The Search for Meaning in Life Through Continuing and/or Transforming the Bond to a Deceased Spouse in Late Life

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Abstract

Bereavement is an ongoing process of negotiation and meaning-making in which widows and widowers make sense of the changed nature of their relationship with their deceased spouse. We analyzed the experiences of meaning in life among older widows and widowers (aged 65+) using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; see Smith et al. in *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*, Sage, 2009), with the following question: How do widows and widowers search for meaning through continuing and/or transforming their bond to their deceased spouse? The results demonstrate that some of the widowed persons sought meaning through rituals or various means of after-death communication with their deceased spouses. Other participants transformed the bond, for example, through clearing out their deceased spouse's belongings or a process of reconciliation. Many continued and transformed the bond simultaneously, which shows that negotiation of the relationship after the death of a spouse is an ongoing process in which both continuity and change are present. The experience of a violation of meaning in life affected the participants' capacity to continue their bond with their deceased spouse.

Keywords Bereavement · Meaning in life · Continuing bond · Transforming bond · Widowhood · Late life

Introduction

Widowhood causes pain and loneliness. The death of a spouse is one explanation for decreasing purpose in life in old age (Read & Suutama, 2008) as widowhood decreases one's experience of quality of life (Vaarama et al., 2010). The experience of meaning in life has various definitions, many of which include the following three aspects: coherence, significance, and purpose (Martela & Steger, 2016; Park, 2010; Schnell, 2009). Generally, the experience of meaning in life changes during one's lifespan (Haug et al., 2016; Reker et al., 1987). Researchers have found that aging promotes the experience of meaning in life

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(e.g., Reker & Chamberlain, 2000; Schnell, 2009). These studies are united in the view that the experience of meaning in late life is related to struggle, crises, and the need to negotiate life events in order to find coherence. If life is appraised as unpredictable and coherence of life cannot be restored, the experience of mistrust expands and loss of meaning increases (Stillman & Baumeister, 2009).

Meaning in life is intertwined with an individual's personal worldview. Existential domains should include different types of value systems: religious, spiritual, and secular orientations (la Cour & Hvidt, 2010; Saarelainen, 2017; Vattø et al., 2020). The "secular existential domain" touches on personal place in the universe (Pyszczynski et al., 2004), including possible conflict or processes of negotiation when seeking one's place (Yalom, 1980). Therefore, the "secular existential domain" responds to general questions related to identity, meaning, values, and purpose (Pyszczynski et al., 2004; Yalom, 1980).

In this paper, we see religion as a culturally formed phenomenon that includes both traditional and nontraditional actions and meanings related to the sacred or God. Therefore, classical definitions of religion must be extended to grasp the lived religious context of today (Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014; Hermans, 2014). As our paper looks into the bereavement process, we turn to explanations regarding the significance of religion in the coping process. In his work in the field of psychology of religion, Ganzevoort (1998a) suggests that religion encompasses experiences linked to transcendence and effects aroused by religious life. Additionally, religion includes a cognitive dimension with an interpretation of events through religious beliefs and knowledge. Further, religion deals with religious behavior and rituals. Taking all of this into consideration, it is then crucial to comprehend that religion is in constant change as personal life course and events influence personal religiosity (Ganzevoort, 1998a.) Therefore, on an individual level, religion is formed from a combination of practices that are selected to make sense in daily events. These types of practices of lived religion are always an outcome of cultural negotiation as an individual combines and chooses personally significant elements from a larger religious tradition and amalgamates them into their (religious) identity. (Ammerman, 2013; Ganzevoort, 2009; McGuire, 2008.)

For older Finns, religion often provides a strong source of meaning (Takkinen, 2000). Older Finns are the most committed and active members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF); nearly 80% of Finns age 65 and over and almost 90% of people older than 80 are members of ELCF (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland, 2020). Older people link religion and belonging, as practicing religion alleviates loneliness among the elderly (Wijesiri et al., 2019). As death approaches, the importance of religiosity varies from individual to individual; some find comfort in traditional Lutheran practices, whereas others turn to more personally constructed lived religion or individually meaningful spirituality (Saarelainen et al., 2020a, b).

Bereavement is an ongoing process of negotiation and meaning-making in which bereaved people make sense of the changed nature of their relationship with their deceased loved one (Valentine, 2008, pp. 3–4). This process deals with emotions connected to death, which have both a personal and a social dimension (Davies, 2017, p. 64; Zech & Stroebe, 2010). Through mourning rituals, bereaved individuals perform actions and expressions of grief that are shaped within particular cultural frames (Zech & Stroebe, 2010). There has been a significant paradigm shift within bereavement research; the idea of letting go of emotional attachments has shifted to understanding the importance of maintaining a relationship with the deceased individual (Klaas & Steffen, 2017). Bereavement researchers claim that the question is not solely one of reconstruction but rather of transformation of the bond to the deceased (Bray, 2013; Mathijssen, 2017; Neimeyer et al., 2006). Others,

such as Stoebe and Schut (2006), use the term *relinquish* to indicate aspects of breaking the bond. This article uses the term *transforming the bond*, which is more neutral and suits our analysis of the balance between the needs to maintain and to change a bond with a loved one after their death.

The aim of the paper is to answer the following question: How do widows and widowers search for meaning through continuing and/or transforming their bond to their deceased spouse?

Theoretical framework

In the process of bereavement, the ability to maintain one's connection to a deceased spouse may provide comfort while one reconstructs meaning and learns a new way of life (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer et al., 2006). Bereavement researchers have identified three activities of meaning reconstruction in the grieving process: sense making, benefit finding, and identity change (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006, pp. 44–49, 53–56). In bereavement, meaningfulness is significantly impacted by the nature of the relationship before the death of the loved one (Root & Exline, 2014). In earlier studies, too, continuing to nurture bonds and meaning-making have been connected (Holm et al., 2019; Neimeyer et al., 2006). Ritualized behaviors become an important aspect in the life of a widow or widower in order to maintain or transform their bond to the deceased (Mathijssen, 2017; Valentine, 2008). Our study takes the next step from these theoretical ideas and discusses the relationship between continuing and transforming the bond and how this affects the search for meaning after losing a spouse.

The quality of the pre-death relationship and the length of marriage influence the bond after bereavement (Root & Exline, 2014). Previous research describes bereavement situations in which the widow or widower has had more than one spouse as triadic relationships (Dew Conant, 1996; Moss & Moss, 1996; Stevens, 2002). Many widowed persons have after-death communication (ADC) with their spouses, which some researchers label as complicated grief or hallucinations (Kamp et al., 2019). Researchers on continuing bonds insist that supernatural experiences are a natural part of the bereavement process for many widows and widowers (Dew Conant, 1996; Keen et al., 2013; Steffen & Coyle, 2011). These experiences are expressions of the continuing relationship with the deceased that can be understood as part of the bereaved person's experience of spirituality (Siltala, 2019; Steffen & Coyle, 2010).

Meaning in life is a holistic and individual experience (Baumeister, 1991; Frankl, 2010/1959; Schnell, 2009). It is understood to incorporate three aspects: sources, sense, and loss of meaning (Park, 2013; Schnell, 2009). For religiously oriented older people, religion may represent a source of meaning that becomes threatened through the loss of a spouse. If trust in God, who is normally seen as good and protective, is lost, the source of meaning is violated and meaning structures are contested (Ganzevoort, 2010, pp. 334, 336; Tromp & Ganzevoort, 2009). Besides religion, meaning may be constructed out of many different sources (Hammond et al., 2014; Krause, 2007; Park, 2013; Schnell, 2009). In particular, social relationships are crucial to finding or making meaning throughout the lifespan (Schnell, 2009; Steger et al., 2009). They imbue life with a sense of belonging, significance, and purpose (Hibberd, 2013; Martela & Steger, 2016; Schnell, 2009). In older adults, relationships, and especially emotional support, have been found to be a significant contributor to sense of meaning, but conflict can reduce this (Krause, 2007).

Loss of meaning is likely to shake up the experience of meaning in life, leading to a search for meaning. Meaning is defined in this article as coherence, significance, and purpose; it refers to something very important, like spousal loss (Steger et al., 2008). When an individual loses a source of meaning in life, they seek new meaning and find remaining sources of meaning more important (Baumeister, 1991; Park, 2013; Schnell, 2009). In searching for meaning, it is important for well-being to simultaneously experience the presence of meaning in other areas of life (Dezutter et al., 2013). In other words, the search for and the presence of meaning are distinct. A search for meaning combined with a low presence of meaning refers to an existential crisis (Steger et al., 2008).

Methods

Ethical procedure and study design

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Helsinki Ethical Review Board in Humanities and Social and Behavioral Sciences at 15.11.2017 (Statement 41/2017). Ethical viewpoints, voluntary participation, the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time, and data protection were all addressed with each participant before their interview began. To protect the well-being and emotional resources of the participants, it was agreed that the maximum duration of the one-time interview would be two hours. Further, permission was requested for the researcher to phone the participants a week after the interview in order to check on their emotional well-being. Based on these check-up calls, some interviewees were encouraged to seek support for themselves in order to continue their process of loss. It seemed that this type of support seeking was a consequence of becoming aware of an existing support system rather than an increased anxiety level resulting from participation in the interview. Ethical choices were made to protect interviewees from the draining effect of working with a topic that might be an emotional burden; mostly, the interviews were conducted in pairs and were followed by a short reflection discussion. In addition, the researchers kept diaries to follow their thoughts and emotional capacity during the process.

Conducting the semistructured interviews in pairs also enabled researchers to scope interdisciplinary aspects within one interview meeting. A guide was prepared to serve the needs of the multidisciplinary research team (theology, nursing, social sciences, and law). The main themes covered in each interview were the following: life here and now with the palliative care decision, home as an environment (including relations, restrictions), life before the illness, services and support, values, and worldview (including religiosity and spirituality), personal rights, and narrative of the future.

The recruitment plan employed both private hospices and public hospice-at-home networks. Palliative care providers assisted in finding suitable participants using leaflets provided by the research team to share information about the study. If people were interested, a nurse asked their permission to pass on their contact details to the research group. Further, an ELCF newspaper published an announcement about the study both online and in print. This gave potential participants an opportunity to reach out to the research team. Additionally, some participants were contacted using the snowball method. Interviews with the bereaved individuals were conducted in southern Finland, mainly in the Helsinki metropolitan area.

Recruitment of the participants and phenomenological analysis

Altogether, 13 people who had recently lost a spouse were initially interviewed. To grasp the experiences linked to bereavement and meaning seeking in the midst of the grieving process, we chose a method designed for this purpose, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Therefore, as IPA suggests in-depth engagement with a small and homogeneous sample (Smith et al., 2009), we identified interviews that contributed to the discussion on continuing and/or transforming the spousal bond for closer analysis. The data in this article consists of the experiences of 10 widows and widowers. For the selected cases, the interviews lasted from exactly one hour to two hours and 18 min. All the interviews were transcribed by professional transcribing services and were checked by the research group.

To protect the anonymity of the participants, each was given a pseudonym, and any details that could jeopardize their anonymity have been left out. Table 1 presents the pseudonyms, gender, and age of the participants as well as the length of their bereavement and additional information on their family.

At the beginning of the analysis, the first and second authors analyzed the data independently using IPA analyses as instructed by Smith et al. (2009). In the IPA process, the researchers first read the transcripts several times to familiarize themselves with the data. Then, the researcher jotted down free comments and thoughts in the left-hand margin, utilizing the right-hand margin to note codes and initial themes. After the independent analysis process, the researchers began to compare their findings and form initial consensuses on the main themes overarching the data. In this phase, the third author was invited to comment on and double-check the reliability of the analysis. Three main themes of meaning-making arose from the IPA analysis: loss as a threat to meaning, ADC, and rituals of remembrance. In the results section, these themes are discussed one by one.

Results

Loss as a threat to meaning in life

All interviewed widows and widowers had experienced some challenges in meaning in life after the death of their spouse. Some of them had found the loss harder than others. In this section, we discuss these challenges and evaluate how they influenced the participants' search for meaning. We also consider how these challenges hindered the bond between the deceased and bereaved spouses.

Most of the participants in this study had had lifelong marriages and felt lonely after bereavement. Kyllikki, for example, had no children, and even though during their marriage she had coped well with this, after losing her spouse she felt left alone without offspring. Kyllikki did not talk about not having children at all during the first interview and raised it only in the phone call afterwards. In her second interview, she touched on the topic but did not want to delve deeper into it. The lack of a continuing bond to the next generation seemed to challenge meaning in her life so much that it was difficult to share it with the researchers.

Another challenge for continuing the bond between a deceased spouse and the widow or widower was the belief that the deceased does not continue living in any form. Matti did

Table 1 Background information on the participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Length of bereavement and additional family information
Aino	F	76	Initial interview after six months of bereavement, with another unrecorded phone interview half a year later. Aino's third marriage lasted for 10 years. She had two children from previous marriages, and her late husband was a widower with a child from a previous marriage
Eila	F	76	Two years of bereavement. Long marriage with children and grandchildren
Hanna	F	77	A year of bereavement. Long marriage with two children and three grandchildren. A long care period
Ilmari	M	65	Five months of bereavement. A 42-year marriage with four children but no grandchildren
Kaarina	F	65	Lost a husband and, within two years, a partner; the latter loss was a year prior to the interview. Over 40 years of marriage with two children. A long care period; the son was an official family caregiver
Kari	M	72	First interview three months after bereavement and a second half a year later. Cohabitation for 7 years
Kyllikki	F	81	First interview a year after bereavement and a second 18 months after. A long marriage with no children
Matti	M	75	A year of bereavement. A long marriage. The wife had a child from a previous marriage. An extremely long care period
Markku	M	65	Just over a year of bereavement. A long marriage with two children and two grandchildren
Sirpa	F	69	Six months of bereavement. 50 years of marriage with two children and two grandchildren

not believe in the afterlife, and this seemed to challenge his meaning in life. He explained that he and his wife had an agreement that they would not go to mourn at each other's graves. Matti's challenge to continue the bond with his wife made it hard for him even to remember her and to talk about his bereavement. Matti explained about his visit to her son: "I visited there during summer, and stayed for a few days. I will think twice about visiting him again or at least I have to tell him that we will not talk of the old days and bereavement and especially not talk of the loss. It is not the right place for that." The son had wanted to share memories of his mother with Matti, which was too much for Matti. Despite being a social person, Matti did not want to discuss his loss and feelings during bereavement.

In some cases, the deceased had been a challenging person when alive, and this made the search for meaning harder for the widowed person. During Hanna's long care experience, her husband's previous extramarital relationships challenged their relationship. Hanna elaborated: "I have to say that our marriage was never easy. He was a real ladies' man. The other women were many... When I cared for him, I had mixed feelings. Where are all these other women now while I am taking care of him?" Hanna was working on forgiveness and reconciliation as part of her meaning-making process during bereavement. Part of this process was her willingness to demonstrate feelings of anger toward the deceased, which is not culturally appropriate. What is striking is that she started talking about her anger only at the end of the interview just before the recorder was turned off. After sharing her thoughts, she clearly felt relieved. Hanna's process of forgiveness and reconciliation was her way to transform her relationship to her deceased husband, which seemed to be necessary for her search for meaning.

Kaarina also revealed that her marriage, which she called a 40-year battle, had not been without problems. Sirpa explained that her husband had problems with alcohol, and this made him quite a difficult person to live with. These three widows had difficult memories of their husbands, which made it harder for them to continue the bond and to find meaning in their lives. They did not avoid memories of their long marriages, but at the same time they saw a need to transform the bond.

For some, the threat to meaning resulted from complicated grief. Kaarina shared how she grieved two men at the same time: “When my husband died, I did not feel at all like I would like to die myself. But when this one died, then I felt like dying myself. Now it is more than a year after he died and I tolerate it better, but anyhow...” Soon after the loss of her husband, Kaarina had started a relationship with a former colleague. This relationship only lasted less than a year because of his sudden death. Kaarina reflected that starting a relationship so soon after the death of her husband was a strategy to avoid thinking about it. Now, after losing both men in such a short time, she was confused about how to face her feelings and to find meaning in her life.

This section has shown that widowed people share three types of threats to meaning that are connected to the quality of the pre-death relationship, the lack of afterlife beliefs, or grieving two people at the same time. These threats demand that bereaved people either continue the bond with their deceased spouse or transform this bond. Part of balancing continuity and transformation is the experience of ADC, which is discussed next.

After-death communication as a search for meaning in life

The participants’ forms of communication following death included subthemes of visions, dreams, and mundane communications such as talking to a picture of the deceased spouse. Communicating after a loved one’s passing, for example, sensing their presence, is a way of staying connected to the deceased. Markku explained how he sensed the presence of his deceased wife: “Even though more than a year has passed I still have difficulty coping with the loss.... When I go to bed in the evening, I still hear her breathing; I still hear it.” This experience of hearing his wife’s breathing was at the same time comforting and also increased his sadness and feelings of loss and loneliness.

Aino had various experiences in which she sensed the presence of her husband. During the interview, she said that her husband haunted her, but she found these experiences amusing, not fear-inducing. Soon after his death, Aino had the following dream:

He had booked a service for the car, which included motor vehicle inspection and changing the summer tires, and he was no longer there to take the car to be serviced. Then, a day before this appointment, I woke up in the middle of the night to a voice: “You have to collect the hubcaps from the cellar.” I started thinking, Why on earth do I have to collect them? Shouldn’t they be on the tires? Then I understood that there are different hubcaps for the summer tires.

Aino’s dream reflects the close bond she had with her deceased spouse. Taking the car to the garage had been her husband’s task, and in her dream he took the role of an adviser. Aino felt like she had not been left alone even though he had died.

Kari had been an atheist since childhood, and he did not believe in the afterlife. After losing his spouse, he had started to long to meet her in one way or another. Kari explained a supernatural experience in which his deceased spouse visited him as a bird: “When we distributed her ashes, suddenly a blackbird flew onto my feet and stayed close to me....

When I later visited the place, I saw that same blackbird many times, but during the winter it disappeared. I asked, Is it her soul?" This supernatural experience of meeting the blackbird differs very much from Kari's previous atheistic worldview. The loss of his spouse seems to have awakened an interest in him to continue his bond to the deceased. In Finnish mythology, a bird represents the soul of a deceased person (Butters, 2016), and it is interesting that Kari, a strong atheist and a believer in science, had this impactful supernatural experience.

Many of the widows had photographs or photo albums through which they negotiated relationships with the deceased. Eila, for example, explained that pictures were a channel for her to keep a bond with her deceased husband:

I will search for help from all the lovely memories and they will support me... I keep the photos on display and then we have written diaries ...and I tell these children [her grandchildren] that I will collect them... These diaries give me memories of all that we have done together so that I live them again.

Kyllikki similarly explained the importance of photos as ADC. She had a special photo of her husband which is in a standing frame so she can move it around her home. She explained that she starts the day with her morning porridge in front of the picture and talks to him. This is a way to stay connected to him and to share her thoughts with him.

Some participants used photographs and photo albums to continue their bond to the deceased. Others also used them to transform the bond by repositioning the pictures in new places in their home. Directly after the funeral, many widows kept a picture of the deceased on a special table but later placed it among the pictures of the living. This was the case in Aino's home, where the deceased husband joined her grandchildren on the same wall. This transformation did not mean that Aino was not eager to continue the bond with him. On the contrary, she developed the habit of talking to that picture in the midst of the photos of her grandchildren. Transformation of the bond in Aino's case did not mean forgetting.

The bereaved interviewees had both supernatural experiences and everyday communication with their spouses. These experiences were a way for the living spouse to search for meaning after the loss. This shows that they wanted to negotiate their relationship with their deceased spouses in various situations. This is also the case with rituals, which is discussed next.

Post-funeral rituals of remembrance and/or transformation

Widows and widowers have various ways of remembering their spouses. Some of those interviewed practiced more traditional Lutheran rituals of remembrance, but most had created their own everyday rituals through which to remember their spouses. In this section, we introduce some of these rituals and discuss the role of rituals and remembrance in the search for meaning after loss and as a tool to stay connected to the deceased.

Some widows had rituals of remembrance that were connected with the burial of their spouses. One of these was Hanna, whose husband had been cremated; his ashes had been scattered in the sea close to an area where he used to sail. On the first anniversary of his burial day, Hanna and her children and some of the grandchildren traveled to the lighthouse where they had scattered the ashes and organized a memorial event there by the sea. Hanna explains this ritual: "Last summer we drove to the place [where he was born] and took a ferry to the island with a lighthouse. We sat by the shore and she [their daughter] put some

flowers in the sea...” This personalized ritual was important in Hanna’s search for meaning; she wanted to remember the good in her husband in spite of the partly difficult memories of him.

Many of the participants shared rituals with their family members, as Hanna did with her daughter in the discussion above. Similarly, Ilmari outlines rituals of remembrance that he conducts together with his children:

We have reminisced about her but we have not organized evenings of remembrance or such... When we visit the cottage we discuss that Mom would have done this and that she fixed that and so on. But I have started thinking about whether we should organize a meeting on the first anniversary of her death that we could all attend and remember her.

Rituals of remembrance are ways to maintain the bond between the deceased and bereaved, as is seen in Ilmari’s plans.

Most of the interviewees visited the grave of their deceased spouse at least on All Saints Day and Christmas, days on which the deceased are remembered in Finland and many people visit cemeteries. Others, such as Kyllikki, visited the grave of their deceased spouses at least once a week. She explained: “When somebody asks if it is traumatic, I respond to them the opposite. And I have with me, I take snacks with me, and sit on the bench and eat. Also, yesterday, I had some cold coffee there and afterwards walked around.” Kyllikki has made visiting the grave into a personalized ritual during which she enjoys some refreshments, most recently some coffee. Similar to Kyllikki, Kari visits the grave of his deceased spouse weekly, which shows that visiting a grave is not a gendered ritual but that both widows and widowers see it as an important part of continuing the bond with the deceased.

Other participants used rituals to transform the bond. Matti explained his clearing-out ritual:

The curtains in the kitchen I will keep. But the bed cover, which was made for a double bed, she made it over a year and half whenever she had free time. I gave that bed cover to her son...

Clearing out was Matti’s way to cope with the bereavement. His wife had been talented in handicrafts such as making bed covers. These handicrafts reminded him too much of her and made his bereavement harder. Additionally, Matti had bought a single bed, on which the double bed cover did not fit. This example shows that some of the rituals did not aim to remember but to transform the bond.

Other participants, such as Kyllikki, explained clearing out their husband’s clothes: “That jacket which he had in the hospital... I washed it and took it to the Salvation Army. But the shoes he had... Those I have not taken anywhere yet.” When we entered Kyllikki’s home, she pointed these shoes out to us. They were clearly an important memory to Kyllikki, and she did not want to get rid of them. Clearing out was a process for her; she could choose which items she wanted to dispose of and which she wanted to hold on to. For Kyllikki, this was a slow process; she did not want to change things too fast.

Some participants had personal rituals of remembrance. Kari listened to music from a Spotify playlist that the couple used to enjoy together: “I look at pictures and then I sit around the kitchen table with a glass of wine and listen to music. And then I start crying when I think of her.

Music reminds Kari of his spouse, which made this ritual very personal and helped him to reflect on his loss.”

The findings of this section reveal that some participants used rituals to continue the bond to the deceased, while others wanted to transform the bond. Additionally, rituals were used as a way to search for meaning in the midst of a big loss and feelings of meaninglessness.

Discussion

Three main themes of search for meaning in life after the loss of a spouse in late life arose from the IPA analysis: threat to meaning, ADC, and rituals of remembrance. In all of these themes, the search for meaning in life was connected with continuing, transforming, or even breaking the bond with the deceased. The quality of the pre-death relationship and beliefs about an afterlife influenced how the widowed persons wanted to continue the bond and what type of transformation they needed in it. These findings are in line with what Root and Exline (2014) found—that continuing bonds are complex and their definition needs refining.

Many of our participants had experienced challenges in their sense of meaning in life and feelings of loneliness after the death of their spouse. Previous researchers have used the term *reconstruction* of meaning (Neimeyer, 2001; Neimeyer et al., 2006), which stresses the strongly active role of the widow or widower in the process. The findings of this study suggest that the search for meaning in life is a more realistic term for the situation where somebody has lost their spouse and is still trying to adapt to a new life. DeMarinis (2013) introduces an important definition in which rituals and meaning are combined: “Existential rituals are those activities that signify the meaning itself in life and death” (p. 211). The participants in this study used various existential rituals and ritualizing activities to search for meaning in life after the loss of their spouse. Rituals are essential in order to maintain coherence in life. This is important for widowed persons as coherence is one of the main psychological aspects of meaning in life (Martela & Steger, 2016). After a crisis, through a favorable coping process, coherence balances back to “normal” (Ganzevoort, 1998b). Still, the presence of meaning in life may exist even in the midst of finding the coherence (see Dezutter et al., 2013).

In our study, the significance of rituals was twofold. On the one hand, rituals assisted in maintaining the participants’ connection to the deceased. On the other hand, rituals also provided an avenue for dealing with personal pain. From a psychological viewpoint, rituals then became a significant source of comfort when the bereaved person was seeking lost coherence and meaning in life (see Martela & Steger, 2016). As the significance of traditional religious rituals has decreased, personalized rituals are needed to find individually meaningful ways to cope with loss (see Ganzevoort, 1998a). From a psychological viewpoint, rituals form a tactile element that assists in maintaining or rebuilding coherence in life (see Dunlap, 2011; Saarelainen, 2016). In a favorable coping process, coherence of life can be newly found and balance in life restored (Ganzevoort, 1998b). It is important to remember that the crisis or loss itself does not have to become meaningful in order for the individual to live a meaningful life (Saarelainen, 2017).

Widowed people in late life share experiences of various threats to meaning that require the bereaved either to continue the bond with the deceased or to transform this bond into something new. In transforming the bond, the present study suggests it is important that forgiveness is accompanied with a sense of reconciliation. This is in line with previous research about spousal forgiveness, in which the importance of reconciliation is well

recognized (Worthington et al., 2019). Forgiveness is often viewed as a positive force; however, in continuing bonds, the relationship seems more complex (Gassin & Lengel, 2014). From this perspective, more research is needed. Yet, several psychological studies have already identified that the experience of meaning in life is closely connected to personal relationships and connectedness (Baumeister, 1991; Schnell, 2009). When close relationships provoke stress and pain, loss of meaning is likely to occur (Baumeister, 1991; Lambert et al., 2013; Saarelainen et al., 2020a, b).

Many of the widows and widowers we interviewed had communications with their spouse. These happened in dreams, visions, and, for example, while talking to a picture of the deceased spouse. Some of this communication dealt with practical issues, but much of it included spiritual experiences, which indicates the role of worldview in search of meaning in bereavement (see also Kwilecki, 2011; Siltala, 2019; Steffen & Coyle, 2010). This confirms previous research findings that ADC helps to reconstruct meaning and to make sense of loss (Dew Conant, 1996; Keen et al., 2013; Steffen & Coyle, 2011). ADCs introduced ongoing contact with the deceased outside of a traditional ritual setting (Kwilecki, 2011). Our data, nevertheless, shows that some of the everyday rituals and ADCs were rather similar experiences.

Three of our participants had a long history of taking care of their spouse. Hanna and Matti had been their spouse's caregivers for more than 10 years, and Kaarina's son had cared for his father for a rather long time. These three widowed persons faced some challenges in their search for meaning in life through a continuing bond with the deceased. Previous research suggests a link between the inability to move on from the past and the search for meaning in life (Steger et al., 2008). With such limited data, however, we cannot prove that this resulted from their history of caring for their spouses.

ADC included meaning-making in existential or spiritual terms (see also Neimeyer, 2001). This type of ADC was found among people who identified themselves as spiritual, as Aino did, but also among those whose identity was strongly nonspiritual, such as Kari. This is somewhat unsurprising as previous research on the importance of nature in Finnish spirituality has revealed that even people who are not very spiritual search for meaning in nature (Butters, 2016). ADCs are understood to be comforting, not hallucinations or traumatic reactions to bereavement (Klass, 2006; Klass et al. 1996). From the viewpoint of psychological support and counseling, it is crucial to comprehend the everydayness of ADCs as part of the bereavement process. A study conducted by Castelnovo et al. (2015) suggests that the majority (80%) of widows and widowers experience ADCs.

Our findings, nevertheless, indicate that it was not enough to hold onto the bond as it was when the spouse was alive. Rather, many of our participants saw a need to adjust this bond into something at least slightly different (see also Stroebe & Schut, 2006). Many of the widowed persons wanted to continue their bond to the deceased, but this required some changes to the bond. Others wanted only to continue or to transform the bond in their search for meaning in widowhood. This confirms what Valentine (2008) wrote:

People's relationships with their loved ones may survive the life-death boundary, the focus being placed on how bereaved people make sense of, and manage, the changed nature of their relationship with deceased loved ones. Bereavement is thus conceptualized as an ongoing process of negotiation and meaning-making. (pp. 3–4)

Our findings show that this ongoing process of negotiation included both continuing and transforming the bond.

The holistic nature of spousal loss was reflected in the search for meaning in life through continuing and/or transforming the bonds through everyday rituals and ADCs. Many of the

participants in this study searched for meaning through both continuing and transforming the bond. Additionally, the same people who had ADCs saw the importance of ongoing rituals of remembrance. Although the process of meaning-making in bereavement may contribute to the sense of meaning (Hibberd, 2013; Neimeyer et al., 2006), the loss of a spouse includes changes in less reflective aspects of meaning in life, such as daily habits (Park, 2010). The results of our study emphasize that meaning in life is not just sense-making but deeply ingrained in emotions and the bodily world, and thus many times it is expressed through rituals.

Participants in this study narrated various traditional and everyday rituals that had been important in their search for meaning in life. Many of these rituals were relational; the widow or widower conducted them with other close family members, especially their children. This confirms earlier findings that rituals are a valuable part of bereavement support (Davies, 2017, 75; Valentine, 2008). Additionally, previous studies suggest that personalized rituals, which include aspects of memory and biography, are even more meaningful for bereaving people (Ramshaw, 2010; Schäfer, 2007). The results of this study thus indicate that the relations between bereaved people and their deceased spouse are central during bereavement. Previous research has also indicated that the relations between people who are bereaved and the deceased are an important source of meaning (Ellis, 2013; Woodthorpe, 2017).

The findings of this study are in line with psychological studies showing that connectedness is a strong source of meaning in life. For instance, in meaning studies, it has been indicated that when one source of meaning is violated, the significance of remaining sources is highlighted (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; Park, 2013; Schnell, 2009;). Our results are a reminder that, for some, the source of meaning in terms of connectedness to the spouse remained the same as before, yet the means of holding on to this source were transformed through the bereavement process.

Our findings indicate that some participants used rituals helped to maintain the bond with the deceased while other rituals were used to transform this bond. Others saw the bond between the deceased and the bereaved as continuous and accordingly did not see a need to transform it. Our findings confirm previous research indicating that a relationship can be transformed through everyday rituals of clearing the home of some of the deceased person's belongings (Mathijssen, 2017, pp. 2–4, 5–8). Sas and Coman's (2016) findings indicate three types of personal grief rituals for honoring, letting go, and self-transformation (pp. 561–562). The rituals of our participants were performed to honor and let go. Honoring rituals help to express positive emotions associated with a past spousal relationship, as is seen in most of the rituals in this paper. The aim of these rituals was to continue the bond with the deceased. Rituals of letting go focus on processing the negative feelings associated with loss (Sas & Coman, 2016, p. 562). The focus of these rituals was the transformation of a bond that was seen, for example, in Hanna's struggle for reconciliation.

Rituals of self-transformation are ones in which people evaluate their lives and make plans for the time ahead (Sas & Coman, 2016, p. 562). These rituals, which focus on the future of the bereaved, were not included in our data. Participants' search for meaning in life included discussion about the future of the bereaved spouse during the interviews. This theme was not included in this paper because of limitations of space, but is certainly relevant for future research. During a crisis, it is important to focus on the future in order to have hope (Lester, 1995; Saarelainen, 2019). Yet, the future perspective is often neglected in counselling and support processes (Tromp & Ganzevoort, 2009). The relationship of continuing bonds may be moderated by the duration of bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 2006); this reveals the need to study widowed persons' plans for the future.

Limitations of the study

This study is based on a small body of qualitative data that is not statistically representative. Characteristics such as the age and gender of the volunteer participants may have biased the results. We could not provide detailed information how aspects of meaning are connected due to such limited data. This study's results do not provide valid knowledge about the participants' experience of meaning in life outside the study context, which focused on spousal bereavement.

Conclusion

In this paper, we aimed to answer the following question: How do widows and widowers search for meaning through continuing or transforming their bond to their deceased spouse? Our results show that the death of a spouse often led to an existential crisis for the participants. During the bereavement process, the possibility of maintaining a connection to the deceased provided a source of meaning. After-death communication aimed to continue the bereaved person's bond to the deceased. Rituals were used to maintain and transform this bond. The experience of violation of meaning in life during bereavement affected the person's capacity to continue the bond with the deceased spouse. Many widowed persons continued and transformed the bond, which shows that negotiation of a relationship to the deceased spouse is an ongoing process involving both continuity and change.

Author contributions The first and second author were part of the original research team and participated in the data gathering. At the beginning of the IPA analysis, the first and second authors independently analyzed the data. After that, they began to compare their findings and agree on the main themes overarching the data. In this phase, the third author commented on and double-checked the reliability of the analysis. First author wrote most of the results, second author mostly the method part. All authors contributed to introduction, theory, and discussion. During the writing process, the whole author team had various discussions on the paper that helped to develop a common argument.

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Declarations

Ethical approval This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the University of Helsinki Ethical Review Board in Humanities and Social and Behavioral Sciences at 15.11.2017 (Statement 41/2017).

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Public repository The data will be in the Finnish public repository of Humanities and Social sciences after the protection of anonymity is checked in the whole data.

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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