



## Changing everyday activities of couples in late life: Converging and keeping up

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### ABSTRACT

The influence of mutual spousal interrelations in domains such as health and wellbeing has been demonstrated, but little is known about the domain of everyday activities of couples in late life. In the present explorative study, we considered all of the activities participating couples talked about to be their everyday activities. Its aim was to understand, over time, changes in everyday activities as experienced by late-life community-dwelling couples. In a two-year period, 41 individual and joint interviews were conducted with 8 couples, who were purposefully selected from the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam. Analyses involved the construction of couple narratives and constant comparisons within and across couples. Changing everyday activities in late-life couples was interpreted to be a two-way process of (1) converging, and (2) keeping up, which occurred in three fluid phases. Converging was a slow inward movement with a shift towards diminished everyday activities performed in a smaller world. Keeping up was an outward movement in order to resist the converging process by using everyday activities as a means to keep fit, physically and mentally, and to connect with the wider social world. In the first phase, couples maintained their unique linked activity pattern. In the second phase, spouses resisted converging by keeping up. In the third phase, spouses co-performed everyday activities closely together. The findings support the need to develop couple-oriented interventions that aim to enhance the couples' functioning in the domain of everyday activities.

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### Introduction

With increasing numbers of spouses growing old together, it is becoming ever more important to study the ageing of late-life spouses in the social context of their marriage. Many late-life couples have to deal with declining health (Deeg, 2005), which may involve an inability to maintain activity patterns or to continue everyday activities (Charmaz, 2002). Older married persons who need care, most likely receive this from their spouse (Lima, Allen, Goldscheider, & Intrator, 2008). This has consequences for the caregiving spouse's own activity pattern. It is the changes in everyday activities that are often of

more concern than declining health (Harwood, Jitapunkul, Dickinson, & Ebrahim, 1994), and particularly when it is no longer possible to take part in activities that have essential personal meaning (Lawton, 1993; Reker & Wong, 1988). Current literature furthermore suggests that meaning and perceived value may be more important for the positive effects of activity on well-being, than the type and frequency of the activities older people engage in (Adams, Leibrandt, & Moon, 2011; Hammell, 2004). However, while ageing theories emphasize the importance of activities for ageing well, knowledge about the meanings and change of activities needs to be further developed (Liang & Luo, 2012).

Literature demonstrates strong evidence of spousal influences on health and well-being (e.g. Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Walker & Luszcz, 2009). Dyadic studies have demonstrated the interdependence and the influence of mutual spousal interrelations in domains such as cognitive functioning, health

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and wellbeing (Hoppmann, Gerstorf, & Luszcz, 2011; Walker & Luszcz), by analyzing data from both spouses within the unit of the couple. Since late-life spouses engage in frequent interaction in their everyday life (Antonucci, Akiyama, & Takahashi, 2004; Lang, 2001), it is to be expected that they will influence each other in their everyday activities. We anticipate spousal influence on everyday activities to be particularly relevant when couples have to adjust in the face of declining health in late life. In the domain of everyday activities, we found one longitudinal dyadic study that investigated changes in the frequency of engagement in four selected social activity in late-life couples over an 11 year period. It demonstrated that both the level of engagement in these social activities as well as changes in the frequency of their social activities were closely interrelated among these older spouses (Hoppmann, Gerstorf, & Luszcz, 2008).

To understand meaning in everyday activities in late-life couples, it needs to be investigated how spouses construct meanings in their everyday activities. Some qualitative studies shed light on meaning in everyday activities and demonstrate the dynamics among late-life spouses. In one dementia study, the participants perceived performing everyday activities closely together as a strategy for coping with the consequences of dementia. This was positively experienced by the participant with dementia, but the caregiving spouses often experienced this proximity of their partner with dementia as burdensome. (Vikström, Josephsson, Stigsdotter-Neely, & Nygård, 2008). Another study showed that doing things together was perceived positively by both spouses as something that contributed towards preserving couplehood (Hellström, Nolan, & Lundh, 2005). A qualitative study exploring the everyday activities of an older couple after a stroke demonstrated that the couple's everyday activities were fully intertwined: the couple acted as one entity in timing, coordinating, balancing, orchestrating and assisting in their everyday activities, and doing things together had various meanings (Van Nes, Runge, & Jonsson, 2009). We found one prospective three-year qualitative study that investigated activities and roles related to meals in spousal male care partners and their wives with dementia. The findings showed how both spouses actively worked together in a complex change process resulting in the transfer of food-related roles to the male care partners (Atta-Konadu, Keller, & Daly, 2011).

Most of these qualitative studies used a retrospective perspective and focused on caregiver-carerecipient dyads with specific diagnoses, such as dementia. Consequently, knowledge remains limited about the process of change in everyday activities as it unfolds over time in couples who adapt to the health changes that are associated with the ageing process as such. In particular, we need to improve our understanding of how late life couples experience their changing everyday activities and how they attribute meanings to their everyday activities. The purpose of our study was to explore, over time, changes in everyday activities as experienced by late-life community-dwelling couples. In the present study, we considered all of the activities the participating couples talked about to be their everyday activities. In other words, we conceptualized everyday activities in a loose and broad manner. Thereby, everyday activities covered a range of activities from basic activities of daily life to participation in society. Expanding our knowledge of changing everyday activities from the perspectives of couples, might contribute to understanding the role of activities in ageing theories. This may ultimately further the

development of interventions to support late-life couples in coping with declining health.

## Design and method

Our understanding of the concept of meaning is based on the notion that in daily life people give meaning to situations, feelings, and activities. In the process of attributing meaning to activities people interpret the value of their activities (Christiansen, 1999; Erlandsson, Eklund, & Persson, 2011). Following a social constructionist perspective, we consider meaning to be co-constructed in interaction and mediated by intersubjective dialogues and narratives. These narratives are constantly changing in time and context (Gergen, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1988). In our study, narratives are considered to be changing during a phase of health decline of one or both spouses and shaped by the social context of the marriage.

Based on these notions, a dyadic qualitative two-year longitudinal study was designed with a combination of joint and individual interviews in three waves, with the couple as the unit of analysis. The joint interviews permitted us to explore how the spouses within one couple co-constructed meanings. The combination with individual interviews made it possible to obtain more aspects of meanings than can be obtained by joint interviews alone (Taylor & de Vocht, 2011). The couple being the unit of analysis involved that first within couple analyses were made before comparisons across couples were undertaken.

### Participating couples

The participants were respondents in the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam (LASA) and were recruited to participate together with their spouses. LASA is an ongoing multidisciplinary cohort study on the predictors and consequences of changes in physical, cognitive, emotional and social functioning in older people in The Netherlands (Huisman et al., 2011). Our study involved community-dwelling LASA respondents who were selected using the last available LASA data to include participants (1) being married; (2) living in the community in Amsterdam or vicinity, (3) aged 68 and over; (4) no cognitive limitations ( $MMSE \geq 24$ ) at the time of the last measurement,<sup>1</sup> and (5) a recent health decline, defined as an increase in functional limitations as measured with the LASA self-report scale. The increase in functional limitations was used as a marker for expected changes in everyday activities. By using available LASA data, participants could be selected from all eligible respondents to obtain a variety of backgrounds. These backgrounds were considered to be relevant for experiences of everyday activities and included level of increase of functional limitations, age, and living environment (see Table 1). An information letter was sent to ten LASA respondents and their spouses. Following a telephone call, nine couples agreed to participate, one of which was eventually excluded due to illness.

<sup>1</sup> The last available LASA measurement dated from two to three years prior to the start of the present study: in the meantime participants could have developed cognitive limitations. At the start of the study, there were no participants having cognitive limitations to such extent that interviewing was not possible.

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