

## The Psychology of Loss as a Lens to a Positive Psychology

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*This article argues for the development of a field concerned with the psychology of loss that is interdisciplinary in nature and focused on people's pervading sense of loss. The psychology of loss may be defined as broader than related fields such as traumatology, thanatology, and stress and coping. It focuses on the perception of major loss deriving from events such as death and divorce but also on this perception in connection with diverse phenomena. An important research topic for this field concerns people's imputed meanings to losses in their lives and their activities of developing stories of losses and confiding those stories to close others as they cope with the losses. This article describes basic principles of loss that may be observed across varied loss events. It is argued that this development of a psychology of loss will contribute invaluable perspective to developments in work on positive psychology.*

**Prominent psychologists, including Seligman (1998) and Snyder and Lopez (in press), have recently called for greater emphasis in psychology on what is positive about human behavior. They suggest that the history of psychological research to date has put too much attention on negative aspects of human behavior, human character, and human potential. As suggested by Frankl (1959) in his classic analysis of how people seek meaning under the most desperate and degrading conditions, humans are imbued with potential for accomplishment and contribution to others. Based on the enormous personal and collective losses Frankl experienced in Nazi death camps, he was able to articulate a unique vision of how people can transform their losses into personal growth and strength that embodies care and concern for others. It is argued in this article that ironically, a better understanding of the depth and breadth of a new field called the "psychology of loss" will provide this new field of positive psychology with some of its greatest lessons. This article outlines some of the features of this psychology of loss.**

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From early in our lives until our deaths, we are affected by a sense of personal loss, whether we personally experience the losses or they are incurred by those whom we love. The impact of this experience may be implicit, lurking in the background of our thinking or daily behavior. Or, it may be staring us in the face and terrifying us. Every year, national and international disasters confront us. The 1986 Challenger disaster, the bombing of Pan Am 103 in 1988 over Lockerbie, Scotland, the 1995 bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, the 1996 disintegration of TWA 800 over Long Island Sound, Princess Diana's death in 1997, John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s death in a plane crash in 1999, the 2000 crash of Alaska Airlines Flight 261 in the Pacific, as well as many other tragedies are losses in our collective psyche as Americans, and each one of them has had profound, reverberating impacts on thousands of people.

Our individual major losses, however, may receive little notice from others but may be wrenching in their impacts. Life is filled with loss for every person. Viorst (1986) persuasively recognized the cyclic, natural, and pervasive nature of loss in our lives. Erikson (1963) and Bowlby (1960) posited developmental passages that involve the necessity of coming to grips with loss at all developmental stages. These losses begin at birth and do not end until our own deaths. They often include unusual and great losses that are termed *traumas* and more subtle, insidious losses, such as the loss of health over time.

My colleagues and I (e.g., Harvey, 1996, 2000; Harvey & Miller, 1998; Harvey & Weber, 1998) have advocated a field of the psychology of loss that focuses on people's naive understanding of their own and others' losses and that is broad and interdisciplinary in nature. We argue that the advantages of a field focusing on major loss experiences would be its breadth, as compared to several related fields, such as traumatology, thanatology, and suicidology, and its explicit attention to the psychological dynamics of loss. We also contend that the development of and contributions from this field of work could be enlightening and empowering to real people experiencing a diversity of losses in their own lives.

Reasoning similar to the above argument was advanced by Kastenbaum and Costa (1977) in pointing to the need for greater attention to the topic of death in psychology. They said:

It is unreasonable to expect psychology—either independently or in consort with other fields—to provide quick and sure solutions to the problems associated with death. . . . Yet it is hard to identify a topic more significant to individual and society—or more mind-stretching for those who take up the challenge. (pp. 244-245)

Central to the psychology of loss are principles that may underlie most major losses. Included among these principles, which will be illustrated in this article, are: (a) Major losses are relative, (b) major losses may have cumulative impacts on us, (c) major losses often contribute to facets of identity change, (d) major losses involve adaptation to loss of a sense of control, and (e) important coping

strategies for dealing with major losses involve working on the meanings of these losses and learning how to give back to others based on our lessons of loss.

### DEFINING MAJOR LOSS

People perceive many types and magnitudes of loss. In terms of magnitude, some are perceived as relatively minor (e.g., the loss of a minor, insignificant possession) and others as relatively major (e.g., the loss of one's parents). In evaluating our losses over time and in observing others' losses, we learn that losses are relative. Over time, we learn to view our own and others' losses on relative continua, involving perceived impacts, complexity, and difficulty in coping with or resolving them. In common sense psychology, people make general discriminations between relatively minor and major losses, and the psychology of loss will be most useful as it focuses on what people mean by "major loss" in their lives. This reasoning has a parallel in Wakefield's (1999) definition of mental disorder as harmful dysfunction and as involving a culturally specific value judgment about loss. Major loss, like harmful dysfunction, may be seen as an intuitive concept that has developed in human cultures and that, similarly, often involves reasoning by analogy in common sense discourse (Cosmides & Tooby, 1999; Kirmayer & Young, 1999).

One definition of major loss is a reduction in resources, whether tangible or intangible, that involves a significant emotional investment in the resources by the person(s) experiencing the loss (Harvey, 1996). Harvey and Miller (1998) argued that a combination of subjective-objective markers are needed in defining major loss: (a) a subjective indication by the individual that he or she has experienced a major loss and (b) an objective concurrence by knowledgeable others. For most situations about which our analysis pertains (e.g., divorce, death, impaired health, being the target of prejudice, loss of home or employment), it is likely that these indicators would be highly correlated.

However, there are exceptions that necessitate more specific reasoning about boundary markers. What if the individual survivor perceives that he or she has experienced such a loss, but objective outsiders do not concur? This disagreement raises other questions. How objective are the outsiders? Approximately 40 to 50 years ago in the United States, persons of color might have concluded that they experienced many major losses in the prejudice and discrimination they encountered in the American culture. Outsiders may not have agreed. But we might investigate and conclude that the outsiders had been socialized not to see the prejudice and discrimination. In such cases, it is argued that the individual's perception takes priority.

In other situations, however, outsiders' view of the relevant events may suggest that the individual's perception of major loss is too idiosyncratic. Situations involving interpersonal conflict may be ripe for such divergence. The individual may act as if he or she has experienced a major loss and may grieve that

recognition. Discussion of the event with supporters or even a professional therapist who can readily sort out perceptions and facts may dissuade the individual regarding the magnitude of his or her loss.

Still another exception to the combination subjective-objective markers definition of major loss is when a person does not perceive that he or she has experienced a major loss. But observers view the situation as clearly involving major loss. A notable example of such a situation might be when a person experiences a brain injury. The person may lose functions (including memory) of which he or she is unaware or might not give the loss its due in severity. An outsider, however, may readily conclude that a major loss for the person has occurred.

What are some empirical implications of this definition of loss? This scheme suggests the value of examining the insider-outsider variable (i.e., who is the perceiver of the loss: the person who has experienced the loss or a close outside observer of the person?) times different types of loss experience (e.g., personal divorce, death of a close other), with the dependent variables including perceptions of the severity of the loss, perceptions of the impact of the loss on the person experiencing it, perceptions of lessons learned via the loss, and perceptions of how much the basic aspects of the person's identity changed as a function of the loss.

Does our definition of major loss suggest that any event can be viewed as a major loss? No, the foregoing definition limits major loss to those events that meet the possibilities indicated by the combination of subjective-objective markers or to exceptions such as the ones noted above. Many events in our lives do not constitute major losses.

### **GROUNDS FOR A NEW FIELD: AN EMPHASIS ON COMPARISONS OF LOSS EXPERIENCES**

I am arguing for the idea of a new field of work, rather than for a subarea of some established field. Consider fields such as stress and coping, death and dying, traumatology, and health psychology. In such fields, perceived loss usually is treated as a specific issue, as in the case of a death, or more often, it has tacit status in the theoretical analysis. Yet, for each of these fields and others that could be listed, perceived loss often is intimately related to the phenomena being studied. Even the literature of the psychology of bereavement often is narrowly focused on grief associated with death. Loss is a perception that must be addressed in coping with our most significant stresses. By considering the psychology of loss as a field, there is greater impetus for integration of findings across relevant phenomena.

A prominent theoretical and empirical task for the psychology of loss is to examine common principles (e.g., the role of perceived control, identity change) in diverse types of loss events, including death of close others; divorce and dissolution of close relationships; alienation in families; loss of employment; loss

of home; victimization through violence and war; victimization due to stigmatization because of differences in background, skin color, beliefs, or behavior; loss of physical and psychological functioning due to illness and accidents; amputation of body appendages; and loss of trust due to physical and psychological functioning. As suggested in the definitional discussion, comparison of people's experiences across such events might profitably include sampling the perceptions of multiple persons directly involved in the events. This reasoning is consistent with the work of many researchers of bereavement emphasizing a social-cognitive perspective (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 1992), including articles in this issue such as that by Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema (2001 [this issue]).

Work on the psychology of loss may contribute to useful distinctions among phenomena that have been linked closely in the literature. For example, Stroebe, Schut, and Stroebe (1998) perceptively theorize about distinctions that may be drawn between trauma and grief. Similar to the logic being advanced for the field of loss, Stroebe et al. argue that grief covers a broader range of manifestations than does trauma and that trauma research generally focuses on pathological rather than normal reactions.

Research comparing the dynamics of diverse major loss events would help distinguish trauma and bereavement reactions. Integrative research may determine that other similarities and dissimilarities also exist across different types of loss. For example, common arrays of emotional experience (e.g., regret, guilt, shame, anger) may be found. But differences in grieving patterns for these events also may be found. Emphasizing the individual's and close others' perception of the loss event and the nature of the resources lost is a starting point for integrative research with major loss events.

The link between the concept of perceived loss and contemporary work in psychology currently is established mainly by implication. In psychopathology theory and research, researchers have provided evidence about the role of negative life events on a number of psychiatric disorders, including depression, schizophrenia, and anxiety disorders (Day, 1989; Finley-Jones & Brown, 1981). More severe symptoms in unipolar depression appear to be associated with negative life events (Munroe, & Simons, 1991). However, careful study of theory and research will show that such work on psychopathology, or even in areas such as aggression and violence, infrequently has probed or emphasized the individual's sense of loss associated with these events.

It is argued that the development of a psychology of loss will contribute to convergences in understanding across hitherto disparate psychological phenomena. Take, for example, the situations encountered by newly deprived persons who have lost close loved ones in divorce, who have lost homes because of financial difficulties and bankruptcy, and who have lost their jobs in downsizing operations by their employers. Each has encountered a situation over which they may perceive to have little personal control and for which they have to work to find meaning. In a related vein, each has encountered a situation in which they probably had made assumptions about continuity and goal attainment that now

are dashed. Each likely will have to develop a new personal identity that incorporates this loss into who they now have become and make new plans for further identity change. As for the latter, in one situation, the person may plan to find a new spouse and become a married person again. In another, the person may plan to reorient his or her lifestyle and change behavioral patterns leading him or her to the brink of financial ruin. And in a third, the person may plan to find a new and less vulnerable job or perhaps go into business on his or her own so as to have more personal control over job tenure.

Research may determine, however, that different psychological dynamics occur across different loss events. The way people deal with the death of a child, for example, may involve activities (e.g., leaving a child's room the way it was when he or she was alive for years after the death) that differentiate the grieving in significant ways from how people deal with a divorce or how they deal with being the target of sexual or racial harassment (Raphael, 1983). The loss of perceived control may be exceedingly great in the loss of a child, as this person noted: "I still hear the screaming in my head. I can't stop the screaming, my screaming" (a mother speaking of her 27-year-old daughter who had died of a blood clot 2 years earlier, reported in the *Kansas City Star* (Kane, 1997).

Resources that may be brought to bear in dealing with significant stressors differ across people (Hobfoll, 1989). Ellis (1995) incurred unusual, multiple, devastating losses in her 20s and 30s that are described later in this article. Now, as a university professor, Ellis (personal communication, April 1999) suggests that one of her resources in dealing with her personal losses has been her ability to write and tell her story and, in so doing, contribute to others, including students in her classes.

There may be a potential for fertile exchange between a psychology of loss and basic areas of psychology such as cognitive psychology. The plans for change that people make in dealing with stressors may follow a route similar to that articulated by G. A. Miller, Galanter, and Pribram (1960) in their analysis of plans and the structure of behavior. G. A. Miller et al. suggested that people are constantly making plans and testing them, whether the plans are large scale or modest in nature. In terms of dealing with loss, Stein, Folkman, Trabasso, and Richards (1997) report that planning, evaluation of lines of actions and goal attainment, and emotional release are functions of narratives provided by AIDS caregivers. Horowitz (1976) has theorized about the change process in cognitive schemas that emerges in people's attempts to deal with severe stressors such as death of a spouse.

The notion that grieving, coping, and adaptation after loss may be linked to the ideas of planning and testing how we operate on the environment suggests the conceptual proximity of quite different literatures, from those centering on highly emotional events with possibly irrational behavioral patterns to those centering on intellectual planning and execution of rational behavior. It also seems likely that the individual-difference literature will be useful in helping us understand variation in people's reactions to major loss (E. Miller & Omarzu,

1998). The dialectic between loss and love is seen vividly in the extant literature on close relationships (e.g., Ahrons, 1995; Field, Hart, & Horowitz, 1999; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998). Although close relationships bring us some of our greatest moments of joy and satisfaction in living, they also bring us many of our greatest experiences of major loss, protracted yearning and grieving, and major life changes based on losses in and of relationships (Harvey, 1995).

### **THE TOWERING IMPORTANCE OF PEOPLE'S CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING**

A single moment can retroactively flood an entire life with meaning. (Viktor Frankl, 1946, p. 44)

Many influential theories in psychology emphasize people's search for meaning. This emphasis can be found in Heider's (1958) seminal ideas that led to attribution theory in social psychology. Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory also involved this perspective. Recent systematic work on people's search for meaning in situations involving severe stressors has been done by Thompson and colleagues (e.g., Thompson & Janigian, 1988) and by Shneidman (1996) in analyzing the cognitive-emotional dynamics of suicide.

Stroebe (1992) has argued that the concept "search for meaning" has an ambiguous nature in work on coping and adjustment to loss. Stroebe contends that this concept will vary across people and situations. Although this may be true, researchers such as Thompson (1991) and Silver, Boon, and Stones (1983) have reported useful data involving these direct questions to respondents: "Have you found meaning in your loss and if so, how?" More generally, across areas of psychology, researchers have argued for the value of meaning both as a theoretical construct and as a dependent variable (Klinger, 1977; Terwilliger, 1968). Because of the centrality of people's quest for meaning in connection with major loss, refining research on the techniques of probing the perception of meaning and on theoretical distinctions of perceived meaning is a high priority for this hybrid field of scholarship.

As suggested by theorists such as Heider (1958), when people feel that they have a sense of understanding for events, they feel more control in dealing with those events. Some stressors may be so daunting that they defy direct actions designed to establish control (Thompson, 1998). Still, a person may feel a sense of secondary control via acceptance of the situation and making the best of it whether cognitively, behaviorally, and/or emotionally. Finding meaning usually is instrumental to finding hope and feeling agency in coping with loss (Harvey, Stein, & Scott, 1995; Snyder, 1994).

It is argued that an essential focus for a psychology of loss must be on the individual's perceived meanings of events. Frankl (1959) provided penetrating insights into the power of people's ascription of meaning and specific acts to

achieve meaning in allaying pain and suffering, even in situations involving horror, degradation, and deprivation. We are constantly constructing and reconstructing meanings, and ourselves, in the process (Mead, 1934). In life crises, this constructive enterprise can be one of our most effective antidotes to depression and loss of hope. Echoes of Frankl's (1959) conception can be found throughout scholarly and popular literatures on how people adapt to severe stressors (e.g., Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Neimeyer, in press; Radner, 1989; Taylor, 1983).

### **CHAINS OF LOSS EVENTS AND THE INTERACTION OF LOSSES IN OUR MINDS**

It is proposed that people often conceive their losses in terms of accounts or stories that provide a collective context for the major events of their lives (Bruner, 1990; Coles, 1989; Folkman, 1997; Harvey, Weber, & Orbuch, 1990). Associated with these stories are perceived chains of events, not unlike the idea of perceived causal chains advanced by Brickman, Ryan and Wortman (1975) as involved in attributions of responsibility for accidents. These investigators provided some evidence and interesting ideas that have been neglected regarding how people make judgments about chains of causes in making causal and responsibility judgments. It may be hypothesized that people are especially prone to perceive relatedness among their personal losses and possibly in their causes. People may assimilate different loss events occurring at quite different points in time as related and relevant to their identity. Indirect evidence about this perception of causal chains of loss events is found in a variety of literatures. Myers (1999) reports how an individual's experiences of residential mobility early in life (i.e., moving around a lot) are related to the individual's negative experiences in education and work and a lack of social integration.

A series of losses may appear to us as a "pile up" of losses (Viorst, 1986). "When it rains, it pours" is the expression we learn for times when losses such as deaths, accidents, or illness in our personal lives come in multiples. Life stress and distress may be at their highest during these periods. As noted by Stroebe, Stroebe, and Hansson (1993), multiple losses occurring for an individual in a brief period of time often are associated with multiple bereavements that are unremitting over time. But there is more to the "psycho-logic" of multiple losses in contributing to distress. Questions of justice, whether individuals deserve their fate (Lerner, 1980) or whether people typically encounter such losses at such points in their lives, may be critical in our response. A mediating variable in the role of perceived chains of loss events in their impacts may be the sense of whether they are warranted in terms of justice or timing (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Ellis (1995) provides a provocative account of multiple loss events in the lives of two people over a relatively short period of time. She tells the story of her 9-year relationship with Gene Weinstein, a prominent sociologist who died at



age 53 of emphysema. Ellis was 24 and a doctoral student in the program in which Weinstein taught. Ellis describes their relationship as a strong love affair, including mutual intellectual contributions. But she also writes of many imposing losses they faced. Ellis spent almost a decade in her 20s and 30s caring for a man whose health was steadily deteriorating, such that he was unable to take care of most of his bodily functions by the time he died. Ellis had to alter her early career directions and plan her life so as to accommodate caring for Weinstein at a time when her peers were dating and exploring diverse personal and career options. They had to deal with the stigma of being unmarried lovers and encountering academics, who were uncomfortable with them, and hospital and insurance personnel who would not treat her as his legal significant other.

Ellis describes instances of anger, frustration, passed-up dreams, and despair. In 1982, 3 years before Weinstein's death, Ellis's young brother was killed in the crash of the Air Florida jet in the Potomac River, an event that in and of itself had a devastating effect, especially on Ellis's mother, and that she reports (personal communication, April, 1999) has continued to be a part of her as she mourns about how her mother has suffered and grieved the loss of her son. Indeed, Ellis's account of this loss in the middle of losing a partner to a terrible, chronic disease points to how little we know about the reverberating nature of losses and how we may grieve in such situations.

Ellis describes how she and Weinstein negotiated between denial and acceptance and reveals their emotional complexities in situations of overwhelming loss, which so often could be construed as bordering on hopeless. Ellis concludes with the idea that the negotiation of her relationship with Weinstein, as well as their story, cannot end yet and will likely be a lifelong enterprise. This negotiation occurs while still other negotiations of loss and grief simultaneously are ongoing (e.g., Ellis's grief about her brother's death and how that affected her mother).

In recent studies using narrative and questionnaire probes, my colleagues and I (Harvey, Walker, Mason, & Pauwels, in preparation) have asked 300 people in their 20s and 30s to describe their most significant loss and to indicate whether they perceived the loss to be related to various contemporary issues such as relationship and health difficulties as well as gains in learning and maturity. The connections drawn were quite substantial. For persons experiencing losses such as death of a parent or sibling, divorce, or serious health problems (e.g., rheumatoid arthritis), respondents rated the loss event as having a major impact on an average of 12 other losses they were now experiencing (e.g., eating disorders, sleeping disorders, reckless behavior, relationship turmoil). Many respondents also emphasized the gains they have achieved from struggle with major losses. For example, persons who have battled debilitating illnesses such as cancer have become volunteers working with families who have a member who has cancer or have even decided on careers associated with professions dealing with cancer therapy.

The idea of collective loss experiences that accumulate and interact in our minds goes well beyond the notion that we tend to cognitively work on (negotiate) losses and assimilate them over time and circumstance. Dealing with loss events may lead to secondary losses (e.g., energy, resources, morale) and stigmatization (Rando, 1993). Loss events of grand proportion may have cascading effects over long periods of time. Holocaust researchers such as Peskin, Auerhahn, and Laub (1997) and Bar-On (1995) have provided evidence suggesting that the impacts of the Holocaust continue for second and even third generations of families whose loved ones were murdered in the Holocaust. In its impact and implications, the Holocaust continues from the recently reported Swiss banks' complicity with the Nazis to continued reports of Nazi perpetrators being found in the United States (Novick, 1999).

Psychologists have inadequately theorized about and investigated the meanings of loss to people who continue to suffer from the Holocaust (Langer, 1991) and other instances of genocide. Psychologists' general study of genocide (e.g., Staub, 1989) is a topic that would be a part of the domain of a psychology of loss. It is our opinion that a great advantage of a psychology of loss would be its breadth to include such topics in the same conceptual domain as topics involving much less far-reaching phenomena.

### **PSYCHOLOGY OF LOSS: A BRIDGE TOO FAR?**

Is the bridge across ideas and phenomena we are advocating too far? We believe that we are proposing a bridge that is necessary to span ideas that otherwise would not be adequately integrated and understood. A strength of the breadth of the proposed psychology of loss is that it supports an interdisciplinary approach to loss phenomena. The example of the continuing impacts of the Holocaust suggests a convergence of several disciplines that are needed to explore relevant phenomena, including psychology, sociology, psychiatry, family studies, communication studies, law, ethics and philosophy, and political science. A key part of our argument is that psychologists should play a prominent role in the study of loss because of the centrality of people's understanding in how they react to negative life events.

Over time, the value of a psychology of loss will be determined by whether scholars are attracted to the field and its orientation to understanding and make creative inputs. In contemporary psychology, we often hear clarion calls for inter- and intradisciplinary work (Bevan, 1991). We also know that increased knowledge has led to more and more specialization and what Wass and Neimeyer (1995) have insightfully referred to as a degree of marginalization for new specialties within parent disciplines.

Given limitations in our ability to process vast amounts of new information accruing constantly, why would a new field on the psychology of loss that so far has few specifically constructed theories, no formal scholarly organization, or

clearly identified cadre of scholars be beneficial to psychology or the behavioral sciences in general? My response to this question is that new conceptual fields have the potential to open up vistas of understanding that current frameworks may not provide. As this point pertains to a psychology of loss, such a new conceptual field also may have impacts on related fields of application by providing new insights about clients' and patients' understandings of losses in their lives. Across disciplines, we as scholars and humans regularly show that we have the ability to assimilate vast amounts of information and to integrate new and even divergent information. New fields, new journals, and new books all may lead to new ideas and new research on an infinite number of questions that may be formulated. A theme of this article is that the new positive psychology will be advanced by an appreciation of the dynamics of loss and how those dynamics interface with what we find salutary about the human condition.

### THE NEED FOR A BROADER PERSPECTIVE ON ADAPTATION

Consideration of the depth and breadth of the psychology of loss can contribute to what is being called "positive psychology." It can do so by helping us learn how people sometimes use major loss to energize their behavior and give back to others in significant, humane ways. Our understanding of loss needs to be accompanied by a deeper appreciation of adaptation processes. This undertaking necessarily will be both interdisciplinary and international in scope. My appreciation of relativity in adaptation was greatly enhanced in a study of loss among contemporary Romanian citizens (Carlson, Johnston, Liiceanu, Vintila, & Harvey, 2000; Harvey, 2000).

For three decades, Romania was governed by the brutal, isolating policies of the Stalinist-communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. Ceausescu was overthrown and executed in the revolution of 1989. However, Romania has struggled as a democracy since then, as reforms in its economy have come slowly, political intrigue and corruption have been rampant, and the citizens have gone on suffering, with an annual inflation rate of more than 50% through much of the late 1990s. The continued effects of Ceausescu's rule, in the form of daunting reverberating losses, can still be observed throughout the country today. A couple of examples may help show what Romanians face.

Hundreds of thousands of stray dogs roam the streets of Bucharest because Ceausescu's administration tore down many central city neighborhoods and built huge concrete block apartments so that people would be "more equal." People moving to these apartments abandoned their pets, who now have bred in the streets for two decades and who depend on the mercy of shopkeepers and passersby to survive. In a similar vein, Ceausescu's policies regarding the family led to terrible results. He wanted to increase the country's population. Thus, he dictated that couples would not use birth control and made abortion illegal,

although financially, most people in the country could not afford more children (David & Baban, 1996). These policies led to couples' abandoning children at birth by leaving them at state-run orphanages. Approximately 100,000 children remained in orphanages as of 1998. The challenge of making a decent living in Romania continues to contribute to the abandonment of children. It also is estimated that there are a few thousand street children. Space does not permit a full discussion of the magnitude of loss issues facing Romania, and this situation continues despite the presence of millions of well-educated, multilingual, proud citizens who make up the Romania of the early 21st century.

Relativity in loss, coping, and adaptation is illustrated by the plight of beggars in Bucharest. Scores of beggars are a common sight in the large cities of Romania. Many are gypsies who for centuries have endured prejudice and hardship in Romania and all of Europe (Fonseca, 1995). But the beggars represent a variety of ethnic groups and ages. The old and disabled as well as the young and apparently destitute can be found at most subway stops in Bucharest at most times every day. Some are quadriplegics. The young include many grimy-faced kids no older than 5 to 7 years. A colleague reported seeing a father leading his young daughter around in the subway as she held a sign saying she needed help because she had AIDS.

A story that unfolded each workday of the week in the Bucharest metro system was that of the tenacious solicitations of a young man in his 20s, who had no legs and slid around the floor of the subway car with a box into which riders sometimes put money. "The slider" went about his work when the subway was not as crowded and did not stop his movement until the trip ended; then, he would move to a different subway car for another trip. The author found him resting early one morning behind a large post at the end of the subway station. It was as if that post gave him sanctuary and dignity from the onslaught of his daily grind. It is unclear how he managed the more than 80 steps of stairs leading to the subway platform or how he interacted with food vendors given his short stature and probable difficulties in negotiating crowded, chaotic sidewalk scenes and store areas. But he was a regular and had found ways to survive in these circumstances. We as researchers and scholars of loss and trauma can learn valuable lessons about resiliency, courage, and coping by paying greater attention to the millions of persons in this world who face losses and levels of ongoing stress similar to those encountered by "the slider."

Observations such as these regarding begging in Bucharest suggest the value not only of a psychology of loss but also of a broad interdisciplinary and international approach to studying loss. This work likely would involve multimethod techniques, including observations, questionnaires, narrative approaches with groups, and case studies. It would involve the integration of ideas and methods from disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, political science, and psychology. Furthermore, essential to such inquiry would be the collaboration of scholars representing the cultures being studied.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article has made a case for a new field of scholarship concerning a psychology of loss. This argument has implications for methodology and application. As has been argued for the field of stress and coping (e.g., Moos & Shaefer, 1986), a psychology of loss requires a broadly conceived research strategy. It needs to focus not only on people's perceptions and stories of loss but also on how their perceptions and narratives change over time and situation (Capps & Bonanno, *in press*). It needs to be concerned with individual differences and cross-cultural differences. It needs to be concerned with how people's understandings of negative events resonate or diverge with those of close others in their social environments. Applications based on a psychology of loss will need to be based on recognition of the varied nature of loss experiences as well as the individual nature of many constructions of loss.

An emphasis on people's common sense understanding of loss may provide greater insights into the nuances of grief and adaptation to losses. At memorial events in 1997 for those who died on TWA 800 in 1996, Joseph Lychner, a Houston businessman who lost his wife and two young daughters—his whole family—in the disaster, was asked whether the memorial events might help him move on and achieve closure regarding his losses. He said there is no moving on and closure for him and that he does not want closure. Rather, he wants to continue remembering and honoring the family he loved so much and to dedicate a significant portion of his life to an area in which his wife was an activist (criminal justice). Is his response in some way a small clue about problematic or complicated mourning? No, Lychner's logic is similar to that of others who, in the wake of devastating losses, have dedicated themselves to making contributions to others based on their experiences, a logic that resonates with Erikson's (1963) idea of generativity.

In our society, when others have experienced major losses, it is common to hear people advocate quick movement toward states such as "closure," "moving on," and "getting on with life." This analysis would suggest that such steps not only may not be readily possible but also may not be conducive to effective adaptation over time. A research implication of this analysis is that we have too little descriptive information about adaptation and coping across people who have experienced different types of major loss.

This article has described aspects of a psychology of loss that embodies several general principles that apply to many types of major loss experiences. These principles, demonstrated in accounts such as Ellis's (1995) story of diverse, interacting losses in her life, include the following:

1. Our major losses are relative. They are relative to other losses we have experienced and to those experienced by others. By seeing them on relative continua, we are better able to make sense of them and see them as part of the whole of the human experience.

2. Our major losses have cumulative impacts. When a new major loss occurs, we are affected not only by it but also by other major losses that interact with it in our minds and that are recalled in our experience, some of which have been only partially addressed and resolved.
3. When major losses occur, they contribute to new aspects of our identity. We are different, sometimes vastly different, based on their consequences.
4. Major losses involve adaptation to the loss of perceived control.
5. Valuable strategies for coping with major losses often include working on our idiosyncratic perceptions of the meanings of our losses and learning how to give back to others based on our lessons of loss.

It is the contention of this article that a prominent feature of the new positive psychology, or an emphasis on what is good and healthy about people, will be a focus on how people experience and cope with diverse losses. A psychology that carefully studies the diversity of major losses and people's various responses to them can teach us more about the merit of the dialectic found in Hemingway's assertion that we are strongest at the broken places. A positive psychology of the 21st century will be much more informed to the extent that it recognizes the human potential to interpret major losses as valued learning experiences and to grow and give back to others based on their losses.

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