Identity Continuity and Loss After Death, Divorce, and Job Loss

SUMMARY: Experiences of loss are known to affect one's sense of self, yet how one's identity is related to loss and the implications for the experience of grief are not well understood. Therefore, connections between loss, identity construal (different ways people think about their sense of self), and balance of identity construal on grief intensity were explored across three types of losses; death of a family member (bereavement), job loss, or divorce.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The severity of participants' grief was related to degree of disruption in their self-concept (how one thinks about, evaluates or perceives themselves) after the loss of an important identity role or relationship across all three types of losses.
- Increases in participants' individual self-construal (ways of seeing self that were individual in nature (e.g., "I am myself")) and collective self-construal (ways if seeing self in relation to a larger group (e.g., "I am a woman", "I am on a soccer team")) were associated with both decreased identity disruption and decreased grief symptoms.
- In the death of a family member group, when participants had an increased number of self-statements describing themselves in relation to other individuals this was related to a decrease in grief intensity.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:
Military professionals could:
- Facilitate on-line support groups for Service members and their families that address different types of loss
- Provide Service members and families workshops on adjusting to loss and developing coping skills

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:
Programs could:
- Develop curriculum that can be used to guide Service members and families through critical transition points (e.g., death of family member, separation, divorce)
- Disseminate information on how to potentially lessen Service members and their families grief intensity and symptoms

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:
Policies could:
- Recommend professional development for professionals who work with Service members and their families around loss (e.g., family member, divorce, separation)
- Support the development and continuation of programs that provide help to Service members, their partners, and children in their adjustments to loss

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USDA

METHODS

- Four hundred twenty-four participants from United States were recruited using Amazon' Mechanical Turk service, a web service that provides an on-demand, human workforce to complete needed tasks.
- Data were collected online using self-reported measures that explored the concepts of grief, identity attributes and self-construals, identity salience, and identity disruption.
- Analysis involved the development of a coding scheme for open-ended responses.

PARTICIPANTS

- In order to be in the study, participants had to have lost a loved one (parent, child, spouse), lost a job that they held for at least 6 months, or gotten a divorce, all within the past 12 months.
- The mean age of participants was 34 years old, 55% were female, and 42% had a bachelor's degree or above.
- In terms of race and ethnicity, participants identified as White 74%, Black 10%, Latino or Hispanic 1%, Asian-American 9%, Native American 2%, and Multiracial 4%.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample had a higher average education and employment rate than the general U.S. population, which lessens generalizability of the findings.
- Participants had a higher rate of depression and anxiety than found in the general population for which the study did not control.
- This study involved individuals who were from the U.S. where individuals tend to orient and see themselves in a more individualistic manner; therefore, implications for more collectivistic cultures is limited.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Investigate different attributes that underlie the roles that make up individual identities among Service members and their families
- Explore the assumptions underlying attachment theory and grief
- Interrogate both potential mechanisms of change common across loss in general and unique to different types of loss

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design
★★☆
Appropriate
Research Plan and Sample

Methods
★★☆
Appropriate
Measurement and Analysis

Limitations
★★☆
Few

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
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