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
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: ø 76.91 [range: 69-95, SD 4.06] → transition Third-Fourth Age (Baltes 2003)
MARRIAGE: ø 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!
IIla Quantitative
Illa 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)
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 (R²= 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...“
RQ 2: Age Effects

   - “Things aren't perfect, and you get along with that better.“


RQ 3 & 4: Roles

5) Dyadic Approach
   - Easy to compromise: “almost in all things consensus“
   - Post-retirement change (shared housework & empathy)
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 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“
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!