

Living with spousal loss: Continuing bonds and boundaries in remarried widows' marital relationships

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Abstract

The grief literature emphasizes widows' continuing bonds with their deceased spouses as a significant part of their grief process. Yet, little is known about what happens to those bonds when a widow remarries and there is a second spouse, and how these bonds are dealt with by the new family members. This study explored the continuing bonds of remarried Israeli widows, the role the second spouse plays in these processes, and the ambiguity and permeability of the boundaries between the first and the second marital relationships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 29 Israeli remarried military widows, over three decades after their first husbands' deaths. Data were analyzed by using thematic content analysis. Findings revealed that most of the women maintained continuing bonds with their deceased husbands, whereas a few of them severed these bonds. In all of the scenarios, however, the second husband played a major role, resulting in different levels of boundaries, from strict to blurred, between the first and the second marriages. These findings suggest that in order to obtain a full understanding of grief's impact on the second marital relationship, grief should be considered a couple-hood process in which the boundaries between the relationships are dynamic. The association between these patterns and personal and marital adjustment should be further explored.

KEYWORDS

Boundaries, Grief, Relationship, Remarriage, Widowhood

[Correction added on 12 July 2021, after first online publication: Figure 1 has been added.]

INTRODUCTION

The death of a spouse is one of the most complicated and life-altering events an adult will ever experience. Although the loss of a spouse is traumatic at any time, the experience of spousal bereavement at a young age violates the natural order of things and brings with it unique challenges. Losing a life partner, at this early life stage, during which identity and life are evolving, may enhance the risk of developing elevated levels of grief (Tomarken et al., 2012).

Spouses of military casualties are mainly women, and as military casualties themselves are generally young, the bereaved wives are generally young as well and dependent (Cozza et al., 2020).

The burden of raising children alone, and the emotional suffering and loneliness attendant to it, has been defined as one of the most challenging tasks of bereavement (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2016). Moreover, younger widows may suffer both from a lack of recognition of the grief they feel over the loss of their spouses, as well as an expectation that they "move on already," a moving on which would ostensibly include the forming of a new pair-bond relationship (Bar-Nadav, & Rubin, 2016). As such, following spousal loss, many widows, particularly young widows, may choose to remarry (Livingston, 2014). One challenge, which has been understudied, is the young widow's "ongoing bond with the deceased spouse" during the remarriage, especially in a remarriage of long duration. The current study focused on older Israeli remarried widows, 30 years after the first husband's military-related death. Israel has a total of around 5000 military widows and widowers, the vast majority of whom are widows. Many of these widows had young children at the time of widowhood (Research & Information Center of the Israeli Parliament, 2014).

The ongoing bond with the deceased spouse, namely the "continuing bond," has been central to the understanding of spousal bereavement (Klass & Steffen, 2017; Neimeyer et al., 2006; Rubin, 1981). Recent studies have made clear that bereaved spouses maintain such ongoing bonds, illustrating the idea that "death ends a life, not a relationship" (e.g. Field et al., 2003; Kampet et al., 2019). Studies have examined the ways in which these connections are maintained, via the widowed spouse's holding onto the deceased spouse's possessions, making visits to the cemetery, or feeling a sense of calm by remembering the deceased spouse (Currier et al., 2015). Recently, social media and the creation of memorial pages on social networking sites such as Facebook have facilitated remembrances and the continuation of bonds that extend perpetually in time and outside a fixed space (Irvin, 2015).

However, keeping an emotional connection with the deceased spouse gives rise to mixed feelings in widows and may have both positive and negative consequences (Florczak & Lockie, 2019). At times, such bonds support the development of the bereaved individual's life course, whereas at other times, they feel burdensome (Florczak & Lockie, 2019). Widows may therefore feel both solace and sorrow, happiness and sadness, often simultaneously (Jones et al., 2018). Some have suggested that continuing bonds arising from an external locus without an acceptance of the deceased spouse's physical death is maladaptive. For example, fantasies and hallucinations (externalized continuing bonds) were found to be related to poorer outcomes, whereas memories (internalized continuing bonds) were associated with personal growth and integration of loss (Field & Filanosky, 2009). Additionally, it was found that continuing bonds ease the process of sense-making when dealing with complicated grief symptoms (Neimeyer et al., 2006). Naturally, these bonds changed over time, as they reflected developments occurring both in the bereavement process and in the widow's life.

Widow remarriage—and particularly the experiences of younger widows and their remarriages—is an understudied area in the grief literature. Most studies have focused on remarriage after divorce, and relatively few studies have examined how relational dynamics are different for post-bereavement remarriages (Brimhall & Engblom-Deglmann, 2011). Moreover, when looking at grief, the research has mainly been conducted through the individual prism

(Rosenblatt, 2017), perhaps because when the idea of continuing bonds was first introduced, it was seen as an individual process (Klass et al., 1996; Klass & Steffen, 2017). In addition, even studies focusing on remarriage have explored the ways the widow kept her connection with the deceased husband; they have only minimally explored the dynamic of the current couple relationship, the ways the first husband's presence was evident in the current relationship, and the role of the second husband in maintaining (or not) these connections. The family life cycle perspective views a death in the family not as a short-term event, but as a complex set of conditions that change as families navigate varied pathways to meet emerging challenges. Specifically, legacies of loss find expression in continuing patterns of interaction and mutual influence among survivors and across generations, creating relationships with the deceased even among those who never knew him/her (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2013).

In one of the few studies of long-term loss of widows, many whose loss had occurred twenty years prior were found to think about their deceased spouses once every week or two and had a conversation about said spouse once a month on average (Carnelley et al., 2006), indicating the need for a longitudinal and a family life perspective. In the current study, we therefore widened the scope of examination by observing the influence of the deceased spouse not only on the widow, as many studies have done, but also on the remarried couples. The current study looked at the continuing bonds of remarried Israeli military widows who had been remarried for more than three decades, the ways in which they maintained these continuing bonds throughout their second marriages, the role of the second husband in these bonds, the presence of the first husband in the second marriage, and the boundaries between the first and the second marital relationships.

Remarriage following bereavement: focusing on the relationships

Moss and Moss (1996) were two of the first researchers to focus on the triadic relationship comprising the remarried widow, the deceased spouse, and the new spouse. They emphasized that although the surviving spouses accepted the reality of the death, they also maintained meaningful ties with the deceased; the researchers further suggested that a prolonged attachment to a deceased spouse, even after remarriage, was to be expected. According to this perspective, as life continues, new patterns of communication, intimacy, and an identity of the new relationship have to be created, through a mutual and longitudinal process of letting go and holding on.

Despite the importance of the Moss & Moss work, only a few empirical studies have further explored these issues. Brimhall and Engblom-Deglmann (2011) found that the widow's memories of the deceased partner created a chain of processes that included romanticizing the past relationship and spouse, an inevitable current/past comparison, the current spouse's insecurity, and the current spouse's curiosity regarding the previous relationship. The new partner's curiosity about the previous relationship had a critical impact on the current relationship. For those partners who accepted this ongoing grief process, their insecurities decreased, and relationship satisfaction increased. For those partners who minimized the importance of the past, their insecurities increased, and relationship satisfaction decreased. It should be noted that the sample in that study consisted primarily of older couples who had experienced long first marriages (over 27 years) and relatively short remarriages (a mean of four years). Similar findings were found among Israeli bereaved girlfriends of fallen soldiers who developed new romantic relationships after their loss (Leichtentritt & Pedatsur-Sukenik, 2012).

Another study revealed that Israeli military widows maintained their relationships with their first husbands via abstract symbols as well as via physical objects and that sometimes the "new" husbands experienced their relationship as triadic, as it included a unique place for the deceased husband in the new family's constellation (Bokek-Cohen, 2014). This study pointed

to the long-lasting continuing bonds of the widow with her deceased husband (as some of the women lost their first husbands 30 or 40 years previously), which seemed not to threaten the new spouses.

Although there have been studies emphasizing the importance of continuing bonds, recent theories have suggested that a deeper understanding of the diversity of this phenomenon is needed (Klass & Steffen, 2017; Rosenblatt, 2017). In addition, studies that explore the various ways in which continuing bonds influence the new couple, and shift the focus from the individual to the relational level, are needed. Moreover, despite the centrality of the relationships between older people and their families (Litwin & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011), most studies that have investigated these relationships have been conducted from an individual-developmental perspective and focused on the provision of support by families to older people as the support recipients (Blieszner, 2009). By contrast, studies focusing on the quality and patterns of these relationships are lacking.

In order to fill this gap, we employed the concept of family boundaries, which refers to system and subsystem processes (e.g., rules, rituals, and roles) regarding participating members: who, when, and how members participate in family life (Minuchin, 1974). As such, families are viewed as an open system, made up of subsystems, each of which is surrounded by a semi-permeable boundary, which is actually a set of processes influencing who is included within that subsystem and how they interact with those outside of it (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). Boundary ambiguity is conceptualized as a state in which family members are uncertain regarding their perceptions of who is inside or outside of the family and who is performing what roles and tasks within the family system (Boss, 2009). Further, boundaries (which have both physical and psychological dimensions) foster a sense of identity that differentiates the members of a family from one another as well as from other families. It has been suggested that boundary ambiguity, defined as a lack of clarity on the part of family members concerning family membership, is related to increased family stress and overall family dysfunction (Boss & Greenberg, 1984; Minuchin, 1974).

Purpose of the current study

The current study investigated the ways continuing bonds are maintained (or not) in the case of long-term second marriages. In light of recommendations made by several bereavement scholars (e.g. Breen et al., 2019; Rosenblatt, 2017), we integrated the concept of family boundaries and continuing bonds, exploring the boundaries between the earlier marital relationship and the current one, and the role of the second husband in maintaining/severing the earlier relationship. We focused on relationship boundaries and their permeability, looking through the boundary ambiguity lens (Boss & Greenberg, 1984) and applying it to the additional stressor of a clear loss (Carroll et al., 2007). Specifically, we aimed to explore the boundaries between the first marital relationship and the second marital relationship and to examine their rigidity and their level of ambiguity. Moreover, we wished to understand how the presence of the second husband affected the bonds between his current wife and her deceased first husband; what role, if any, did the second spouse have in facilitating or impeding these connections?

METHODS

Participants

A randomized criterion sample (Patton, 2015) was used to contact 45 remarried widows (out of 317) who were under the jurisdiction of one district in the Department of Families and

Commemoration of Israel's Ministry of Defense. This specific district was chosen in order to achieve a wide variety of case representations, as it is one of the most populated and diverse areas in the country. Out of 45 women who were asked to participate, 29 agreed and completed the interviews. The women who refused to participate explained this refusal in various ways, mainly describing a lack of desire to share their emotional hardships.

All of the widows in the current study were Jewish and experienced military-related traumatic loss. Twenty-four lost their husbands in battle, and five lost their husbands in accidents during the husband's military service. The average participant age was 68 ($SD = 6.4$), and the age at which participants became widows varied between 19 and 29 (the average age of widowhood was 23). Half of the participants had young children when they became widowed. It took 4.5 years on average between bereavement and remarriage (median = 4). Thus, the participants in this study had been remarried for over 30 years. Most of the participants had an advanced education (the average length of schooling was 15 years), and all but one had past or present careers.

Procedure

Semi-structured in-depth interviews (Patton, 2015) were conducted with 29 remarried military widows who agreed to participate. The Head of the Department of Families and Commemoration in the designated area was the one who made first contact with and presented the study to the widows. Those who agreed to participate were interviewed by seven experienced social workers, who received additional training from the research team. Interviews lasted for an hour and a half on average (a more comprehensive description of the course of this study was published elsewhere: Nuttman-Shwartz et al., 2019).

The interviews were conducted in accordance with an interview guide that addressed participants' grieving processes. Questions referred to the way their grief developed over the years, on personal and interpersonal levels. For example, participants were asked to "describe the way grief manifested itself in your life and in your family's life. Please relate to its influence over your marriage." Other questions related to the ways in which grief and the connection with the first husband were manifested in the current marital relationship. For example, participants were asked: "How did your relationship with your first husband influence your second marital relationship over the years? How did your grief over your first husband affect your relationship and life with your second husband? If and in what ways did these dynamics change throughout the years?"

Data analysis

The researchers used thematic content analysis (Clark et al., 2015) to analyze the data while adhering to an interpretative phenomenological approach (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). In the current research, the second author read all the transcripts thoroughly and performed open coding, marked separate content units of meaning arising from the interviews, and shared these materials with the other authors. ATLAS software for analyzing qualitative data was used to detect units of meaning (codes and categories). During this process, the second author encoded every unit of meaning within the text separately (many units were encoded with more than one code). Related meaning units were gathered into categories, which were later arranged within the suggested themes (Patton, 2015). The three authors together analyzed the findings, discussing them until agreement was reached.

Rigor

The interviewers used an interview manual to help them focus on the subject (Patton, 2015). The guide was designed to cover the course of the bereavement process, its development and fluctuations over the years, and how grief and bereavement both influenced and were influenced by the familial dynamics. The interviewers were supervised by the authors throughout the data collection process. Data were analyzed by the three authors, who met on a weekly basis to share and critically examine their proposed conceptualizations. To ensure a high level of theoretical saturation, the authors conducted as many interviews as necessary to reach code and meaning saturation (Hennink et al., 2017). Such saturation was achieved once the researchers agreed that theoretical categories were beginning to repeat themselves and were sufficiently grounded. The findings and the theoretical conceptualizations were presented to the study's participants, who added their own input and gave their final approval (Thomas, 2017), ensuring that the findings reflected their actual life experiences.

Ethical considerations

This research was approved by the first author's university's Board of Ethics and by the district board of the Ministry of Defense. To ensure participants' confidentiality, none of the widows were interviewed or contacted regarding this study by their case managers, and interviewers did not interview women with whom they were acquainted prior to the study. Moreover, once a widow confirmed her participation in the study, no details of her interview were provided to other members of the research team. The content of the interviews was only made available for the research team's use after participants' names and details were changed, to secure their confidentiality.

Findings

The findings revealed two main patterns of long-term continuing bonds among the remarried widows over the years. Most of them ($n = 22$) preserved continuing bonds with their deceased husbands over the years and throughout the three decades of their second marriages. A small number of widows severed their bonds with their first husbands ($n = 7$), meaning that they cut these bonds both in terms of other parts of their lives in general and specifically in terms of their current couple-hood. Regardless of the pattern, the second husband seemed to play an important role. The Findings section continues now with a description of the prevalent pattern of continuing bonds as they manifest in the current marital relationship, as well as the second husband's role in this situation. Subsequently, the less prevalent pattern of relations will be described.

"They Are Integrated into Our Lives": The widow's first marital relationship continues into her second marital relationship

Most of the participants described their long-term, continuing bonds with their deceased husbands and the manifestations of those bonds throughout the years.

Mutual agreement to maintain the continuing bonds with the deceased husband, within the new family

Most of the participants described examples of the continuing emotional bonds they held with their first husbands, which were manifested in the form of carrying out ceremonies and

commemorative acts (22 out of 29 participants) and keeping a connection with the first husband's family of origin (20 participants). Most of them made clear that their second husbands accepted and respected their need to maintain these bonds and dealt openly with the "presence" of the first husband in their partnership and family life. For example, Batya, 69 years old, who lost her husband when she was 26, said:

I decided that if I remarried it would be with a man I could talk to about my first husband - whenever I wanted, and the way I wanted. I mean, I'm not going to accept any restrictions on this issue. And so it was. My husband supports me and really lets me do everything I want when it comes to this issue, and his arms are always open to me.

In this passage, Batya indicated that she consciously decided to maintain the presence of her first husband in her current marriage; it seems to have been something that she decided on in advance, and it was accepted by her second husband. In another interview, Esther, 73 years old, who was widowed at 29, when she was a mother of two children, described this decision as an act of maintaining her identity and her commitment to her deceased husband and to his family. As she said to her second husband, "I am part of this family, and I am not going to leave them." This commitment to her past relationships and experiences, as well as to a particular moral stand, seems to have been part of the basis on which the new partnership was established.

In another interview, Tova, 66 years old, who lost her husband when she was 23, spoke emphatically:

The first thing I want to say is that if I have a picture of my [first] husband here in my living room, while my [current] husband is here with us, then that means this is an issue that has been openly discussed. And it has been like this throughout the years, and if it had not been, then I would not have established a new relationship at all!

These quotes provide an example of the manifestation of participants' continuing bonds with their deceased first husbands, which seem to have been accepted by the second husband. Participant narratives revealed that this agreement on the acceptance of the first husband often led to the blurring of boundaries between the "first" family and the current family, as was described by Mika, 66 years old, whose husband died when she was 23 years old. She explained:

My first husband did not leave my life. The two men in my life reside next to each other [...] I believe that the worlds are connected and communicate with each other, and so I do not want to give up on either of them[...] my first husband is part of the family life - his humor, etc. [...] And my husband never asked me to stop grieving.

Mika seems to acknowledge the complexity of her relationships with her two husbands, demonstrating the way in which she managed to maintain a unique and vivid connection with both of them at the same time. In another interview, Karen, 69 years old, who lost her husband when she was 26 and the mother of a two-year old, said: "I define myself as a married woman, and my marriage is very good. But still, between us [between the interviewer and the interviewee] there are some additional figures in my marriage."

Her words suggest that her previous marital relationship was an acknowledged component of her partnership with her current husband: physically absent but psychologically present.

The current husband's role in maintaining the continuing bonds with the deceased husband
Participants described the different ways in which their second husbands took an active role in keeping alive the bonds with the first husbands. For example, Hagar, 67 years old, who was 19 when her husband fell in action, described:

Every year before Memorial Day my husband and I go to the cemetery, and he always helps me clean the grave and take care of it, and makes sure the Ministry of Defense doesn't forget to maintain it. He comes with me to the memorial ceremonies in his [first husband's] hometown. He supports me fully. And it is not taken for granted - because not everyone would do so

In another interview, Pnina, 69 years old, who lost her husband when she was 26 years old, described how her new husband took an active role in the maintenance of her first husband's memory:

In our house we spoke openly of my first husband. And I have his picture hanging up [...] [Ever since] we started dating, and even after we got married – whenever Yom Kippur would arrive [the anniversary of the death, or “yahrzeit”] - I would flee the country. I just felt I could not take it anymore. ... So my second husband would go to the memorials [of my first husband] alone. Without me. And he would go to visit his [my first husband's] family as well.

Hagar's husband actively contributed to her manifestations of long-term grief, and Pnina's spouse supported her continuing bonds with her deceased first husband even when she herself found it difficult to do. These are unique examples of couples preserving the widow's grief. The second husbands helped to preserve the widow's long-term commitment to the fallen husbands and even played an active and leading role in doing so.

By contrast, other participants described how their current husbands did not take on any role or have any involvement at all in keeping the memory of their first spouses alive. Sigalit, 66 years old, who was 23 when her husband died in a war, shed more light on the impact this continuing bond of hers had on her current emotional bond with her present husband:

My first husband always exists in my heart, he is always in the background. ... But it is not a stumbling block, he is not an obstacle between us... We have been married for 34 years now, and he [my second husband] knows that this is a part of my life. ... But emotionally - there is no emotion. I'm a completely different person now.

Her description exemplifies a state in which the widow's continuing bonds seem not to threaten the current spouse. Other participants described similar situations. For example, Tamar, 74 years old, who was 28 when her husband died, said: “*It is clear that I have him [the first husband] with me. And we've never talked about it deeply, but we know that each of us is carrying his own [emotional] toll.*” And Hagar said, “*I always go back to it... I can't stop the comparison between the two of them...*”.

Common to these relationships was the acknowledgment of the former relationship's influence over the current one, and the current husband's lack of involvement in keeping the bond with the deceased spouse alive. At the same time, the current husband did not object to the idea of the deceased spouse's presence.

“It Is Not Our Family's Narrative”: Excluding the widow's continuing bond with the deceased spouse from the second marital relationship

Several participants (n=7) described the hardships they experienced in maintaining any connection with their deceased first husbands (or their memories of them) since the time of their remarriage. A main factor in dealing with these hardships was the second husband's way of coping with this issue.

"We closed that door": Mutual agreement to sever the continuing bond

Three of the study participants said that they found it too hard to maintain a connection with the memory of their deceased first husband, dating back to the time of the remarriage. For example, Sara, 57 years old, who lost her first husband when she was 22, described:

The pictures of my first husband and all of these parts of my personal history – are stored at my sister's house. It is not an issue that accompanies us in our daily lives. This is because of my [current] husband's nature, and it's fine with me. I think it has to do with his ego. He wants to be "the only one," and he does not want to compete with my former husband. [...] and we "closed that door" behind us, so there is no one between us.

It seems that Sara and her husband made the decision to exclude her first husband from their family. By making this decision, Sara and her husband may have been seeking to avoid dealing with the complexity involved in Sara's loss and its long-term emotional effects. This avoidance seems to have served the interests of both partners, who "bypassed" the conflict stemming from the recognition of the two men in Sara's life. Despite the proclaimed advantages of this choice, elsewhere in her interview Sara made clear that this coping method was taking its toll, in the form of restricted emotional levels and limited communication levels among all family members.

In another interview, Noga, 73 years old, who lost her husband at the age of 24 when she was a mother of a two-year-old, explained her choice of not dealing with her grief once she remarried:

Maybe because I had more children coming, I cut myself off fully from my grief. We hardly talked about my first daughter's father. There was no presence of him in our life for many years [...] It was simply more comfortable for us not to think about it, and not to be grieving.

Her explanation illuminated the short-term benefits of this coping method along with some of its costs, as later on in her interview she described the effect of this emotional deprivation on her daughter, who grew up seeking to fill the hole left by her absent father.

In another interview, Timor, 63 years old, whose husband was killed in battle when she was 20 years old, described cutting herself off from grief as a way of dealing with the enormous emotional pain: *"I felt that in order to get over the loss I had to distance myself from the memory of my first husband – from his "type." [I had to find] someone who wasn't here at all during the war..."*

All of the couples in these examples seemed to try and minimize the effects of grief on their new partnerships and families. Although these participants had in common the severing of the bonds with the deceased first husband, they differed in terms of who initiated the break: the widow, her second husband, or both.

Disagreement regarding continuing bonds

In contrast with the former examples, where the partners were in agreement about keeping the wife's widowhood out of the new family's life, four participants described disagreeing with their husbands on this issue. Miriam, 63 years old, who was widowed at the age of 20, said the following:

My husband criticized me when I expressed my interest in going to widows' events. He asked me: "Are you really a widow?"[...] For me – sharing [my grief] was over after we got married. I was not allowed to speak about my first husband or mention him [...] And the fact that I could not speak or tell our children [about what I was dealing with] was very hard.

As in Sara's case, Miriam's account depicts an extreme situation in which the current husband is unwilling to accept in his life the presence of his wife's deceased husband. Whereas Sara seemed to accept her husband's decision/need, Miriam could not seem to make her peace with it, and voiced her sadness. The husband's difficulty in containing this marital triad seemed to result in the couple's inability to resolve this complexity, which continues to date. In another interview, Naomi, 65 years old, who was widowed when she was 22 and the mother of a young child, explained why she chose to put her needs aside and accepted her current husband's wish to sever the emotional bond with her deceased first husband:

It is not an easy situation to enter – to be willing to live in the shadow of the first husband [...] and he didn't want my first husband to play a role in our life. And although it disturbed me, I respected his request.

Her words seem to represent a widow's understanding of her husband's state of mind and her willingness to bend to his will. Yet, this choice may exact an emotional toll. For example, Ziva, a 70-year old widow who lost her husband when she was 20, described how she'd had to conceal parts of her identity and suppress any overt expressions of grief for many years: "I did not even say the word 'widow,' and I never dared to let a tear fall in the company of others... It was something I had to shut within myself." For her, only when the formal recognition of her widowhood was reinstated could she finally share her grief-related emotions with her current husband:

One day I told him, "Look, it's all flowing now. I feel like now I'm beginning to grieve. I'm allowing myself to feel the emotions fully." [After hearing this], he cried a lot. Loads and loads. We went to the cemetery and visited his grave and we sat there for a long time. And he wept and wept. And I felt so guilty... But on the other hand, I think I felt great relief, and he was relieved as well.

Ziva's experience of finally airing her grief contrasts with the way Naomi was living in the shadow of her grief. The fact that it took her so many years to allow the expression of her feelings reflects the ambivalence she had toward her initial decision. The mutual emotional relief she describes—hers and her current husband's—seems to mark the beginning of another stage of her continuing grief.

DISCUSSION

The current study examined the ways in which widows' continuing bonds with their deceased first husbands were handled in the case of their long-term remarriages. The findings suggest that most of the widows in the current study maintained these long-term bonds, even after having lost their first husbands three decades earlier, and despite having second husbands (with whom, as stated, they had long marriages). These findings are consistent with earlier literature about the long-lasting effects of grief (Carnelley et al., 2006). Maintaining continuing bonds was manifested in a variety of ways, for example, by widows placing their first husbands' pictures on the walls, imagining talking with them, participating in commemoration ceremonies, etc., all of which seemed to be an integral part of their new lives (Klass et al., 1996; Silverman, 2013). A small number of widows severed their bonds with their first husbands, meaning that they cut these bonds both in terms of other parts of their lives in general and specifically in terms of their current marital relationship.

When we view the findings through the prism of the family boundaries concept, it seems clear that the boundaries between the first and the second marital relationships exist somewhere on the spectrum from rigid to permeable. We identified four patterns. The first pattern,

"blurred boundaries," is characterized by a loss of boundaries between the deceased husband and the current husband (a "triadic" marriage). An additional pattern is "holding together," which indicates that the currently married couple is jointly honoring the continuing bonds with the deceased husband, while also acknowledging the ways in which they are together and separate on this front. The third pattern could be described as one in which the first marriage "overshadows the current relationship." In this scenario, the first marital relationship has an outsized influence on the current marital relationship, as if the first marriage actually still exists. The last pattern, "strict boundary," is at the other extreme: A clear restricting boundary is erected between the deceased husband and the current husband, to the point that the first marriage may be ignored altogether, as if it had never existed at all.

Our first theme presented couples who maintained blurred boundaries between their current relationship and the wife's first marital relationship. This type of scenario could be termed a "marriage triad," in which both partners (of the current relationship) are active in keeping the memory of the deceased spouse alive. In this scenario, the currently married couple acknowledges the presence of the deceased husband in their couple-hood, a finding that has also been identified in previous research studies (Bokek-Cohen, 2014; Moss & Moss, 1996). Moreover, in some couples, the current husband takes upon himself the role of "rememberer" of the deceased husband and takes an active role in promoting these continuing bonds. In these couples, it seems that there is a very delicate boundary between the two relationships, as the first husband comprises part of the current relationship. It seems that the second husband's support is essential for the wife to feel that she has a legitimate right to maintain her connection with her deceased first husband, and yet it is important to further explore the nuances of this phenomenon. For instance, this situation could indicate that the new husband feels inferior to the deceased one (Moss & Moss, 1996), potentially raising conflicts for the new couple. Nevertheless, our findings showed that the remarried widows who succeeded, together with their current husbands, in maintaining continuing bonds with the deceased first spouse, reported on well-being and good marital relationships. It is also important to point out that there is an extreme form of blurred boundaries and ambiguity, whereby the continuing bonds overshadow the new marriage. As family members are not certain who is in or out of the family, and who is carrying out what roles within the family, this situation might create tension and stress (Boss & Greenberg, 1984).

In addition, the findings showed that some women did not maintain continuing bonds with their deceased husbands. The theory of continuing bonds represents a movement toward a greater willingness to include connections with the deceased, as a natural part of the bereavement process, and as a salutary factor in grief resolution (see Klass et al., 1996). However, a review of the empirical literature portrays a complex picture of the role of continuing bonds in bereavement, with contradictory findings emerging across studies. Certain types of continuing bonds have been associated with both good and poor adjustments across different studies (Stroebe & Schut, 2015). Recently, findings among Israeli religious widows who had lost their spouses to war/terror, and who remarried soon after their spouse's death, reported on a happy family life. They claimed that they severed the relations with the deceased husband and entrusted commemoration to the bereaved parents, who were still part of their extended family (Lebel et al., 2018).

In our findings among these kinds of couples, the wife's previous marital life did not constitute a part of the current life, and there were strict boundaries between the first and the second relationships, as a means of minimizing the ambiguity that might otherwise ensue. Deciding to what extent to share grief over the former husband in the current relationship was sometimes a mutual decision; in other cases, either the widowed wife or the current husband had a more active role in making this decision. Theories about communication in families have drawn particular attention to cases in which grief plays a role (Basinger et al., 2016). Women in the current study described the existence of "rules"—whether explicit or implicit—which

were sometimes decided by themselves, but other times by the second husband, of not talking about the deceased. This situation deserves further research, as we do not know enough about the process, from the partner's perspective. The dynamic variations of continuing bonds in the families are represented in Figure 1.

As presented, the widow and her two husbands (represented in the three circles) can share various degrees of “common ground.” This characteristic might reflect the degree to which the earlier and the current relationships maintain open borders between them. Triads in which the second husband accepts the first one's presence are characterized by the two circles having more congruence and therefore fewer boundaries. Triads in which the second husband tries to minimize his wife's former husband's influence over their lives are characterized by the three circles having less congruence and therefore clearer boundaries within the family relationships. As was made clear by the participants, these relational aspects have the potential to change over time, in accordance with life's changing circumstances. According to the widows' perspectives, the couples in our sample seemed to struggle to find the right balance and the proper boundaries for their continuing bonds. For example, although they were maintaining their bonds, they kept their grief rituals to themselves. Others shared these rituals with their current spouses throughout the years. In either case, the current study highlights the importance of the relational aspects of continuing bonds, and the fact that continuing bonds are not an isolated, individual phenomenon that resides within the widow alone.

The current study has several limitations. Although we analyzed continuing bonds among couples, the findings cannot be applied to all bereaved spouses, as we interviewed only military widows and only those who remarried. In addition, the widows were all older (average age 68), were being interviewed more than three decades after their loss, and were receiving grief support facilitated by a family social worker. It bears repeating that the grief narrative continually changes and that continuing bonds with the deceased loved one can be part of this

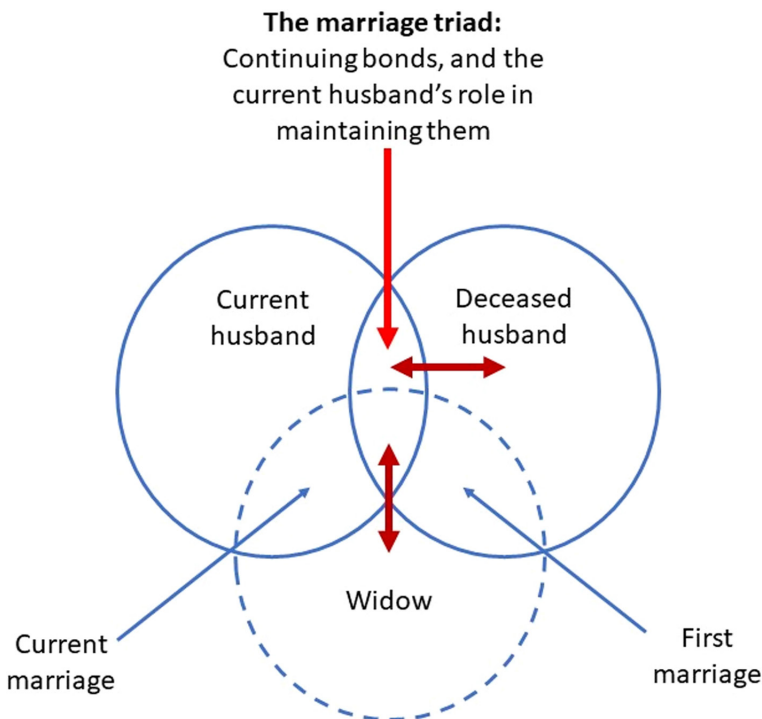


FIGURE 1 Couple dynamics in maintaining continuing bonds

narrative. As such, it is important to continue exploring the dynamics of couples who remarry after the death of a spouse (whether in traumatic circumstances or not), obtaining more information about the dynamic changes while they occur (Nuttman-Shwartz et al., 2019).

Future studies would benefit from gathering the perspectives of second spousal partners of both genders, as well as interviewing both partners together. However, conducting research on such sensitive issues is very complicated, as some women are frustrated with their current relationships and with their ability to preserve their continuing bond with their deceased first spouse. Knowing that their current husband will participate in the interview might therefore prevent the wife from sharing her perspective. On the other hand, hearing the second husband's views might provide an important dyadic perspective regarding continuing bonds.

As grief is handled in a sociocultural framework, one can assume that the Israeli context exerted some effects. Over the years, with the growing number of fallen soldiers, a “culture of bereavement” has emerged, reflecting the importance that Israeli society places on the deaths of its young people: viewing them as sacrificial and imbuing them with heroism on the national-social level. In addition, our study examined, specifically, military-related widowhood. Military-related grief suggests that the military aspect adds additional bereavement challenges as well as opportunities. Among the challenges of losing a spouse in this context are the spouse's young age and bereavement via sudden and violent death, which might be associated with the necessity of relocating (Cozza et al., 2020) as well as possible stigma or identity conflict (Wehrman, 2019). On the other hand, military widows may benefit from unique advantages such as instrumental and social support from military communities, a sense of pride associated with their husbands' duty-related deaths, and military survivor death benefits (Ben-Asher & Bokek Cohen, ; Cozza et al., 2017). Future studies should examine these questions in civilian samples.

Despite these limitations, our study has several clinical implications. Professionals should be aware of grief's effects on couple-hood, and the current partner, which often last for many years. Our findings emphasize the shared experience of loss and shared meaning-making efforts by the current couple through family transactions and cultural rituals (Imber-Black, 2012). As services in this area are mainly focused on the bereaved individual, intervention at the couple or family level should also be suggested. Such interventions could help integrate the deceased spouse into the current relationship and promote the bereaved individual's re-engagement with others (Shear et al., 2007).

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