Refining the Ecological Model of Resilience for Older Widowed Men and Women

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Widowhood is a high-probability life event in later life. Whilst bereavement and subsequent widowhood are naturally highly stressful, the majority of widowed men and women cope well enough to continue their lives without professional intervention. Amongst those widowed people are some, reported as between 38 and 54% (Bennett, 2010; Bonanno, 2004; Spahni et al., 2015) who could be defined as resilient, able to adapt or bounce bounce back in the face of adversity (Windle, 2011). Thus, there is growing interest in resilience amongst widowed people, and in the factors that contribute to that resilience. However, much of the work has focused on quantitative analyses and on bereavement rather than qualitative work focusing on the longer-term effects of widowhood. In this study we examine resilience amongst older widowed people using qualitative methods. We utilise the following definition of resilience: "the process of negotiating, managing and adapting to significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment facilitate this capacity for adaptation and ‘bouncing back’ in the face of adversity" (Windle & Bennett, 2011). We analyse data from 120 in-depth interviews of older widowed people which focused on the experiences of widowhood. We examined factors that promote or hinder resilience. 1/3 of participants were resilient and 1/3 were not. The remaining 1/3 showed some resilient features. Key factors include psychological characteristics, social support, and religious faith. We develop the idea of more than a binary classification of resilient or not-resilient.