



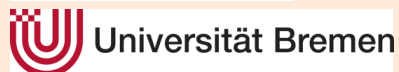
# Elderly Couples: Conflicts, Roles and Late Life

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# Overview

## Current and New Relevance

**A) Societal Macro Level: demography**  
→ necessary societal adjustment?!

**B) Dyadic Micro Level: Aging**  
→ necessary dyadic adjustment?!

## Presentation

**I Theory: Conflicts, Roles & Late Life**

**II Research Questions**

**III Mixed Methods Research**

(a) Quantitative

(b) Qualitative

**IV Short Summary**

**V Discussion and Outlook**

# I Conflicts & Roles

## Conflicts & Relationships

- 1) Crucial (Levenson 1993); **unavoidable**, detrimental, central task (Gottman 2000); across whole life course and life span! (Wiley 1988)
  - 2) **Gender** differences: with-draw & demand pattern (Gottmann 1998)
  - 3) **Contextualize** conflicts (Fincham 2010): **Late life!**
- **Changes & New Demands**

## Roles & Relationships

- 1) **Hierarchy**: diverging and conflicting interests (Ferree 1990)
- 2) **Power**: affect (Gottman 2000); “*family bargaining*”, decision-making (Ferree 1990); agenda setting (Wilkie 1998)
- 3) **Gender**: “*opportunity and oppression*”, work division (Ferree 1990); relationship work (Neff 2005)

# I Conflicts & Late Life

## Positive

- 1) Experts of relationship; „*dyadic familiarity*“ (Dixon 2011; Riediger 2010); emotion regulation (Scheibe 2010)
- 2) Focus on relationship (Baltes 2003); **Socio-Emotional Selectivity Theory** (Fung 2004, Carstensen)
- 3) Dyadic coping: „*compensation through collaboration*“ (Dixon 2011)

## Negative

- 4) Third vs **Fourth Age** (Baltes 2003); **loss of abilities** (Vogel 2013, Gerstorf 2008)  
→ Strain vs “*couple’s homeostasis*” (Korpolaar 2013)
- 5) Aging: dynamic, unpredictable (Raasch 2008; Dixon 2011)
- 6) Increasing **life-expectancy** (Freund 2009); **joint frailty** (Freund 2003; Baltes 2003);  
new tasks & **agency demands** (Freund 2009)

# II Research questions

## **A) Conflicts**

### 1) Reasons, Resolutions, Phenomenology?

- Why do conflicts arise?
- How are conflicts resolved?
- How do conflicts look like?

### 2) Age effects?

## **B) Roles**

### 3) Changes and role patterns?

- How egalitarian are these couples?
- Which role dynamics do they have ?

### 4) Roles and conflicts?

# III Methods and Sample

Convergent mixed-methods design (Leech 2009)

**A) Cross-sectional questionnaire** (N = 170/85) [Couples Study, Gerstorf]  
**AGE:  $\bar{x}$  76.91** [range: 69-95, SD 4.06] → transition Third-Fourth Age (Baltes 2003)  
**MARRIAGE:  $\bar{x}$  46.48 years** [range 4-66, SD 12.35], 79.8% first marriage; **satisfied**

**B) Qualitative interviews** (N = 22/11, 1.5+ hours): with both partners, open-ended; *theoretical sampling* (Flick 2012); analysis (Creswell 2014; Flick 2012; Mayring 2002; Kelle 2008)

## Limitations

1) **Bias:** few migration background; urban; satisfied 2) **Cross-sectional!**

# Ila Quantitative

# IIIa Quantitative Items

Items: 9 items conflict + 3 items roles + 1 item dyadic satisfaction

## **Conflict**

- I) Conflict topics: general; age-related
- II) Phenomenology & coping: addressing problems; long term conflicts; resolution; positivity; duration of bad mood

## **Individual Differences**

- III) Partner differences: Who causes conflict, who gives in
- IV) Roles & hierarchy: Past possibilities; current decision power; change of power

E.g. „*How difficult is it to address problems with your partner?*“ (Wilkie1998)



# IIIa Quantitative Results

## Descriptives

**Positive:** Few long-term conflicts; short conflict duration; egalitarian

**Mixed:** Number of positive conflicts; address problems

→ Satisfied & long marriage, still **for 2/3 not easy to address problems**

## RQ1: Reasons, Resolutions, Phenomenology

1) „**Banalities of everyday life**“: more conflict topics associated with negative conflict pattern ( $d = .17^{**}$ - $1.42^{**}$  address problems,  $r = .16^{*}$ -.31)

2) Who **causes/gives in?** ‘dyadic’ > individual

3) **Addressing problems:** widest, strongest associations ( $d = .69^{**}$  age conflicts,  $.82^{**}$  long conflicts,  $r = -.36^{**}$  positivity,  $.28^{**}$  dyadic satisfaction)

# IIIa Quantitative Results

## RQ 2: Age Effects

- Slight increase in satisfaction, less conflict topics.
- **Cross-sectional?! Selection bias?! Functionality bias?!**  
→ Rather **modulating effect** than fundamental change
- **Age-related conflicts** 26,4%: **functional** decrease: „*health, hearing, sex*“

## RQ 3 & 4: Roles

- 1) Almost **no gender difference** (e.g.: conflict topics, causing, giving in)
- 2) **Giving in** associated with (past) **roles** ( $r=.18^*-.35^{**}$ ), causing not.
- 3) **Egalitarian** relationships **superior**, both in conflict ( $d=.60^{**}$  talking,  $\phi=.29^{**}$  long conflict) and in dyadic satisfaction ( $R^2= 4,1\%^{**}$ )

# IIIb Qualitative

# IIIb Qualitative Results

## RQ1: Reasons, Resolutions, Phenomenology

- 1) Due to **dyadic everyday hassles**, not necessarily ,mature or wise'
  - „*Sometimes sparks really fly. As a result I can be for 2 days deaf-mute*”
  - Silence for up to a week, but outside pretending
  - *“And then I say: 'You don't know anything about me!’”*
  
- 2) **Few explicit resolution strategies:**
  - Unresolved: *“Some points we do not resolve, they remain in the dark.”*
  - „*Somehow, I don't know - one can't really describe, how this then...“*

# IIIb Qualitative Results

## RQ 2: Age Effects

- 3) **Limited modulation with age:** accepting, anticipating, self-conscious. But subjectively no strong change.
- „*Things aren't perfect, and you get along with that better.*“
- 4) Without conflict: **personality > age.** Stable dyadic patterns.

## RQ 3 & 4: Roles

### 5) **Dyadic Approach**

- Easy to compromise: „*almost in all things consensus*“
- Post-retirement change (shared housework & empathy)

# IIIb Qualitative Results

## 6) Gendered dyadic life courses

- Mr *“Equality yes, but different positions. We always took care that it complements as a whole. She backed me up.”*
- **Historical Social Context:** comparatively to peer-context egalitarian?!
- Between-couple heterogeneity: more egalitarian, more harmonic
- Mrs: *“My husband has supported me really a lot in my aspiration for occupation. And that was totally [emphasized] against the trend. [...] A man just did not touch a baby buggy. And my husband proudly pushed the baby buggy along.”*

# VI Short Summary

**Why?** Dyadic everyday hassles. Age-conflicts: 'functioning'.

**How resolved?** Rarely consciously; dyadic resolution superior. Talking about problems still an issue.

**How do they look?** Short, but not in general positive.

**Age?** Rather modulation than fundamental change

**Roles?** Egalitarian superior: "*power is not a zero-sum factor in the relationship*" (Wilkie 1998), also in elderly couples

→ Late-life dyadic conflict dynamics rather positive. But: there won't be any conflicts „*when you stop to think*“

# V Discussion and Outlook

Vulnerable groups less positive?!

- 1) Partner age differentially; age difference
- 2) Additional, de-balancing strain, e.g. age poverty or health issues?

**What happens during Fourth Age**, when functional limitations, loss of abilities and burdens increase dramatically?

→ Difficult research (ethical, compliance), but important!



**Thank you for your attention!**