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The Impact of Bereaved Parents' Perceived Grief Similarity on Relationship Satisfaction

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The present research focused on bereaved parents' perceived grief similarity, and aimed to investigate the concurrent and longitudinal effects of the perceptions that the partner has less, equal, or more grief intensity than oneself on relationship satisfaction. Participants of our longitudinal study were 229 heterosexual bereaved Dutch couples who completed questionnaires 6, 13, and 20 months after the loss of their child. Average age of participants was 40.7 ($SD = 9.5$). Across 3 study waves, participants' perceived grief similarity and relationship satisfaction were assessed. To control for their effects, own grief level, child's gender, expectedness of loss, parent's age, parent's gender, and time were also included in the analyses. Consistent with the hypotheses, cross-sectional results revealed that bereaved parents who perceived dissimilar levels of grief (less or more grief) had lower relationship satisfaction than bereaved parents who perceived similar levels of grief. This effect remained significant controlling for the effects of possible confounding variables and actual similarity in grief between partners. We also found that perceived grief similarity at the first study wave was related to the highest level of relationship satisfaction at the second study wave. Moreover, results showed that perceived grief similarity was associated with a higher level in partner's relationship satisfaction. Results are discussed considering the comparison and similarity in grief across bereaved partners after child loss.

Keywords: relationship satisfaction, grief, perceived similarity, bereaved parents, comparison

Supplemental materials: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000252.supp>

The loss of a child has long been recognized as one of the worst life events that can happen to a person (Paykel, Prusoff, & Uhlenhuth, 1971). Losing a child is a major stressor, and has severe effects on the psychological and physical well-being of bereaved parents (e.g., Stroebe, Schut, & Finkenauer, 2013; Vance, Boyle,

Najman, & Thearle, 2002). Bereaved parents report high levels of depressive symptoms and anxiety, and have a mortality rate higher than the average in the general population (e.g., Li, Precht, Mortensen, & Olsen, 2003; Stroebe, Schut, et al., 2013; Wing, Burge-Callaway, Rose Clance, & Armistead, 2001). Worse still, the loss of a child is deleterious not only for bereaved parents' personal well-being, but also for their relationship. Because both partners are subjected to the same event, partners have to deal with the loss of their child together over the course of their relationship (Rubin, 1993). Loss of a child, therefore, affects people not only as parents, but also as relationship partners.

Research has shown that relationship satisfaction of bereaved parents decreases over time, and that they have higher divorce rates than other parents (Gottlieb, Lang, & Amsel, 1996; Lyngstad, 2013). However, these studies typically examined the effect of people's own grief on their relationship satisfaction. In this study, we investigate whether people's perception of their partner's grief intensity compared to their own, which we will refer to as *perceived grief similarity*, affects their relationship satisfaction. We define grief intensity as a person's level of occupation with and involvement in his or her grief. Because partners' perceptions of each other's reactions to their loss affect their emotions and behaviors toward each other (Albuquerque, Pereira, & Narciso, 2016; Song, Floyd, Seltzer, Greenberg, & Hong, 2010; Stroebe, Finkenauer, et al., 2013; Stroebe, Schut, et al., 2013), in this paper,

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we propose that bereaved parents' perception that the partner experiences less, equal, or more grief intensity than the person himself/herself affects their relationship satisfaction.

Why should bereaved parents' perceived grief similarity affect their relationship satisfaction? Previous studies have shown that perceived similarity in a broad range of aspects (e.g., personality characteristics, emotions, attitudes, and interests) between romantic partners is positively related to relationship quality (e.g., Anderson, Keltner, & John, 2003; Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007; Lutz-Zois, Bradley, Mihalik, & Moorman-Eavers, 2006). Nevertheless, to our knowledge, no study has tested whether perceived similarity in terms of grief intensity between bereaved parents affects their relationship satisfaction. Because bereaved parents deal with the same loss, they may have the expectation that they and their partner experience similar levels of grief intensity (Gilbert, 1996). Hence, we propose that the perception that the partner has dissimilar—lower or higher—levels of grief intensity has negative effects for the relationship satisfaction of bereaved parents.

Comparison and Similarity Between Bereaved Parents

Because bereaved parents are also relationship partners, grieving about the loss of a child is not only an intrapersonal process within one person, but also an interpersonal process between parents (Song et al., 2010; Stroebe, Schut, et al., 2013). As stated by Gilbert (1996), "In order to truly understand the nature of grief in families, it is necessary to recognize that both individual and relational factors are operating and that these must be considered simultaneously" (p. 271). For example, a recent study (Stroebe, Finkenauer, et al., 2013) showed that one partner's holding in grief for the sake of the other partner has detrimental effects on the grief levels of both partners. Thus, using an interpersonal approach is important to extend our knowledge of bereavement after child loss.

Loss of a child is an unfamiliar situation for almost all bereaved parents. Especially in this kind of stressful and uncertain situations, in which people do not know how to react and feel, people automatically compare themselves with others to make things predictable and understandable (Buunk, 1994; Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995). Originally, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) argued that people assess their abilities and attitudes by comparing themselves with others. Schachter (1959) showed that social comparison also helps people to identify their emotions, and to determine the appropriate emotional reaction under threat and in unfamiliar situations. In this study, we focus on the perceived grief similarity or dissimilarity as a result of comparison across bereaved parents in this unfamiliar, and often traumatic, situation.

Unlike most studies in the social comparison under stress literature, in this study, the comparison target is not another, average, or strange person in similar conditions (i.e., other parents who lost their child; cf. Buunk, 1994), but their own partner and other parent of the lost child. Furthermore, we investigate the comparison between partners in the context of a major life event (i.e., child loss), instead of daily comparisons between partners (e.g., work performance; cf. Pinkus, Lockwood, Schimmack, & Fournier, 2008).

Perceived Grief Similarity and Relationship Satisfaction

Because bereaved parents share a common fate, the outcome of comparison between partners may have evaluative implications for their relationship. Below, we address possible mechanisms to explain how three types of comparison outcomes (i.e., perception that the partner has similar, less, or more grief intensity) may affect bereaved parents' relationship satisfaction.

Perception That the Partner Experiences a Similar Level of Grief Intensity

Similarity between partners in various domains is positively related to relationship quality (Anderson et al., 2003; Gonzaga et al., 2007; Lutz-Zois et al., 2006). This finding even holds for less desirable traits. For example, Locke and Horowitz (1990) found that dysphoric people, who interacted with a dysphoric partner, reported comparable levels of interaction satisfaction and perception of the partner's warmth as nondysphoric people, who interacted with a nondysphoric partner.

Although mechanisms of how perceived similarity boosts relationship quality await further research, some studies have addressed possible mechanisms. For example, research has found that, in close relationships, perceived similarity signals that the partner understands the self, and feeling understood and validated, in turn, has a positive effect on relationship well-being (Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009). Perceived similarity can also indicate that one is not lonely (Bell, 1993). Moreover, Townsend, Kim, and Mesquita (2014) showed that emotional similarity is linked to lower levels of stress in threatening contexts. Thus, perceiving that another person has similar emotions has a comforting effect on people, especially when they are under stress. These findings imply that similar processes would operate in a bereavement context. In line with existing studies, bereaved parents who perceive that they and their partner experience similar levels of grief intensity may be better able to feel understood and validated by their partner, feel less isolated and lonely in their relationship, and benefit from the comforting role of having similar levels of emotions with their partner. Therefore, they should experience greater relationship satisfaction.

Perception That the Partner Experiences a Dissimilar Level of Grief Intensity

As discussed above, research suggested that dissimilarity in grief intensity between bereaved parents should have negative effects on relationship well-being. That is, converse to the effects of similarity, dissimilarity may indicate the lack of being understood, induce feelings of loneliness in the relationship, and be related to higher levels of stress.

Evidence on how the two types of dissimilarity in grief intensity may affect relationship satisfaction is mixed, however. On the one hand, dissimilar grief intensity may be related to positive outcomes. For example, people may sometimes learn how to cope with their loss, and be hopeful about healing their grief when they perceive another person to have a lower level of grief intensity (cf. Taylor & Lobel, 1989). Or, if they perceive a person to have high

level of grief intensity, they may interpret this as a sign of that person's ability to form strong social bonds (Winegard, Reynolds, Baumeister, Winegard, & Maner, 2014).

On the other hand, dissimilar grief intensity may also be related to negative outcomes. For example, perceiving that the partner is grieving less intensely than oneself may signal to people that their partner was not attached to their child, or that s/he does not care about the loss as much as they do themselves (Bonanno, 2004; Fraley & Bonanno, 2004). Such a perception may give rise to feelings of anger and blame toward the partner (Shuchter & Zisook, 1993; Wing et al., 2001). People who perceive higher levels of grief intensity in a partner, however, may try to stay strong for their partner, which has detrimental effects for both partners' grief (Stroebe, Finkenauer, et al., 2013). Partners with a lower level of grief intensity may also worry about their partner's possible negative judgments about themselves and feel guilty for not having emotions as intense as their partner (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). Furthermore, they may feel obliged to provide more support to their partner than they receive. Such an imbalance between provided and received support may negatively affect relationship satisfaction over time (Gleason, Iida, Bolger, & Shrout, 2003).

Although research on the effects of perceived imbalance is missing, in this study we propose that possible positive outcomes of dissimilar grief intensity may not hold for bereaved parents (or, would be outweighed by negative outcomes) because of the unique context of child loss and the comparison target being the partner.

Overview of the Study

Across three waves of a longitudinal study (6, 13, and 20 months after the loss of a child) among bereaved parents, we investigated the effect of perceived grief similarity on relationship satisfaction both concurrently and longitudinally. We expected that perceived similarity in levels of grief intensity between bereaved parents would be positively related to their relationship satisfaction, while both types of perceived dissimilarity would be negatively related.

Furthermore, we examined whether our results vary across mothers and fathers. Mothers are typically perceived as the primary sufferers following child loss due to their major role during the birth and/or upbringing of the child. Fathers are typically less involved, and expected to stay strong and comfort their partner (Cook, 1988). Given these differential social norms, it is possible that violations of these norms, that is, fathers' (mothers') perception that the partner has a lower (higher) grief intensity level is particularly harmful for relationship satisfaction. Consequently, we investigated whether our findings depend on the gender of the parents.

We also attempted to rule out alternative explanations. Using a between-groups design, Fish (1986) found that the difference between mothers' and fathers' grief levels varies as a function of child's gender, child's age at the time of death, expectedness of death, and parents' age. Although Fish (1986) did not examine the effects of these differences on relationship satisfaction, he argued that couples who lost a girl, whose child was younger, who are younger themselves, and who lost their child unexpectedly would experience more problems in their relationships compared with other couples. He reasoned that these couples experience greater

differences in grief between mothers and fathers. Thus, we considered child's gender, child's age at the time of death, expectedness of loss, and parent's age in our analyses as confounding variables. We also conducted our analyses controlling for the effects of parent's gender and time passed since the child's loss.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants of this study were 229 Dutch couples. Average age of participants was 40.72 ($SD = 9.54$). Child's age at the time of death ranged between stillborn and 30 ($M = 9.85$ years, $SD = 9.93$). Most of the children (67.7%) were boys. The causes of death were diverse, including neonatal death, illness, accident, suicide, and homicide.

We identified 463 couples who had lost their child, through obituary notices in local and national newspapers in the Netherlands. All couples were invited to participate in a longitudinal study composed of three data collections. Data collections took place at the 6th, 13th, and 20th months after the loss of the child. Partners filled in the questionnaires separately after they signed the consent forms.

Measures

Perceived grief similarity. We operationalized perceived grief similarity through a two-item scale developed for this study, using statements which would be easy for bereaved partners to identify with (i.e., enabling them to assess their own compared with their partner's grief intensity). Thus, one item asked participants to rate, as compared with their partner, how much they were focused on their grief using a 5-point Likert scale: 1 ("I am much more focused on my grief"; Dutch origin: "In vergelijking tot mijn partner, ben ik veel meer met het verlies bezig"), 3 ("We are similarly focused on our grief"), and 5 ("My partner is much more focused on his/her grief"). The other item asked participants to compare the level of thought they gave to their sadness with the level of thought their partner gave to his or her sadness (In the original Dutch scale, the first point was "In vergelijking tot mijn partner, sta ik veel vaker stil bij mijn verdriet."). After reversing these two items and taking their average, higher levels indicated the perception that one has a higher level of grief intensity than the partner. Cronbach's alpha levels ranged between .93 and .95 across three waves ($M = .94$).

Relationship satisfaction. To assess relationship satisfaction, we used the eight-item Relational Interaction Satisfaction Scale (Buunk & Nijsskens, 1980). Sample items were "I regret being involved in this relationship" (reverse-coded) and "I enjoy the company of my partner" (1 = *never*, 5 = *very often*). Across three waves, Cronbach's alpha levels ranged between .88 and .91 ($M = .89$).

Confounding variables. To examine whether one person's perceived grief similarity affects his or her relationship satisfaction above and beyond the effect of his or her own grief level, we controlled for the effect of participants' own grief level. To assess participants' grief levels, we used the 19-item Inventory of Complicated Grief (Prigerson et al., 1995; Dutch version by Dijkstra, Schut, Stroebe, Stroebe, & van den Bout, 2000; $\alpha s = .91-.92$

across waves). Sample items were “I find it difficult to accept the death of our child” and “I feel that it is unfair that I should live when our child died.” We administered a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*). Based on the findings of Fish (1986; see Introduction), we also considered child’s gender, child’s age at the time of death, expectedness of loss (1 = *completely unexpected*, 5 = *completely expected*), and parent’s age as possible confounding variables in our analyses. Furthermore, we controlled for the effects of study waves and participant’s gender in our study.

Results

Strategy of Analysis

Because our data were composed of three levels, in which each lower level was nested in a higher level (i.e., time, individuals, and couples), we conducted multilevel analysis to deal with the interdependence in our dataset (Atkins, 2005; Hox, 2010). To confirm the need to use multilevel analysis, we calculated intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs). Results showed that relationship satisfaction levels across the three waves of data collection were similar to each other within the same person, and partners reported similar relationship satisfaction levels, $ICC_1 = .73$, $p < .001$ and $ICC_2 = .72$, $p < .001$, respectively. Hence, we conducted our multilevel analysis using the SPSS Mixed procedure and maximum likelihood estimation. Intercept was allowed to vary across individuals and couples in our multilevel models.

In our analyses, different variables were situated at different levels of the multilevel models (see the supplemental material for multilevel model equation). First, perceived grief similarity and grief were time-variant individual variables. Following the suggestions for this type of time-variant variables (e.g., Hoffman & Stawski, 2009), we added both person-means across study waves (each participant’s average score across study waves, time-invariant, Level 2) and time-varying scores at each study wave (Level 1) to our multilevel models. Another Level 1 variable we entered into the models was time (i.e., study waves). Expectedness of loss was reported only at the first study wave and reported by each partner independently (Level 2). Parent’s age at the first study wave and parent gender were time-invariant variables which varied across partners (Level 2). Child gender was constant across partners (Level 3).

In terms of centering, because our main research question focused on between-person differences (i.e., Do bereaved parents, who perceive that their partner has similar levels of grief, have higher levels of relationships satisfaction than bereaved parents who perceive that their partner has dissimilar levels of grief?), we grand-mean centered, rather than person-mean centered, our time-varying variables (i.e., perceived grief similarity and grief) at Level 1 (see Hoffman & Stawski, 2009 for a discussion on when to grand- or person-mean center time-varying variables). Although three consecutive study waves (i.e., time) were coded as -1 , 0 , and 1 , we reran our analysis using other types of coding for time (see below). For child’s and parent’s gender variables, -1 and 1 represented boys/fathers and girls/mothers, respectively. All other variables were grand-mean centered.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

The descriptive statistics of and correlations between the study variables are reported in Table 1. Average perceived grief similarity in our sample was 2.93, 2.97, and 3.01 across three study waves, which were very close to the level of similar grief intensity (i.e., the midpoint of our Likert scale). Correlation results revealed that perceived grief similarity had no linear association with relationship satisfaction at any study wave. Results also showed that grief was positively correlated with perceived grief similarity across three study waves. Additionally, grief and child’s age at the time of death were constantly negatively related to relationship satisfaction (albeit the correlation for child’s age was marginal at two study waves).

In further analyses, we investigated whether perceived grief similarity and relationship satisfaction levels varied across participant gender. Results revealed that women ($M_{\text{Time } 1} = 3.72$, $SD_{\text{Time } 1} = .87$; $M_{\text{Time } 2} = 3.76$, $SD_{\text{Time } 2} = .87$; $M_{\text{Time } 3} = 3.72$, $SD_{\text{Time } 3} = .80$) reported higher levels of perceived grief similarity than men at all study waves ($M_{\text{Time } 1} = 2.14$, $SD_{\text{Time } 1} = .80$; $M_{\text{Time } 2} = 2.19$, $SD_{\text{Time } 2} = .83$; $M_{\text{Time } 3} = 2.29$, $SD_{\text{Time } 3} = .79$), $t_{\text{Time } 1}(341) = -17.61$, $p < .001$; $t_{\text{Time } 2}(341) = -17.15$, $p < .001$; $t_{\text{Time } 3}(336) = -16.58$, $p < .001$. Given that averages of women’s and men’s reports were higher and lower than the similarity point in the Likert scale (3 represents similar grief intensity, see the Method section), we examined the frequencies of perceived grief similarity variable across gender. Results revealed that in 64% of women’s reports, but only in 5% of men’s reports, bereaved parents expressed that they experienced more grief intensity than their partner (i.e., reported a value higher than 3). Furthermore, women ($M_{\text{Time } 1} = 4.37$, $SD_{\text{Time } 1} = .57$; $M_{\text{Time } 2} = 4.40$, $SD_{\text{Time } 2} = .55$; $M_{\text{Time } 3} = 4.39$, $SD_{\text{Time } 3} = .53$) reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction than men at the first two study waves, but equal level of relationship satisfaction at the last study wave ($M_{\text{Time } 1} = 4.50$, $SD_{\text{Time } 1} = .44$; $M_{\text{Time } 2} = 4.51$, $SD_{\text{Time } 2} = .49$; $M_{\text{Time } 3} = 4.46$, $SD_{\text{Time } 3} = .51$), $t_{\text{Time } 1}(444) = 2.62$, $p = .01$; $t_{\text{Time } 2}(407) = 2.06$, $p = .04$; $t_{\text{Time } 3}(373) = 1.34$, $p = .18$.

We also examined the correlations of confounding variables with each other to avoid collinearity in our analysis. Only the association between child’s age at the time of death and parent’s age was high (see Table 1). We included parent’s age in our models. Nevertheless, we also reran our analyses using child’s age at the time of death, instead of parent’s age, and found identical results.

Validity of Perceived Grief Similarity Variable

Considering that our perceived grief similarity variable was developed for this study, in order to assess its construct validity, we examined its association with actual similarity in grief across partners (i.e., agreement between partners’ grief scores). Empirical research has shown that the association between actual similarity and perceived similarity may depend on the computation method of similarity across partners (Epley & Dunning, 2006; Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; Luo & Klohnen, 2005). Thus, we computed three indicators of actual similarity. The first indicator was the difference score between self-reported grief levels of partners and computed by subtracting the partner’s grief level from one’s own grief level. The second indicator was the absolute value of the first

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among the Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Time 1 (6 months after the loss)									
1. Perceived grief similarity	2.93	1.15							
2. Relationship satisfaction	4.43	.51	-.08						
3. Grief	2.75	.74	.24**	-.25**					
4. Child gender			-.02	.02	-.06				
5. Child age	9.85	9.93	.01	-.16**	.32**	-.15*			
6. Expectedness of loss	1.86	1.35	.05	-.08 [†]	-.17**	.06	.03		
7. Parent age	40.72	9.54	-.10*	-.13**	.18**	-.18**	.85**	.02	
8. Parent gender			.69**	-.12**	.22**	.01	.00	.03	-.13*
Time 2 (13 months after the loss)									
1. Perceived grief similarity	2.97	1.16							
2. Relationship satisfaction	4.46	.52	-.06						
3. Grief	2.68	.70	.25**	-.23**					
4. Child gender			-.02	.00	-.06				
5. Child age	9.85	9.93	-.01	-.10 [†]	.34**	-.15*			
6. Expectedness of loss	1.86	1.35	.02	-.05	-.12*	.06	.03		
7. Parent age	40.72	9.54	-.09	-.09 [†]	.24**	-.18**	.85**	.02	
8. Parent gender			.68**	-.10*	.20**	.01	.00	.03	-.13*
Time 3 (20 months after the loss)									
1. Perceived grief similarity	3.01	1.06							
2. Relationship satisfaction	4.42	.52	-.03						
3. Grief	2.60	.67	.27**	-.26**					
4. Child gender			.03	.01	.00				
5. Child age	9.85	9.93	-.02	-.09 [†]	.38**	-.15*			
6. Expectedness of loss	1.86	1.35	.06	-.02	-.11*	.06	.03		
7. Parent age	40.72	9.54	-.12*	-.08	.25**	-.18**	.85**	.02	
8. Parent gender			.67**	-.07	.24**	.01	.00	.03	-.13*

Note. For child's and parent's gender variables, -1 and 1 represent boys/fathers and girls/mothers, respectively. As explained in the text, child's age at the time of death, expectedness of loss, and parents' age were assessed at the first study wave and thus used as time-invariant variables in the analyses.

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p \leq .001$.

indicator. That is, independent from the direction of the difference (i.e., higher or lower), this second indicator represented the extent of the difference between one's own level of grief and the partner's level of grief. For the third indicator, we computed within-couple correlation of grief items, which represented the consistency between the relative strength of items across partners' grief ratings (Luo & Klohnen, 2005).

The correlation between the perceived similarity variable and difference score was $r(1014) = .51, p < .001$. This correlation indicated that the closer bereaved parents' actual grief levels were, the more they perceived similarity in grief intensity they reported. The correlations of perceived similarity with the absolute value and within-couple correlation were not significant, $r(1014) = .00, p = .96$, and $r(1013) = .01, p = .86$, respectively. Nevertheless, note that although the similarity level occurs at the middle level of the scales of perceived similarity (i.e., 3 in the scale) and the difference score (i.e., 0 in the scale), it occurs at the end of the other two scales (i.e., lower end in the absolute difference, and higher end in the within-couple correlation). Thus, linear associations of perceived similarity with the absolute value and within-couple correlation are not very informative.

In order to deal with this issue, we examined the quadratic association of the perceived similarity variable with these two actual similarity indicators (i.e., absolute value and within-couple correlation). Both quadratic associations were significant, $\beta = .22, p < .001$ for the absolute value, and $\beta = -.18, p < .001$ for the within-couple correlation. We have reported the results of these

examinations and presented their graphs in our supplemental material. The results showed that similarity levels in perceived similarity were also related to similarity levels in these two indicators of actual similarity. Thus, these examinations using three different indicators of actual similarity increased our confidence in the validity of our perceived grief similarity scale.

Main Analyses

To test the hypothesis that bereaved parents who perceive that they and their partner have similar levels of grief intensity have the highest level of relationship satisfaction, we examined whether relationship satisfaction at the midlevel (i.e., perceived grief similarity) of our Likert scale was higher than relationship satisfaction at the other levels (i.e., perceived grief dissimilarity). Thus, we examined the quadratic (i.e., second order nonlinear effect) association of perceived grief similarity at Level 1 with relationship satisfaction. We computed the quadratic effect of perceived grief similarity by multiplying the perceived grief similarity variable at Level 1 with itself and added this new quadratic variable to Level 1 in our multilevel analysis.¹

¹ Throughout the text, perceived grief similarity variable refers to time-varying perceived grief similarity variable at Level 1 unless otherwise stated. If a variable that is mentioned is at Level 2, we specifically state that it is a Level 2 or person-mean variable.

First, before adding the confounding variables to the model, we ran a multilevel analysis using linear and quadratic effects of perceived grief similarity at Level 1 and person-mean perceived grief similarity at Level 2 as predictors. Results revealed that there was no linear association between perceived grief similarity at Level 1 and relationship satisfaction, $b = .02$, $t(669.07) = 1.11$, 95% CI = $[-.02, .07]$, $p = .27$. The effect of person-mean perceived grief similarity at Level 2 on relationship satisfaction was significant, $b = -.06$, $t(807.71) = -2.46$, 95% CI = $[-.11, -.01]$, $p = .01$.² Moreover, consistent with our hypothesis, there was a quadratic association between perceived grief similarity at Level 1 and relationship satisfaction, $b = -.05$, $t(961.41) = -5.24$, 95% CI = $[-.07, -.03]$, $p < .001$ (see below for the discussion of this quadratic effect).

Importantly, we ran the same analysis controlling for the effects of own reported level of grief (both at Level 1 and person-mean at Level 2), child's gender, expectedness of loss, parent's age, parent gender, and time (i.e., study waves). As presented in Table 2 (see the first results in columns in Table 2), neither linear effect of perceived grief similarity at Level 1 nor person-mean perceived grief similarity at Level 2 was related to relationship satisfaction. Three marginally significant results in Table 2 showed that average level of grief across waves (i.e., person-mean grief at Level 2) had a marginal negative relation with relationship satisfaction, women tended to report lower levels of relationship satisfaction than men, and relationship satisfaction tended to decrease over time. Crucially, the quadratic effect of perceived grief similarity at Level 1 on relationship satisfaction remained significant when controlling for the confounding influence of these variables (Figure 1a). The turning point of the graph (Figure 1a), where maximum relationship satisfaction occurred, was .30 in the centered scale of perceived grief similarity (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). This point was very close to zero (i.e., similar grief intensity). Hence, the results of this analysis suggest that perceived grief similarity was associated with the greatest level of relationship satisfaction.

As discussed in previous sections, because mothers and fathers reported different levels of perceived grief similarity and relationship satisfaction, in subsequent analysis, we examined whether the quadratic relation of perceived grief similarity to relationship satisfaction varied across parent gender. No interaction with parent gender emerged, $b = .00$, $t(785.48) = -.09$, 95% confidence interval (CI) = $[-.03, .03]$, $p = .93$. Given the longitudinal nature of this study, in another analysis, we examined whether the quadratic relation of perceived grief similarity to relationship satisfaction varied across our study waves, and found a significant interaction with time (i.e., quadratic effect of perceived grief similarity at Level 1 $\times$ Time; see the second results in the columns in Table 2; Figure 1b). As presented in Figure 1b, across all three study waves, the highest level of relationship satisfaction emerged close to zero (i.e., similar grief intensity).

To examine the quadratic effect of perceived grief similarity at each study wave in Figure 1b, we reconducted our analyses by recoding the time variable (i.e., we assigned zero to each study wave in three separate analyses). Results revealed that the quadratic effect of perceived grief similarity on relationship satisfaction was significant at all study waves, $b = -.03$, $t(817.98) = -2.63$, 95% CI = $[-.06, -.01]$, $p = .01$ at the first study wave, $b = -.06$, $t(902.71) = -5.95$, 95% CI =

$[-.08, -.04]$, $p < .001$ at the second study wave, and $b = -.08$, $t(822.34) = -6.16$, 95% CI = $[-.11, -.06]$, $p < .001$ at the third study wave.

In subsequent analyses, we decomposed the interactive association using very low (i.e., much less grief intensity than the partner) and very high (i.e., much more grief intensity than the partner) levels of perceived grief similarity defined as two standard deviations below and above the mean, respectively. Results revealed that time had a significant negative association with relationship satisfaction among the participants who perceived that they had a lower level of grief intensity than their partner (i.e., left-hand side of Figure 1b), suggesting that their relationship satisfaction decreased over time, $b = -.16$, $t(673.14) = -3.69$, 95% CI = $[-.25, -.08]$, $p < .001$. There was a decrease in the relationship satisfaction level across study waves among participants who perceived that they had higher grief intensity than their partner (i.e., right-hand side of Figure 1b) too, $b = -.09$, $t(669.03) = -2.20$, 95% CI = $[-.17, -.01]$, $p = .03$. Thus, our results suggest that the effects of both dissimilarities, namely, perceiving a lower level and perceiving a higher level of grief intensity than the partner, impair or have a negative effect on relationship satisfaction over time. Nevertheless, change in the effect over time is stronger for the perception that one experiences less grief intensity than the partner.

Taken together, our analyses so far revealed that, as compared with bereaved parents who perceive dissimilar levels of grief intensity, bereaved parents who perceive their partner to have a similar level of grief intensity had the highest levels of relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, the negative effect on relationship satisfaction of the perception that the partner differs in his or her level of grief intensity increased over time.

Additional Analyses

Controlling for actual similarity. Given that previous research has shown that perceived similarity is more influential than actual similarity on marital quality (e.g., Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009), in our study, we focused on the perceived similarity of grief intensity across bereaved parents. Nevertheless, these perceptions may not reflect actual correspondence between grief levels of partners, and both actual and perceived similarity may play a role in relationship satisfaction (Gagné & Lydon, 2004). We therefore examined whether perceived similarity affects relationship satisfaction above and beyond actual similarity of grief across partners in subsequent analyses.

As reported above, we computed three different indicators of actual similarity (i.e., difference score, absolute value of the difference score, and within-couple correlation). We reran our analyses including each actual similarity indicator. Detailed results of these three analyses are reported in the supplemental material of this paper. The results revealed that the quadratic effect of per-

² Note that this association should be interpreted cautiously, because it represents a linear relation. Because this association shows the linear effect of average perceived grief similarity across three waves of data (i.e., perceived grief similarity at Level 2) on relationship satisfaction, it is different from the research question of this study. Still, in a further examination, we found that the quadratic effect of this Level 2 variable on relationship satisfaction is also significant.

Table 2
Fixed Effect Estimates for the Study Variables on Relationship Satisfaction

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)	95% CI	β	<i>p</i>
Intercept	4.53/4.53	132.19 (199.15)/132.24 (198.91)	[4.46, 4.60]/[4.47, 4.60]		<.001/<.001
Grief (Level 1)	-.06/-.08	-1.53 (628.73)/-1.90 (628.55)	[-.15, .02]/[-.16, .00]	-.09/-.11	.13/.06
Grief (Level 2)	-.12/-.10	-1.96 (857.20)/-1.73 (854.84)	[-.23, .00]/[-.22, .01]	-.15/-.13	.05/.08
Child gender	.01/.01	.20 (159.00)/.23 (159.13)	[-.06, .07]/[-.06, .07]	.01/.01	.84/.82
Expectedness of loss	-.01/-.01	-.70 (215.85)/-.68 (215.99)	[-.05, .03]/[-.05, .03]	-.04/-.04	.49/.50
Parent's age	.00/.00	-.84 (227.62)/-.83 (227.74)	[-.01, .00]/[-.01, .00]	-.05/-.05	.41/.41
Parent gender	-.04/-.04	-1.82 (170.41)/-1.82 (170.21)	[-.08, .00]/[-.08, .00]	-.08/-.08	.07/.07
Time (Study waves)	-.02/.01	-1.98 (629.24)/.44 (651.98)	[-.05, .00]/[-.02, .04]	-.04/.01	.05/.66
Perc. grief similarity (Level 2)	-.01/-.01	-.23 (589.56)/-.35 (587.83)	[-.07, .06]/[-.07, .05]	-.01/-.02	.82/.72
Perc. grief similarity (Linear Level 1)	.03/.04	1.43 (628.97)/1.68 (629.51)	[-.01, .08]/[-.01, .08]	.07/.08	.15/.09
Perc. grief similarity (Quadratic Level 1)	-.05/-.06	-5.52 (904.40)/-5.95 (902.71)	[-.07, -.03]/[-.07, -.04]	-.13/-.14	<.001/<.001
Perc. grief similarity (Linear Level 1) $\times$ Time	.02	1.55 (657.27)	[.00, .04]	.03	.12
Perc. grief similarity (Quadratic Level 1) $\times$ Time	/.-03	/.-3.07 (683.40)	[/-.04, -.01]	/.-06	/.002

Note. Perc. grief similarity = perceived grief similarity; CI = confidence interval. Results before and after the sign "/"(slash) represent the results in models without (Figure 1a) and with (Figure 1b) the interaction with time, respectively.

ceived grief similarity, and its interactive effect with time on relationship satisfaction, remained significant even when we controlled for the effects of each of these three actual similarity indicators. Additionally, none of these three actual similarity indicators was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction in the analyses.

Longitudinal associations. To examine the longitudinal associations, we investigated the lagged effect of perceived grief similarity at a wave (i.e., T1, T2) on the relationship satisfaction at the next wave (i.e., T2, T3, respectively), controlling for the relationship satisfaction at the same wave (i.e., T1, T2). Because we added relationship satisfaction at the previous wave to the model, the results represent the change in relationship satisfaction between two study waves. For the longitudinal analyses, as we did in our cross-sectional analyses, we controlled for the effects of the same confounding variables as in our cross-sectional analyses.

Results yielded no quadratic longitudinal effect on average, $b = -.01$, $t(543.61) = -1.17$, 95% CI = $[-.03, .01]$, $p = .24$, indicating that perceived grief similarity at a study wave did not have a quadratic effect on relationship satisfaction at the next study wave (see the supplemental material for detailed results). In further

analyses, we investigated whether this lagged association varied across the first and second study waves. We found a three-way interaction with time (see the supplemental material for detailed results), $b = .02$, $t(429.54) = 2.24$, 95% CI = $[.00, .04]$, $p = .03$, indicating that the quadratic effect of perceived grief similarity varied across study waves. Decomposition of the effect showed that only the quadratic effect of perceived grief similarity at the first wave was related to a change in relationship satisfaction at the second wave, $b = -.03$, $t(620.95) = -2.33$, 95% CI = $[-.06, .00]$, $p = .02$. The examination of the graph revealed that perceived similarity at the first study wave was related to the highest level of relationship satisfaction at the second study wave. The quadratic effect of perceived grief similarity at the second wave was not related to a change in relationship satisfaction at the third wave. This result suggests that bereaved parents' perceived grief similarity 6 months after the loss (i.e., first study wave) had a quadratic long-term effect on their relationship satisfaction 13 months after the loss (i.e., second study wave).

Partner effect. In subsequent analysis, we tested whether Parent A's perceived grief similarity also had a quadratic effect on Parent B's relationship satisfaction. We ran the same analyses we

Figure 1. The quadratic association between perceived grief similarity and relationship satisfaction across study waves. Panels (a) and (b) represent the models without and with interaction with time, respectively (see Table 2 for details). T1 = Time 1 (6 months after the loss); T2 = Time 2 (13 months after the loss); T3 = Time 3 (20 months after the loss). On the x-axis, 0 (zero) represents perceived similarity in grief intensity; -2 and -1 to the left of the 0 (zero) on the x-axis represent the perception that one has lower levels of grief intensity than the partner, while 1 and 2 to the right of the 0 on the x-axis represent the perception that one has higher levels of grief intensity than the partner.

reported above, but used Parent B's relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable (see the supplemental material for detailed results). Results revealed a quadratic effect of perceived grief similarity on the partner's relationship satisfaction, $b = -.04$, $t(896.96) = -3.73$, 95% CI = $[-.06, -.02]$, $p < .001$. Parent B's maximum level of relationship satisfaction occurred where Parent A's perceived grief similarity had a score of .13, which was very close to zero. Paralleling the within-person effect reported above, inspection of the graph of this effect showed that when Parent A perceived either type of dissimilarity of grief, Parent B's relationship satisfaction was lower. When Parent A perceived similarity of grief, Parent B's relationship satisfaction was highest.

Discussion

This study shows that bereaved parents' perceived grief similarity with each other affect their concurrent and longitudinal relationship well-being. Previous research on parents who have lost a child found a negative association between individual grief and relationship quality (i.e., one's own grief level negatively affects one's relationship satisfaction) (Gottlieb et al., 1996; Lyngstad, 2013). Yet, grieving about the loss of a child is an inherently interpersonal process between partners who are also parents. In this study, we demonstrated that bereaved parents' perceptions that the partner has less, equal, or more grief intensity affect their relationship satisfaction.

In line with the hypotheses, our results revealed that the perceived grief similarity between partners had a quadratic effect on relationship satisfaction. The perception that the partner has dissimilar—lower or higher—levels of grief intensity was related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction among bereaved parents, whereas the perception that the partner has a similar level of grief intensity (i.e., a value close to 3 in the original scale) was related to the highest level of relationship satisfaction. The positive effect of perceived similarity and the negative effect of perceived dissimilarity in grief on relationship satisfaction held even when we controlled for the effects of actual grief, child's gender, expectedness of loss, parent's age, parent's gender, time, and actual similarity of grief between partners.

Furthermore, our results showed that this quadratic effect of perceived grief similarity varied across time. Although a similar level of grief intensity was associated with the highest level of relationship satisfaction across all three study waves, the negative effects of perceived dissimilarity increased over time. However, the decrease in relationship satisfaction was stronger for the perception that one experienced less grief intensity than the partner than for the perception that one experienced more grief intensity than the partner. This finding suggests that over time, the concurrent negative effect of perceived grief dissimilarity on relationship satisfaction becomes stronger the longer the duration since the loss of the child. Although perceiving that the partner has dissimilar grief levels seems to be relatively bearable just after the loss, this perception becomes distressing over time.

Further research is needed to examine the mechanisms underlying this decline in relationship satisfaction. To illustrate, it is possible that people may feel that after a certain time one needs to get on with one's life, and may become impatient when they see that their partner's grief intensity does not decrease. It is also possible that the bereaved parent who perceives that his or her

partner has a higher level of grief intensity may feel obliged to continue providing support. This, however, may give rise to feelings of inequity and unfairness in daily activities and chores, and can tire out and wear down the supporting partner (cf., Gleason et al., 2003; Ybema, Kuijer, Hagedoorn, & Buunk, 2002). Considering that both partners experience the same life event, such an imbalance in terms of support may be especially destructive for the relationship. This finding is also consistent with the literature on equity in close relationships, which showed that underbenefiting (e.g., providing more support than receiving support) has more harmful effects on relationship quality than overbenefiting (Sprecher, 1986; Ybema et al., 2002).

Longitudinal results showed that dissimilar grief at the first study wave had a long-term negative association with relationship satisfaction 7 months later. Taken together with the cross-sectional results, this finding showed that dissimilar grief just after the loss does not have a strong concurrent effect (i.e., the effect at the first study wave was weaker than the effects at the second and third study waves), but a significant longitudinal effect. Perhaps the loss affects the intraindividual factors such as depression and grief first (Wijngaards-de Meij et al., 2005), but interpersonal factors gradually. That is, bereaved parents may be too focused on their own pain and grief just after the loss to think about the quality of their relationship with the other parent. The impact of perceived dissimilarity in grief after the loss on relationship satisfaction may therefore emerge over time. Future studies examining intraindividual and interpersonal processes after the loss of a child would be promising to investigate this possibility.

We also showed that perceived grief similarity affects not only one's own relationship satisfaction, but also the partner's relationship satisfaction. That is, bereaved parents whose partner perceives that they have a dissimilar level of grief have a lower level of relationship satisfaction than bereaved parents whose partner perceives that they have a similar level of grief. This finding underlines that perceived grief similarity is an interpersonal process. It is possible that when people perceive that their partner has dissimilar grief, they enact blaming behaviors toward their partner, which, in turn, may decrease their partner's relationship quality (Kowalski, 2001).

Limitations, Future Directions, and Strengths

Given the correlational nature of the study, the direction of the association between perceived grief similarity and relationship satisfaction requires further research. That is, although perceived similarity across partners in terms of grief intensity may lead to greater relationship satisfaction, it is also possible that people with higher levels of relationship satisfaction are motivated to perceive similar levels of grief intensity (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). For ethical reasons, we did not conduct experiments to manipulate their perception of their partner's grief compared with themselves. Longitudinal studies, which include both preloss and postloss variables, should examine the direction of the association (cf. Bonanno et al., 2002).

In this study, we investigated the effect of similarity in the grief intensity across bereaved parents on their relationship satisfaction. Nevertheless, some partners who reported similar grief intensity may have different feelings (e.g., sad vs. angry), or they may have different coping styles (e.g., dismissive vs. adaptive; cf. Chow,

Buhrmester, & Tan, 2014). Rather than focusing on similarities in specific feelings or coping styles, we examined the effect of similarity in grief intensity levels on relationship well-being. Whether other types of similarities across bereaved parents affect their relationship is a question that necessitates future research. For example, is feeling the same emotions positively related to relationship satisfaction? Do bereaved parents with similar coping styles (e.g., both parents have adaptive coping styles) experience higher levels of relationship quality than bereaved parents with dissimilar coping styles?

In this research, we also showed that perceived grief similarity is more influential than actual grief similarity on relationship quality. This finding is consistent with existing research on other interpersonal processes. For example, felt loneliness is a stronger predictor of morbidity and mortality than objective criteria of loneliness such as the number of social contacts (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014) or the presence of social support sources (e.g., marital status; Luo, Hawkey, Waite, & Cacioppo, 2012). In a similar vein, bereaved parents may think that they and their partner have dissimilar levels of grief and feel dissatisfied in their relationship, even when this perceived grief dissimilarity does not reflect actual grief dissimilarity. Future research should thus investigate when and under which conditions people perceive a gap between their and their partner's grief levels. For example, people with a dismissive coping style may be perceived by their partner as grieving less, a perception which might or might not be accurate (Bonanno, 2004; Gilbert, 1996). Because men are less expressive of their emotions than women, they may be perceived as having lower levels of grief by their partner (Stroebe, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001). Thus, understanding the conditions when bereaved parents perceive grief similarity/dissimilarity may contribute to our knowledge on individual and relational well-being after bereavement.

We also acknowledge some strengths of our research. First, different from most of the studies in the grief literature, our study was quantitative and longitudinal, and had a large sample size. Second, our study included both husbands and wives, which provided us with the opportunity to consider the interdependence between partners and examine dyadic effects and processes.

Implications

Our findings highlight the necessity of incorporating interpersonal components and comparison processes into intervention programs for parents coping with the loss of a child. These findings are in line with family and couple intervention efforts (e.g., Kissane & Parnes, 2014; Stroebe, 2010) and research (e.g., Wijngaards-de Meij et al., 2008), which emphasize the interdependence of survivors. Because parents' reactions and responses to their loss affect each other, intervention and counseling efforts should target both surviving parents. Our findings suggest that it is important to identify and work at aligning perceptions of dissimilarities across partners. For example, it may be possible to include perspective-taking exercises to facilitate acceptance of differences in grief intensity between partners, promote empathy, and ameliorate the negative association between perceived dissimilarity and relationship satisfaction. This is all the more important, as studies suggest that relationship quality may serve as a buffer and increase couples'

resilience when coping with the loss of a child (e.g., Lang & Gottlieb, 1993).

Conclusion

Losing a child can have devastating effects for both personal and relational well-being. The present work investigated whether bereaved parents' perception that they and their partner have similar or dissimilar levels of grief intensity has an impact on their relationship satisfaction. Our findings suggest that bereaved parents are more satisfied with their relationship if they perceive that their partner has a similar level of grief intensity. Both the perceptions that the partner has a lower level of grief intensity and that the partner has a higher level of grief intensity are harmful for relationship satisfaction.

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