure has a more devastating effect on well-being, opposed to the feelings of social loneliness by a restricted social network. Thus, although we expect both types of loneliness to be negatively related with well-being, our final hypothesis is that emotional loneliness serves as a stronger contributor to subjective well-being than social loneliness does.

Method

Participants

The current study uses data obtained from 4573 Dutch respondents between the ages of 21 and 93 years. Their mean age was 55 years old ($SD = 17.1$). Represented in table 1 are selected background variables of the respondents. It is noteworthy that gender was quite equally distributed among the participants and that all age groups were well represented. In the interest of current research, civil status is classified into three groups, namely living with a partner, divorced or widowed. Within the first group, cohabitants were added to enclose other forms of relationships, besides marriage, where an intimate attachment figure can be found. For the divorced and widowed, we selected participants who were currently not involved in a romantic relationship.

Table 1. Background characteristics of the sample (N=4573).

Background characteristics	% (N)
Gender	
Male	46.0% (N = 2104)
Female	54.0% (N = 2469)
Age in categories	
15 to 24 years	10.0% (N = 458)
25 to 34 years	10.2% (N = 465)
35 to 44 years	15.1% (N = 690)
45 to 54 years	18.5% (N = 846)
55 to 64 years	23.1% (N = 1056)
65 years and older	23.1% (N = 1058)
Education	
Primary	11.0% (N = 502)
Lower vocational	26.6% (N = 1217)
Secondary	10.3% (N = 469)
Middle vocational	22.8% (N = 1042)
Higher vocational	21.7% (N = 991)
University	7.5% (N = 342)
Civil status	
Living with a partner	84.9% (N = 3882)
Divorced	9.9% (N = 452)
Widowed	5.2% (N = 239)

Procedure

This article was based upon data of the LISS (Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social sciences) panel administered by CentERdata (Tilburg University, The Netherlands). The LISS panel is a representative sample of Dutch individuals who participate in monthly Internet surveys. The panel is based on a true probability sample of households drawn from the population register. Households that could not otherwise participate are provided with a computer and Internet access. When the LISS panel was compared with national statistics, it showed some underrepresentation of elderly people, singles, widowers and immigrants (Knoef & de Vos, 2010). The current study used data from core modules developed by the LISS panel, concerning *personality* and *social integration and leisure* and comprises various well-validated questionnaires. General background information was gathered through a separate survey, which could be updated every month. Some questions concerned the whole household, while others concerned individual household members. However, all questions were completed by the household contact person only.

Measures

Demographics Questions were asked about age, gender, origin, civil status, education level of each person in household and about the type of household.

Loneliness The 6 item Loneliness scale (de Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 2006) was developed to assess overall, emotional and social loneliness and comprises a total of 6 items, using a 3-point Likert scale (1 ‘yes’, 2 ‘more or less’ and 3 ‘no’). In the current study, separate scales for emotional and social loneliness were constructed. The measure of emotional loneliness was constructed by calculating the average of the following three items: “I have a sense of emptiness around me/ I miss having people around me/ I often feel

deserted”. The three items were scored so that higher scores indicated loneliness. The measure of social loneliness was constructed by calculating the average of the other three remaining items: “There are enough people I can count on in case of a misfortune/ I know a lot of people that I can fully rely on/ There are enough people to whom I feel closely connected.” Reliability values of .70 to .80 were referred to as acceptable and above .80 as high (Kline, 1994). Cronbach’s α showed that the scales had good reliability in the current sample (respectively $\alpha = .81$ and $\alpha = .80$).

Subjective well-being was assessed with the aggregation of two measures: happiness and satisfaction with life. Happiness was measured with a single item, asking respondents to rate their overall happiness on a 10-point scale, ranging from 1 (totally unhappy) to 10 (totally happy). The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Pavot & Diener, 1993) comprises five items, using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample items included: ‘I am satisfied with my life’ and ‘the conditions of my life are excellent’. Specific items were reverse scored so that higher scores indicated higher satisfaction with life. The mean of the ratings was used as a whole measure of life satisfaction (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .90$).

Statistical analyses

In order to improve our understanding of how civil status is related to experienced loneliness and reported subjective well-being, several analyses were performed. Analyses of variance (ANOVA’s) were performed with post hoc tests to test for main differences in civil status’ relation to happiness, life-satisfaction and the two types of loneliness. T-tests were used to test for gender differences within the three civil status groups. At last, the relation between loneliness and subjective-well-being was examined by means of regression analyses. We used SPSS 20.0 to analyse the data. In all analyses, we applied a significance level of .001

instead of the common .05, because of the large sample size. Correlations around .20 were considered low, around .50 to be moderate and around .80 to be high (Cohen, 1969).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

In general, people reported to be fairly happy and satisfied with their lives ($M = 7.6$ and $M = 5.1$, respectively). The overall mean score for emotional loneliness was 1.23 and for social loneliness 1.40. Presented in table 2 are the descriptive statistics for all variables of interest, set out for civil status. We will discuss the results in the sequel.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for all variables

	<i>Emotional loneliness</i>		<i>Social loneliness</i>		<i>Happiness</i>		<i>Life satisfaction</i>	
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)
Partner	1.21	0.41	1.39	0.51	7.67	1.18	5.20	1.02
Divorced	1.40	0.54	1.52	0.57	7.02	1.50	4.43	1.23
Widowed	1.39	0.50	1.36	0.44	7.33	1.26	4.84	1.04

Values are based on a sample size of $N = 4573$

Civil status and loneliness

The results concerning our hypotheses about how the presence or loss of a partner through means of divorce or widowhood is related to emotional and social loneliness will be discussed successively. Pertaining to emotional loneliness, tests for mean differences revealed a significant difference between civil status groups ($F(2, 4316) = 50.56, p < .001$). Post hoc tests revealed that in comparison to when a partner is present, both the divorced and widowed reported significant higher levels of emotional loneliness (both $p < .001$). Moreover, no significant difference between the divorced and widowed was found in levels of emotional loneliness ($p = 1$). Pertaining to social loneliness, tests for mean differences revealed a significant difference between civil status groups ($F(2, 4316) = 11.02, p < .001$). Post hoc tests revealed that in comparison to when a partner is present, the divorced reported

significant higher levels of social loneliness ($p < .001$), while the widowed reported no differences in social loneliness ($p = 1$). Meaning that compared to when a partner is present, divorce leads to higher levels of both emotional and social loneliness, while widowhood is marked by higher levels of mere emotional loneliness.

Gender differences and loneliness

In the presence of a partner, we expected men to report lower levels of emotional loneliness than women. Tests for mean differences confirmed that men tended to be less emotionally lonely than women ($t = -4.05, p < .001$). No differences in social loneliness emerged ($t = 2.28, p = .023$). In the absence of a partner, we expected men to report higher levels of both emotional and social loneliness. Tests for mean differences only partially confirmed our expectancies. Men reported higher levels of social loneliness ($t = 3.65, p < .001$), while no differences in emotional loneliness emerged ($t = 2.86, p = .004$) based on a significance level of $p < .001$.

Civil status and subjective well-being

We expected those living with a partner to report higher levels of subjective well-being compared to those who have lost their partner through death or divorce. Tests for mean differences revealed significant main effects for both happiness ($F(2, 4500) = 52.06, p < .001$) and satisfaction with life ($F(2, 4567) = 98.13, p < .001$). Post hoc tests showed that although both the widowed and the divorced reported significant lower levels on both outcome measures, the divorced reported the lowest mean scores for subjective well-being.

Loneliness and subjective well-being

Finally, we examined how emotional and social loneliness were related to measures of subjective well-being. Preliminary analysis revealed significant negative correlations between emotional loneliness and reported happiness ($r = -.47$) and life satisfaction ($r = -.44$), and between social loneliness and happiness ($r = -.30$) and life satisfaction ($r = -.34$), all based on a $p < .001$. With the use of multiple regression analyses, the predictors emotional and social loneliness were simultaneously entered in the model. This procedure is repeated for both outcome variables. A significant model for *happiness* appeared: $F(2, 563) = 87.33, p < .001$. The model explained 23.5% of the variance. Also, for *satisfaction with life* a significant model appeared: $F(5, 569) = 83.74, p < .001$, explaining 22.5% of the variance. We expected emotional loneliness to serve as a stronger contributor in subjective well-being than social loneliness. In order to determine which effect was stronger, we compared the standardized regressions coefficients. As represented in table 3, larger standardized regression coefficients for emotional loneliness were found for both happiness and life satisfaction. This means that emotional loneliness is more strongly associated to subjective well-being than social loneliness.

Table 3. Linear regression showing the interactions between loneliness and subjective well-being.

	<i>Happiness</i>			<i>Satisfaction with life</i>		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Emotional loneliness	-1.15	.11	-.42*	-.82	.09	-.37*
Social loneliness	-.36	.11	-.13*	-.02	.09	-.19*

* $p < .001$

Conclusions and discussion

The main purpose of the current research was to provide insight into how civil status was related to experienced loneliness and reported subjective well-being. Thereby, we drew upon Weiss' (1973) distinction between emotional and social loneliness and made specific notions about possible gender differences. Overall, we found that the presence of an intimate attachment figure is associated with higher levels of subjective well-being and lower levels of emotional loneliness, compared to when an intimate attachment figure is lost. In that case, widowhood was accompanied by stronger feelings of only emotional loneliness, while divorce was accompanied by stronger feelings of both emotional and social loneliness. Regarding gender differences, we found men to report lower levels of emotional loneliness than women in the presence of an intimate attachment figure, while higher levels of social loneliness when this attachment figure is lost. At last we found emotional loneliness to a greater extent related to subjective well-being than social loneliness.

Our results show that the presence of an intimate attachment figure is associated with higher levels of subjective well-being. This is consistent with numerous studies that already established that the status of being married is accompanied with benefits for mental health and well-being (Gove, Style & Hughes, 1990; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Yet, the current study contributed to the literature by adopting a broader view of civil status. Based on attachment theory, we suggested that it is not the status of marriage per se that counts, but rather having an intimate other who can provide a sense of security and belonging. Accordingly, the current study found support for Weiss' (1973) notion that the presence of an intimate attachment figure provides protection from emotional loneliness. In this way, we show that these provided benefits are accessible for other kinds of intimate relationships besides marriage as well.

To form a complete understanding, our study reveals that a further differentiation should be made among those who have lost their intimate attachment figure, be it through divorce or widowhood. Indeed, in line with our expectations we found the two events to be associated with a different experience in loneliness. Compared to the presence of an intimate attachment figure, widowhood was accompanied by stronger feelings of only emotional loneliness, while divorcement was accompanied by stronger feelings of both emotional and social loneliness. The findings confirm that the losses suffered between widowhood and divorce differ (Gove & Shin, 1989; Peters & Liefbroer, 1997). In accordance with the research of Stroebe et al. (1996), we observed that the widowed, although socially embedded, still reported feelings of emotional loneliness. This resembles Weiss' (1973) original statement that the provisions of social integration are distinct from those of attachment and that neither can be substituted for the other. However, the current study notes that greater consideration of this statement is needed. Bonding with a partner often entails secondary advantages with regard to the coming together of partners' own social networks (Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2004). In this way, it is common practice that partners acquire joint contacts and establish mutual friends. Thereby, the social network of couple members gets expanded, making them less vulnerable for social loneliness. Although divorce disrupts someone's social support network, making divorced individuals more vulnerable for social loneliness (Terhell et al., 2004), widowed may maintain their social network which may buffer against social loneliness.

The impact of divorce is also reflected by our finding that the divorced reported the lowest levels of subjective well-being. Moreover, no differences in the strength of the emotional experience of losing an intimate attachment figure through death or divorce has been found. Although contrary to our expectations, these findings imply that divorcement is marked by an equally deep felt emotional loss compared to widowhood, but characterized by stronger impairments in well-being. Weiss (1973) described that the similarities of

bereavement and divorce are situated in the fact that the person in either instances needs to adjust to the loss of their partner and reconstruct multiple aspects of his or her life. Moreover, although not directly measured in the current study, it seems plausible that divorce is especially painful when children are involved. This might explain why the divorced reported the lowest levels for well-being. Indeed, from the perspective of the parents, not seeing one's children on a daily basis can reduce one's happiness and satisfaction with life to a substantial degree (Amato, 2000).

Based on the notion about dissimilar gender advantages gained from marriage (Gove, 1972), gender differences were predicted in civil status' relationship with loneliness. In our sample, men involved in a relationship reported less emotional loneliness than women involved in a relationship. This is consistent with Gove (1972) who suggested that men benefit more from close relationships than women. Because men rely stronger on women to fulfill their attachment needs than vice versa, men may get more emotional fulfilment and satisfaction out of their romantic relationship than women (Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2004). In agreement with this, we expected that men might be more affected by intimate partner loss than women. However, the present study showed no gender differences in emotional loneliness when an intimate attachment figure is lost, indicating the impact of losing someone on emotional loneliness may be equal for men and women. This is in contrast with previous studies reporting higher emotional loneliness in men than in women after losing an intimate attachment figure (Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2004).

On the other hand, men who had lost their intimate attachment figure were found to report higher levels of social loneliness compared to women. Our results on social loneliness are in agreement with prior research on loneliness that suggests men to fare worse without a partner than women when an intimate attachment figure is lost (Peters & Liefbroer, 1997; Pinquart, 2003). Men may have greater difficulty to maintain their social network following

partner loss and as a consequence report more social loneliness than women. This may be explained by the fact that in their relationship men can rely on their female partner to organize and maintain their social network, whereas after losing their partner men stand aside because they can no longer count on their wives to facilitate social contact. Furthermore, women may have larger support networks and maintain stronger ties with their children. This idea is supported by Pinquart's (2003) finding that the limited contact between men and their children serves as the reason why fathers tend to be lonelier than mothers.

At last, when emotional and social loneliness were related to well-being, we found in accordance with our expectations, that the loss of an important attachment figure is more severely related to impaired subjective well-being than lacking a social network. This implies that the differences in experienced loneliness are important for understanding the nature of mental health. Although attachment and social integration can both be considered as features of mental health, our findings make it reasonable to suggest a more distinctive approach and underscore the possible independence of emotional and social loneliness for the establishment of subjective well-being. In addition, our results support the notion that relationship quality is a more potent predictor of loneliness than the quantity of social contacts (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2003). One implication is that in order to promote people's well-being, more attention should be brought to the importance of the quality of our contacts in order to satisfy the person's subjective need for close connections (Victor, Scambler, & Bond, 2009).

Methodological considerations

Some aspects of the current study merit attention. Firstly, we may have not succeeded in making a proper comparison between divorce and widowhood, due to the differing age distributions of the two groups. Since widowhood is more prominent later in life and divorce an earlier occurring event, age differences could serve as a confounding factor. Future

research might control for the effects of age or use age matching samples. Secondly, we did not include marital history in our analysis and time since divorce or widowhood was unknown. For example, a recent divorce may exert stronger effects on loneliness than a divorce that occurred years ago. Although only divorced and widowed individuals that were single were selected for the present study, we have no insight in their marital history or where someone stands in the recovery process. Thirdly, practising cross-sectional research comes along with the restriction that no estimates over time can be given nor causal conclusions can be drawn. This may be particularly relevant for the association between loneliness and subjective well-being (VanderWeele, Hawkey, & Cacioppo, 2012). A longitudinal design would be better suited to address these questions. Fourthly, the measurement of subjective well-being consisted of an individual score approach by examining separate subscales, rather than an overall measure. In the future, the usage of a bifactor model may lead to a better understanding of the results (Chen, Hayes, Carver, Laurenceau, & Zhang, 2012). At last, although not in the scope of the current research, it would have enriched the perspective on well-being if civil status and loneliness were incorporated using a mediational model. If applied in future research more direct statements about how differences in civil status groups are related to experienced loneliness and subsequent well-being can be given.

Practical implications and future research

The current study stresses people's needs for close connections and that relationships can be good for us. This makes loneliness a paradoxical problem since modern society values the pursuit of individual needs and self-reliance. Perhaps too much time is investigated in the self instead of others. As a consequence people get more isolated and detached from others. We have seen that loneliness has multiple aspects and specific implications for subjective well-being. Our study supports the importance of investigating

emotional and social loneliness as distinct entities that cannot be substituted for each other. Furthermore, greater insight into loneliness is gained when the perspective of attachment is considered. The experience of loneliness differs with the loss of an important attachment figure. People who have lost their partner through divorce or widowhood seem to run a higher risk of being emotionally lonely than people who are still together. Moreover, social loneliness seems to play an evident part in the lives of the divorced. We found that especially men seem to find emotional fulfilment in the presence of an intimate attachment figure, while more socially lonely when this attachment figure is lost. At last, we considered the importance of the quality of our contacts in the contribution to subjective well-being.

We paid special attention to those people left behind after they have lost a beloved one by means of death or divorce. Interesting for future research is to investigate loneliness in a less older group at risk, namely the younger adults. Prior research revealed that the prevalence and intensity of lonely feelings is almost highest among adolescents (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2003). During this phase, adolescents are leaving the parental home in order to establish an independent life style of their own. It seems that many of them feel detached from their parents, while perhaps in no stage to engage in a serious intimate relationship. Although social engagement and interaction with friends can prevent them from feeling socially lonely, it may very well be that the lack of an important attachment figure could result in feelings of emotional loneliness and a deteriorated state of well-being. Therefore, it would be valuable to distinguish the two types of loneliness in the study of loneliness and well-being in younger adults.

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