Love and Resilience

Psychologists investigating resilience have made some unexpected findings regarding our reactions to spousal loss. Several recent studies indicate that many people demonstrate surprising resilience to the loss of a spouse, and are able to return back fairly quickly to their normal levels of subjective well-being. These findings are at odds with what most people would predict about their reactions to spousal loss. The question I wish to address is whether these empirical findings support skepticism about our value or importance to our loved ones. After all, if the loss of a loved one is not shattering, how significant could the loved one have been?

I

If you ask people to predict how they would react to the death of their spouses, most would suppose that it would be a traumatic event that would alter their lives forever. People anticipate experiencing despair that is inconsolable, and many wonder how they will continue living without their spouse.

Studies have shown, however, that these predictions are wrong (Bonanno et al. 2002; Bonanno 2004; Bonanno et al. 2004; Bonanno 2005; Bonanno et al. 2005; Futterman et al. 1991; Zisock et al. 1997). After experiencing some initial shock and trauma, most people demonstrate surprising resilience in the face of loss. Put simply, the experience of losing a spouse is not nearly as bad as we anticipate. The majority of widowers return quickly to their previous levels of subjective well-being, and many remarry within a short period of time. As one leading researcher on resilience explains, “large numbers of people manage to endure the temporary upheaval of loss or potentially traumatic events remarkably well, with no apparent disruption in their ability to function at work or in close relationships, and seem to move on to new challenges with apparent ease.” (Bonanno 2004, 20). Resilience is defined by psychologists as “the ability of adults in otherwise normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event, such as the death of a close relation or a violent or life-
threatening situation, to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning” (Bonanno 2004, 20).

Is resilience in the face of loss a sign that we are not significant to our loved ones? The skeptic, who sees a connection between value and vulnerability to loss, would suppose so. The skeptic will interpret our muted reactions to the loss of a spouse as a sign that were not really important to them, because being valuable requires exhibiting an extreme response to that person’s loss. If the loss of our loved ones fails to elicit any kind of devastating reaction, the skeptic concludes that we simply are not as significant to our loved ones as we assume.

Dan Moller, for one, has defended such a skeptical position (2007). He assumes that if someone is important, significant or valuable to you, that individual’s loss should produce in you a long-lasting significant impact. As Moller explains, “Resilience does tell us something important and distressing about our relationships with those we love…The problem is that because our deaths makes a comparatively minor impact on their lives, we may feel forced to conclude that we do not possess the kind of importance for them that we thought we had” (2007, 308).

According to Moller, “The good of a happy relationship with a lover is one that we value more highly than almost any other, and yet when we lose that good, our response over time does not seem to reflect its preciousness to us. Resilience thus seems to deprive us of our ability to care about those we love to their full measure after they are gone, and so deprives us of insight into our own condition” (2007, 310-311).

I believe skepticism leads to some troubling conclusions, because it implies the majority of married people are somehow deceived about the depth of their own feelings. Rather than accept skepticism, an alternative explanation of our grief reactions can be provided, which makes resilience consistent with deeply loving and valuing our spouses. Following Moller, I shall use the terms importance, significance and value interchangeably. The skeptic’s mistake, I shall argue, is to view our grief reactions as an indication of value or importance, when they are a better indication of our dependency.
Let us begin with an examination of what it means to love somebody, and how that love gives rise to their value for us. Harry Frankfurt, in his seminal work on the topic of love, defines love as “a *disinterested* concern for the existence of what is loved, and for what is good for it. The lover desires that his beloved flourish and not be harmed; and he does not desire this just for the sake of promoting some other goal…For the lover, the condition of his beloved is important in itself, apart from any bearing that it may have on other matters” (2004, 42).

Frankfurt argues that loving someone provides the lover with reasons for action, which guide the lovers’ goals and priorities. Loving someone involves caring selflessly about that person’s well-being, which often requires setting aside one’s own projects and pursuits, and dedicating oneself entirely to the needs of the other person. Perhaps the most paradigmatic examples of this kind of love occur between parents and their children, for parents often make considerable personal sacrifices for their children, but Frankfurt’s account is meant to apply more generally to all kinds of loving relationships.

When we love someone, our beloved is valuable to us, but that love is not the result of perceiving the value of what we love. The particular value my husband and sons have for me is not due to some special qualities in them, but rather arises from my love for them. As Frankfurt explains, “the reason they are so precious to me is simply that I love them so much” (2004, 40).

Frankfurt discusses an example from Bernard Williams in which a man sees two people on the verge of drowning, one of whom is the man’s wife, but he can save only one. Frankfurt argues if the man does not immediately recognize the distress of his wife as providing him with a reason to save her rather than the stranger, then he does not genuinely love her at all.

Frankfurt’s account suggests loving and valuing someone should alter our dispositions and conduct, providing us with reasons for action. It follows that the value of our loved ones should be evident in our behavior towards them. The skeptic views resilience to spousal loss as providing a reason to doubt our value or importance to our
loved ones, but I believe the skeptic has the scenario backwards. We question our importance to our loved ones not because of the way they would react if we died but how they treat us while we are alive. If they fail to demonstrate concern in our time of need, if they ignore our suffering or refuse to help, then we have reason to question their love. How they react when we die is not the issue.

Consider an example: Throughout the course of his marriage, a man worked long hours, and rarely spent much time with his wife. He frequently traveled on business trips, even after his wife was diagnosed with cancer. While she was undergoing treatments and was hospitalized, he rarely had time to visit. All of this man’s behavior suggests that he did not really love or value his wife, for he never made her a priority.

Now suppose this man demonstrates extreme devastation upon the death of his wife. Does this reaction suddenly change our judgment of him? Do we now conclude that his wife was important, despite all his past behavior? My intuition is that it does not, for his wife’s value should have been demonstrated while she lived, not after she died.

Furthermore, demonstrating resilience to the loss of a spouse can be a sign that one was in a healthy relationship, whereas the kind of extreme devastation that is so admired by the skeptic may signify nothing more than a person’s dependence or helplessness. Consider what kind of relationship would give rise to the extreme grief reactions the skeptic expects; one person would have to have been extremely dependent on the other, but dependency can occur in the absence of love. One can certainly be dependent on someone she neither loves nor values, for people often remain in loveless marriages for financial reasons, or because they lack the courage or self-esteem to leave. In cases of dependency, the motive for staying together may have nothing to do with love, value or importance.

What if one is in a loving, healthy relationship, but still maintains one’s own identity? Being independent implies having a life outside of one’s marriage, engaging in projects and goals of one’s own, and having friendships with people one cares about. If
one has these other goods in her life one could expect them to help buffer the distress experienced when one loses a spouse.

Therefore, we have serious reason to doubt the correlation posited by the skeptic between the value or importance of our spouses and our reactions to their loss. Demonstrating extreme devastation upon the loss of a spouse may not be a sign of your spouse’s value or importance; rather, it may merely indicate your dependence. Thus, resilience does not support skepticism about spousal love.

II

Perhaps one will remain skeptical about the importance of our spouses, because one views spousal loss as analogous to the loss of a close family member. The skeptic will view the deep devastation caused by the loss of close family members as evidence of their value or significance. Since we do not experience similar devastation upon losing our spouses, the skeptic will conclude our resilience is an indication of the shallowness or superficiality of spousal love. In short, our quick recovery from spousal loss suggests our spouses do not have the same value or importance as do other family members. Dan Moller believes we have reason to regret our resilience, because it implies we have “much less significance than we imagine” (2007, 310). He also worries that our resilience “suggests that most of us lack the kind of emotional depth that accompanies deep suffering” thus causing us to view ourselves as “less substantial, more superficial beings” (2007, 310).

Although the current research on resilience has focused almost exclusively on spousal loss, one researcher’s comparison of spousal loss with parental grief does lend support to the skeptic’s claim: “The impact of loss of a spouse is much less severe and within a year indices assessing mental health, social functioning, self-imagery, and feelings about the self can be shown to improve significantly irrespective of intervention…The findings on bereaved parents is not so sanguine; one-year follow-up suggests that the parents were still showing major psychological and social problems.
They were symptomatic, and their social functioning was severely compromised” (Lieberman 1989, 369-370). This researcher concludes, “The psychological issues facing family survivors are different when the loss is a spouse compared to that of a child; the patterns of recovery are distinct as are the social-psychological areas influenced” (Lieberman 1989, 370).

I believe there is an explanation for the difference in our grief reactions, which does not diminish the value or importance of our spouses or cause us to doubt our emotional depth. Spousal relationships differ from the various other loving relationships in which we engage in one crucial respect: they are replaceable. The flaw in the skeptic’s reasoning is that it rests on a faulty analogy. Of all the loving relationships we have (with our parents, children, and siblings), the spousal relationship is the most fungible. We actively choose our spouses, and nothing limits that choice other than our own preferences. My husband and I love each other, yet we both realize we could have been happily married to other people.

When you lose your spouse, you are not prohibited from loving and being loved as a husband or wife again. Being happily married is an important good in life, but it is not a good that is rendered unattainable by the death of your spouse. One could draw a comparison with losing your job. Being employed is an important good in your life that is lost when you lose your job. But getting fired does not render you permanently unemployable. If you find another job, that good in your life may be restored.

Frankfurt’s account of love further explains why a widower would seek to remarry after losing her spouse. According to Frankfurt, “loving itself is important to us. Quite apart from our particular interest in the various things that we love, we have a more generic and an even more fundamental interest in loving as such” (2004, 51). Frankfurt argues that a life in which we have things to love is simply better than a life in which we love nothing, because caring about things makes them important to us, and this importance helps to supply us with aims and ambitions. Without having something to care about, our goals would have no point, and “[t]he fact that we cannot help loving, and
that we therefore cannot help being guided by the interests of what we love, helps to ensure that we neither flounder aimlessly nor hold ourselves back from definitive adherence to a meaningful practical course” (Frankfurt 2004, 65-66). Frankfurt’s account of the importance of caring about others explains why losing a loved one can be so devastating. But in the case of spousal loss, we are fortunate to be able to replace that love, thus regaining the value that was lost.

Being functionally replaceable need not diminish a person’s value, significance or importance. Even though our spouses are functionally replaceable, we love them for who they are as unique individuals. There can be no equivalent substitute for our beloved, because, as Frankfurt explains, their significance “is not generic; it is ineluctably particular…It cannot possibly be all the same to the lover whether he is devoting himself disinterestedly to what he actually does love or – no matter how similar it might be – to something else instead” (2004, 44). The functional replaceability of our spouses is entirely independent of the reasons why we love them. The skeptic’s mistake is to view functional replaceability as an indication these relationships are less valuable or more shallow when it has no such implications.

Recall that on Frankfurt’s account, it is the act of loving something that gives rise to its value. But my loving something is entirely independent of whether it is replaceable. I can value my everyday watch much more than I value my great-grandmother’s antique broach, even though one is highly replaceable and the other irreplaceable. The same reasoning applies to our relationships: one can love her spouse (with whom she shares a great affinity of interests) much more than she loves her siblings or parents, even though the former is replaceable while the latter are not. If value is created through the act of loving something, the fact that something is replaceable need not diminish its significance or importance to us.

In sum, the skeptic has not presented any evidence to undermine the seemingly obvious point that some people really do love and value their spouses deeply. If the
skeptic wishes to maintain the view that spousal love is inevitably shallow or superficial, she will have to appeal to some other phenomenon besides our resilience to spousal loss.

Works Cited


“Nearly half of the sample (45.6%) showed low levels of depression at prebereavement and at 6 and 18 months following bereavement. These individuals also exhibited low levels of other grief symptoms (e.g. yearning). This pattern was far more prevalent than the so-called typical or normal grief pattern (an increase in distress following the loss, which abates over time), shown by only 10.7% of respondents” (Bonanno et al 2004, 260-261).

“To date, the most explicit and systematic research on adult resilience has focused on one particular type of PTE [post-traumatic event]: the death of a spouse” (Bonanno et al. 2006, 181).