

Current partnership quality against the background of separation experiences from previous partners

"Many of the most intense of all human emotions arise during the formation, the maintenance, the disruption and the renewal of affectional bonds - which for that reason are sometimes called emotional bonds" (Bowlby 1969, p. 69).

1. Introduction and Theory

Emerging adulthood has been pointed out as providing important learning opportunities for romantic relationships (Walper et al., 2008). While there is considerable agreement that current relationships must be seen against the background of former relationship experiences, it is not clear how these experiences shape current partnerships. Research on divorce and remarriage suggests that women manage to establish more egalitarian and satisfying relationships after divorce (Amato, 2000), be it due to more careful partner selection or improved relationship skills. Hence, some positive learning processes might be expected. At the same time, research focusing on the stressfulness of separation experiences and the finding of a larger amount of avoidantly attached and less securely attached individuals in second marriages (Ceglian & Gardner, 1999) would suggest a disadvantage for "experienced" individuals in subsequent partnership relations.

Hypotheses: The present study contrasts two hypotheses regarding the effects of previous separation experiences on current partnership relations: the advantage hypothesis (assuming former relationships as positive learning opportunities) vs. the disadvantage hypothesis (assuming increased stress in subsequent relationships).

2. Sample and Methods

G0: First long-term relationship (N= 2029)	G1: Former relationship < 2 years (N= 1801)	G2: Former relationship > 2 years (N=1892)
♀ 54.8%	♀ 52.6%	♀ 61.2%
31.36 Ø age	31.54 Ø age	32.13 Ø age
130 (current rel.dur.)	106 months	77 months
No former rel.	1.56	1.98

Data was taken from the first wave (2008/2009) of the *pairfam* panel. The sample comprised 5722 adults in a current relationship of at least 6 months of duration. 2518 persons were between 25 and 27 years old, 3217 between 35 and 37 years. Multivariate analyses of variance were used to compare adults in their first long-term relationship to those who reported at least one previous partnership which lasted between 6 and 23 months or 24 months and longer. Accordingly, three groups were compared with age group and gender as additional factors (see Table).

3. Results

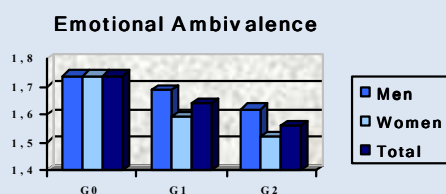


Fig. 1 MANOVA; $p < .01$; $F = 17.236$; $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .006$; controlling for age

Contrary to the disadvantage hypothesis, persons with former relationship experience reported lower attachment anxiety (see Figure 1). However, they described themselves as being less conflict tolerant and as quicker to think about separation when there are serious problems. Interestingly, both destructive and constructive conflict behaviour was reported more often for couple discussions. Still, relationship satisfaction and commitment did not differ for both groups.

"The experiences at one transition point resonate at later transition points. Sometimes they heal, sometimes they exacerbate old wounds; but either way, the past is always present in a second marriage" (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002, p. 165).

Dyadic Coping of Partner

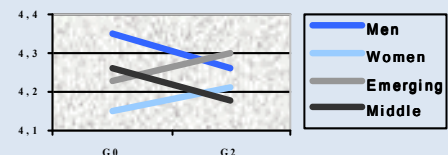


Fig. 2 MANOVA; $F = 12.354$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .003$ (for sex); $F = 3.019$; $p = .08$; $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .001$ (for cohort)

Also, sex and age seem to be moderator variables in dyadic coping (see Figure 2). While women and emerging adults profit from previous experiences with respect to their partners' dyadic coping, the reverse holds for men and middle-aged adults.

4. Discussion

Using biographical information from a large sample of adults in Germany, the present study was able to show that previous intimate relationships can be viewed as a learning opportunity for relationship skills in later long-term relationships e.g. with individuals being less emotionally insecure. Therefore it could be assumed, that these relationships may have another quality than later, more committed partnerships as for example marriages that end. As results show, men and women with previous relationship experiences see their current partners' dyadic coping differently. One might assume that men experience their new partner in the nostalgic air of former experiences as less devoted whereas women in the hope of having made a better choice this time, stressing the advantages of a new partner. In line with frequent findings, women gain autonomy in the face of a separation (BMFSFJ, 2006) when having a subsequent partnership. Also, women might choose subsequent partners differently because of their previous experiences.

Limitations: As the effects are small and there were used few items per scale, results should be examined with precaution. Nonetheless, even when taking into account those limitations, our study can be seen as preliminary evidence for differences in partnership experiences with respect to former relationships. Dyadic analyses and longitudinal studies should take a closer look at the quality of these differences.

Future Directions: In the light of "serial monogamy" and changing relationships there is an urgent need for studies that take a closer look at the partnership history of people and how relationships are intertwined. One of the leading questions concerns the quality of the influence of relationship and separation experiences on current partnerships. Also, attachment theory yet has to prove that it can hold as a concept for relationship and separation research over the life course.