



Research Article

Relationships between Bereavement Support Strategies and Empathy Dimensions

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ABSTRACT

Helpful and unhelpful bereavement support strategies have been identified in many studies. However, few studies have researched the reasons for choosing different ways of supporting the bereaved. Taking this into account, the current study aimed to analyze the relationships between empathy dimensions (Empathy with negative emotions, Empathy with positive emotions, Empathy as a social role, and Emotional reactions provoked by empathy) and bereavement support strategies (Social support/offering practical help, Minimizing feelings, Providing a religious perspective, and Complimenting the deceased and/or bereaved). The Bereaved Support Questionnaire and the Empathy Assessment Questionnaire were administered online to a sample of 271 participants (68.3% female). Descriptive statistics revealed the tendency of respondents to achieve higher than average scores on all empathy dimensions, except on Empathy with negative emotions. This finding points to a difficulty in consoling the bereaved, as they are mostly faced with unpleasant feelings. The respondents showed a slight preference to choose supportive messages that are high in person-centeredness, over those belonging to the Minimizing feelings and Providing a religious perspective subscale. Pearson's correlation and network analysis indicated that empathy is positively associated with the use of high person-centered approach to support (Social support/offering practical help and

Complimenting the deceased and/or bereaved). However, results have also shown that the inclination to use these types of messages is to some extent accompanied with a tendency to minimize the feelings of the bereaved. The article discusses possible interpretations of these findings, as well as guidelines for implementing the findings in bereavement support.

Keywords: bereavement support strategies, empathy dimensions, person-centered messages, avoidance coping

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Introduction

The death of a beloved person is one of life's most stressful events. Despite this, there has always been a tendency among humans to avoid unpleasant topics in everyday conversations, such as death-related losses (Arambašić, 2005; Cohen & Samp, 2018; Macdonald, 2019). Reliance on such avoidant coping strategies results in a ubiquitous lack of knowledge regarding adequate bereavement support strategies. Nevertheless, as part of the bereavement process, most people need appropriate social support, and its absence is a crucial risk factor for the development of complicated grief and is a significant predictor of high psychosocial distress (Bath, 2009). The benefits to the bereaved of conversation, socialization, and primary social network connections are widely accepted (Kouriatis & Brown, 2011). However, despite best intentions, people sometimes say or do things that the bereaved perceive as unhelpful or even harmful. In order to identify the most useful bereavement support strategies, researchers have focused on detecting the formal and substantive characteristics of supportive messages that contribute to the emotional well-being of a bereaved person (Bodie et al., 2012). Some pioneering studies in this domain have identified the following useful and comforting bereavement support strategies: offering presence, talking about feelings, expressing concern for the wellbeing of the bereaved, religious support, complimenting the deceased, offering practical help, talking about the possibility of meeting the deceased again, talking about the possible resurrection of the loved one, discussing memories about the deceased, complimenting the bereaved, and emphasizing the positive aspects of the current situation. In contrast, messages perceived as useless or even harmful by the bereaved were: giving advice, trying to speed up the recovery process, rude remarks, minimizing suffering/imposing a cheerful mood, and complete identification with the emotions of the bereaved ("I completely understand you"), unwanted practical help, interference in the life of the bereaved, and unwanted conversations about the deceased (Lehman et al., 1986; Marwit & Carusa, 1998; Rack et al., 2008). According to the results

of the only research conducted in the Serbian language (to our knowledge), the support strategies rated as most helpful were: providing social support, complimenting the deceased/bereaved and normalizing the feelings of the grieving person (Gencić et al., 2018). These findings are consistent with the results of the previously mentioned studies.

The common feature of adequate comforting messages is that they contain high person-centeredness in their formulations. High person-centeredness refers to the extent to which messages explicitly contextualize and acknowledge the feelings and perspectives of a person in distress (Oh et al., 2021). Low person-centered messages deny a person's emotions and declare how they should think, feel, and behave ("You need to move on with your life"). Moderately person-centered messages implicitly recognize the distressed person's feelings, but they do not elaborate or contextualize them extensively, and are mostly focused on the cognitive explanations of the painful circumstances ("There is a reason for everything, even if you don't see it now"). Highly person-centered messages encourage open conversation, while explicitly acknowledging and elaborating the feelings of the distressed person ("I care for you and I am here whenever you want to talk") (Bodie & Jones, 2012; Burlinson et al., 1994; Gencić et al., 2018; Jones & Guerro, 2001).

Although the abovementioned studies have identified the bereavement support strategies that are mostly rated as helpful, questions remain concerning why some people are better supporters of the bereaved than others, and why they choose certain support strategies. Decades of accumulated scientific evidence from various sub-disciplines of psychology points to a key role of empathy in achieving positive social interactions (Clark, 2010). Empathizing with others' distress-related emotions sends a message that they are cared for and motivates various forms of supportive behavior, aimed at alleviating their suffering (Andreychik, 2019; Sun et al., 2019). Because empathy represents a personal characteristic that enables people to develop quality relationships, accept the emotions of others and foster mutual understanding, it is expected that it would play an important role in choosing a bereavement support strategy (Toffoli et al., 2022).

Empathy represents a person's reaction that results from the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state, and it is identical or at least very similar to the other persons' experience (Andreychik & Migliaccio, 2015). Thus, empathy is an interpersonal phenomenon, in which a person shares common feelings and thoughts with another person and encourages their expression, without judging them, while maintaining personal boundaries (Toffol et al., 2022). Empathy is not a clearly defined single ability, but a complex socio-emotional competency with a multidimensional nature (Sun et al., 2019). According to one of the most cited taxonomies (Davis, 1994), empathy consists of an affective and a cognitive component. The cognitive component can be defined as the ability to take the perspective of others into account in order to understand their intrapersonal state, whereas affective empathy is an automatic affective response, which entails sharing another's emotions (Jauniaux et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2019). Affective empathy can lead to two possible vicarious emotional responses to the suffering of others: personal distress (PD) and empathic concern (EC). PD is self-oriented and involves anxiety, worry and/or grief as a reaction to the other person's distress, while EC is other-oriented and comprises feelings of compassion, sympathy and warmth towards a person in need (Grynberg & López-Pérez, 2018). Accordingly, empathy can be understood as taking an active interest in the problems of others, that can lead to attempts to improve their well-being; it is therefore closely related to prosocial, altruistic behavior (Andreychik & Migliaccio, 2015; Carrizales et al., 2022; Ogińska-Bulik & Michalska, 2022; Vukosavljevic-Gvozden et al., 2015; Yin & Wang, 2022). The multidimensional nature of empathy was confirmed during the construction of the Empathy Assessment Questionnaire (EAQ) in the Serbian language, which was also used in this research (Genc i sar., 2009). The factor structure of this instrument is described in detail in the Measures section.

The first, descriptive aim of the current study was to identify the preferred types of bereavement support strategies amongst the participants. Secondly, we investigated the relationships between supportive messages and different dimensions of empathy. While various empirical research has shown

that empathy plays an important role in helping people cope with a wide range of stressful life experiences (Andreychik, 2019), to the best of our knowledge, no previous study has directly examined how different aspects of empathy contribute to the choice of support strategies people use in their attempt to help the bereaved. Since previous studies show that support strategies differently affect the bereaved, with high person-centered strategies being rated as more helpful than low person-centered strategies, this study aims to explore how empathy determines the choice of support strategies. Both dimensions of affective empathy should be more positively correlated with the readiness to offer support to the bereaved, as empathizing with other people's feelings fosters approach and connection. Affective and cognitive empathy should determine the choice of highly person-centered bereavement strategies in the form of Social support/offering practical help and Complimenting the deceased/bereaved. More specifically, this research primarily aimed to determine whether more empathetic individuals choose support strategies with high person-centeredness and whether all empathy dimensions were related to such strategies. This was achieved by determining the relationships between different empathy dimensions and various types of bereavement support strategies.

Method

Participants and procedure

The convenient study sample consisted of 271 respondents (68.3% female), with an average age of 35.25 years ($SD = 13.37$), from 18 to 71 years. The research subjects were predominantly highly educated (76%), with only 24% of participants not having a university degree.

Google Forms software was used to administer the questionnaires, which were presented in an online survey format, with information about the study circulated via Facebook. The link to the study was shared through the researchers' personal profiles and in different groups. Respondents were

invited to participate in the study and to forward the invitation to others. At the beginning, respondents were informed about the objectives of the study. Following the ethical guidelines of psychological research, the respondents gave their informed consent to voluntarily and anonymously participate in the research. Filling out the questionnaires took approximately 10 minutes per participant. Data collection extended over a three-month period.

Measures

Bereaved Support Questionnaire

The Bereaved Support Questionnaire (BSQ; Genc i sar, 2018) is a 54-item self-report measure of the helpfulness of comforting messages received from members of the bereaved's social network. The respondents were presented with the list of comforting messages (items), and they were asked to estimate their effectiveness in providing support for the bereaved (1 – *"I find this sentence not at all comforting for a grieving person"*; 4 – *"I find this sentence very comforting for a grieving person"*). This questionnaire was developed in the Serbian language, in which it was also administered.

The BSQ was revalidated on the current sample with exploratory factor analysis using minimum residual as an estimation method with Promax rotation. Parallel analysis showed that four factors were significant: Social support/offering practical help, Minimizing feelings, Providing a religious perspective, and Complimenting the deceased and/or bereaved. The extracted factors explained 44% of overall variances. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the particular scales were in the range from .83 (Complimenting the deceased and/or bereaved) to .91 (Social support/offering practical help).

Social support/offering practical help represents a readiness to support the bereaved through conversation, being at their disposal, and offering specific help in daily activities (*"Whenever you want to talk about it, I will gladly listen"*). Messages within this strategy are highly person-centered. Minimizing feelings operationalizes the strategies of advising the bereaved to stop

thinking about the loss and suggesting the avoidance and suppression of unpleasant feelings (*"There is no point in crying, there is no going back"*). Therefore, this strategy is related to low person-centeredness. Providing a religious perspective represents the strategy of accepting the loss as God's decision (*"God's will should not be questioned"*), and messages within this strategy also have low person-centeredness. Complimenting the deceased and/or bereaved refers to remembering the deceased person as good and recognizing the bereaved's capacity to successfully overcome the loss (*"It was a pleasure knowing him"*). This strategy is rated as having moderate to high person-centeredness (Genc i sar., 2018).

Empathy Assessment Questionnaire

The EAQ (Genc i sar., 2009) is a 42-item self-report measure with a 5-point response scale (1 – *"I completely disagree"*; 4 – *"I completely agree"*). This questionnaire measures four different empathy dimensions: two dimensions operationalize the affective component of empathy (Empathy with negative emotions and Empathy with positive emotions), Empathy as a social role refers to cognitive empathy, and the dimension Emotional reactions provoked by empathy represents the emotional-behavioral aspect of empathy. This questionnaire was also developed and administered in the Serbian language.

Exploratory factor analysis using minimum residual as an estimation method with Promax rotation confirmed the structural validity of the instrument. As in the original study, the parallel analysis showed that four factors were significant, and they explained 43% of the overall variance. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales were in the range from .77 (Emotional reactions provoked by empathy) to .90 (Empathy with negative emotions).

Empathy with negative emotions represents a tendency to empathize with other people's unpleasant feelings (*"I feel like crying myself when I see others crying"*). Empathy with positive emotions is described as the inclination of empathizing with the pleasant emotions of others (*"My friend's cheerful mood brightens me up as well"*). Empathy as a social role refers to the more cognitively conceptualized component of empathy. A person who achieves

high scores on this subscale shows interest and understanding of the needs and problems of others and sees themselves as a competent helper. This does not necessarily imply sharing an emotional experience with others (*"People often ask me for advice"*). Emotional reactions provoked by empathy represent the tendency to react emotionally to injustice (*"I get very upset and angry when I see or hear that someone is abusing their child"*), and it can be seen as a basis for altruistic behavior.

Data analysis

Initially, we examined the descriptive statistics for all studied variables. Variables were operationalized as the average of scores for the questionnaire subscales. The scoring keys for each variable (see Appendix A) were generated based on the results of pattern matrices. Pearson's correlations were performed to examine the relationships between studied variables.

Network analysis was performed on the empathy dimensions and bereavement support strategies to understand the structure of relationships between the two concepts. As most of the research variables violated normality assumptions (Curran et al., 1996), we applied the nonparanormal transformation via the R package "huge" (Epskamp & Fried, 2018; Jiang et al., 2019). A data-driven method and Hittner's method for comparing dependent correlations (Hittner et al., 2003) did not identify any redundant nodes. All correlations were lower than 0.70, and no pair exhibited highly similar patterns of correlations with the remaining nodes in the network. The analysis was performed on a partial correlation matrix with minimized spurious correlations to identify unique pairwise interactions between variables (Epskamp, et al., 2017; Epskamp & Fried, 2018). To compute and visualize regularized partial correlation networks, we used a graphical least absolute shrinkage and selection operator ("GLASSO") algorithm. The "EBICglasso" function was employed to help identify the true network structure and minimize the selection of optimal Extended Bayesian Information Criterion (EBIC) (Epskamp & Fried, 2018). To interpret the structure, we analyzed edges,

central indices (Degree (strength), Closeness, and Betweenness), and the Zhang clustering coefficient. A high Zhang clustering coefficient (i.e. a high number of connections among the neighbors of a focal node over the maximum possible number of such connections), together with low centrality, indicates the redundancy of the node (Costantini et al., 2015, 2019). The accuracy and stability of edges and centrality estimates were assessed with a “nonparametric” bootstrap procedure (Epskamp & Fried, 2018). The number of bootstrap samples was 2000.

We used JASP software, version 0.12.2, (JASP Team, 2022) in all statistical analyses. In addition, we used the R package “network tools” (Jones, 2017); more precisely, we used the “goldbricker” function for the application of Hittner’s method and the bootstrapping procedure integrated into the “bootnet” package (Epskamp & Fried, 2018).

Results

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics for the studied variables are provided in Table 1.

Table 1Descriptive statistics for the studied variables ($N = 271$)

Variables	Min	Max	M	SD	Standardized	
					Sk	K
Social support/offering practical help	1.00	3.92	2.94	.58	-4.93**	1.86*
Minimizing feelings	1.05	3.81	1.89	.52	3.93**	.45
Providing a religious perspective	1.00	4.00	1.90	.72	2.60**	-1.79
Complimenting the deceased/bereaved	1.00	4.00	2.66	.85	-0.13	-2.79**
Empathy with negative emotions	1.33	5.00	3.10	.78	.60	-1.72
Empathy with positive emotions	2.00	5.00	4.18	.54	-5.73**	3.62**
Empathy as a social role	1.29	5.00	3.88	.67	-5.40**	4.45**
Emotional reactions provoked by empathy	1.00	5.00	4.13	.80	-6.47**	1.59

Note. $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$; Sk = skewness, K = kurtosis.

Correlations

Pearson's correlation coefficients between researched variables are provided in Table 2.

Table 2Pearson's correlations among researched variables ($N = 271$)

Variable	SSOPR	MF	PRP	CDB	ENE	EPE	ESR
MF	.30**	—					
PRP	.06	.55**	—				
CDB	.65**	.16**	.13*	—			
ENE	.33**	.07	.08	.25**	—		
EPE	.43**	.15*	.17**	.33**	.42**	—	
ESR	.43**	.14*	.10	.25**	.27**	.59**	—
ERPE	.24**	.06	.09	.18**	.44**	.45**	.37**

Notes. $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Correlations between two sets of variables are shown in bold. SSOPR = Social support/offering practical help, MF = Minimizing feelings, PRP = Providing a religious perspective, CDB = Complimenting the deceased/bereaved, ENE = Empathy with negative emotions, EPE = Empathy with positive emotions, ESR = Empathy as a social role, ERPE = Emotional reactions provoked by empathy.

Network analysis

Network analysis was used for the analysis of mutual relations between the empathy dimensions and bereavement support strategies. The network contains 8 nodes and 16 non-zero undirected edges of a possible 28 (Figure 1). The general structure is not sparse and nodes are clustered into communities according to the belonging domain. The crucial variables, according to their central positions on the graph, are Social support/offering practical help and Empathy with positive emotions. This network resembles a "scale-free" network because these two crucial variables are connected to many others (Barabási, 2012).

Edge analysis

On the graphical presentation of the network (Figure 1), thicker edges were apparent between variables that belonged to the same concept. These relationships were significant according to narrower confidence intervals that did not include zero in the bootstrapping analysis. The thickest connections between variables that presented different concepts were found among Empathy as a social role and Social support/offering practical help. Slightly weaker relations were found between Empathy with positive emotions and Empathy with negative emotions on the one side, and with Social support/offering practical help on the other side.

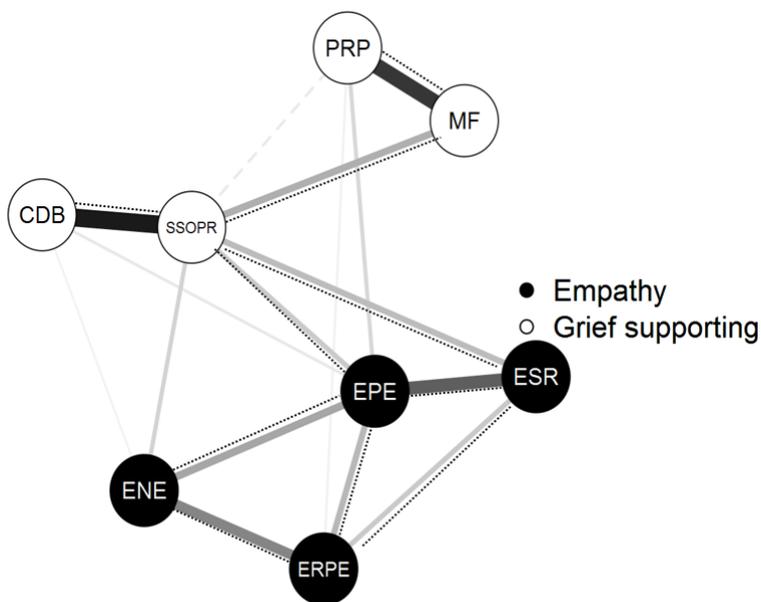


Figure 1. The estimated network structure of empathy and grief-support dimensions
Note. The thickness of an edge reflects the magnitude of the association. Positive correlations are represented with a solid line and negative correlations with a dashed line. Stable edges are marked with a dotted line. PRP = Providing a religious perspective, MF = Minimizing feelings, CDB = Complimenting the

deceased/bereaved, SSOPR = Social support/offering practical help, EPE = Empathy with positive emotions, ESR = Empathy as a social role, ENE = Empathy with negative emotions, ERPE = Emotional reactions provoked by empathy.

Empathy with positive emotions was also weakly related to Providing a religious perspective, and even more weakly correlated with Complimenting the deceased/bereaved. Emotional reactions provoked by empathy was weakly related to Providing a religious perspective. A negative correlation was evident between Providing a religious perspective and Social support/offering practical help. The Pearson correlation of these variables .06 was insignificant so this finding could be a consequence of suppression or the conditioning on common effect (Pearl, 2000).

The stability of these edges was confirmed for the following relationships (because their associated 95% confidence intervals were not wide and did not include zero): Social support/offering practical help and Complimenting the deceased/bereaved; Minimizing feelings and Providing a religious perspective; Empathy with positive emotions and Empathy as a social role; Empathy with negative emotions and Emotional reactions provoked by empathy; Empathy with negative emotions and Empathy with positive emotions; Social support/offering practical help and Minimizing feelings; Empathy with positive emotions and Emotional reactions provoked by empathy; Social support/offering practical help and Empathy as a social role; Social support/offering practical help and Empathy with positive emotions; and Empathy as a social role and Emotional reactions provoked by empathy (Figure 2).

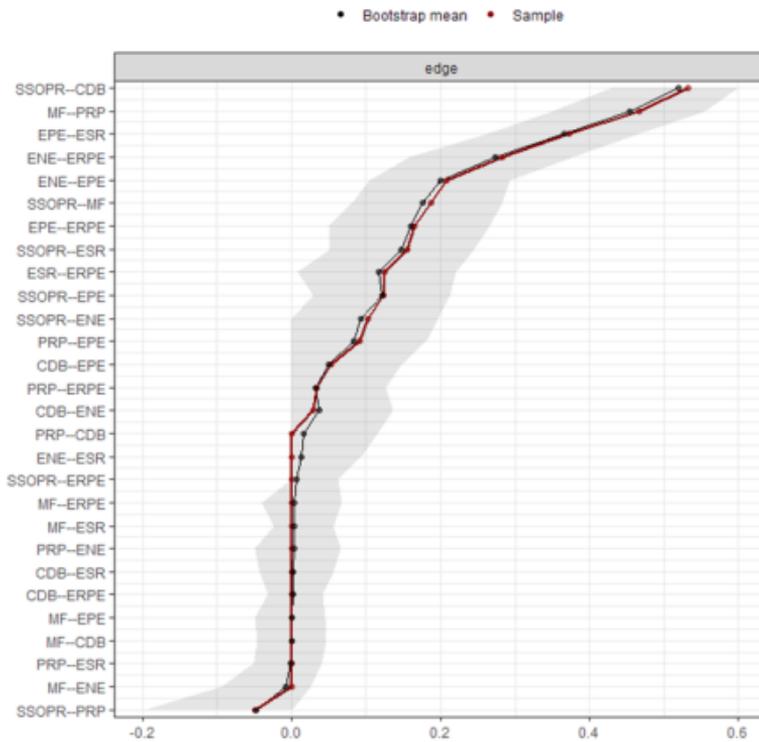


Figure 2. Bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals of estimated edge weights for the GLASSO network.

Note The red line indicates the sample values and the gray area is the 95% confidence intervals. The dark line indicates the bootstrapped mean values. GLASSO = graphical least absolute shrinkage and selection operator.

Centrality indices

The central position is occupied by Social support/offering practical help; this variable had the highest scores on all three centrality indices, indicating that it has many connections and can activate other variables easily. The second-highest central position belongs to Empathy with positive emotions. Empathy with positive emotions has a very high score in terms of Degree, relative to other variables. The Closeness scale shows the importance of Empathy as a social role and Complimenting the deceased/bereaved. The variable Providing

a religious perspective had the least central position for all three centrality indices. This variable also had a high Zhang clustering coefficient, indicating that this variable is redundant and could be excluded. The plots for the centrality indices of the nodes – namely Betweenness, Closeness, and Degree (strength) – are shown in Figure 3.

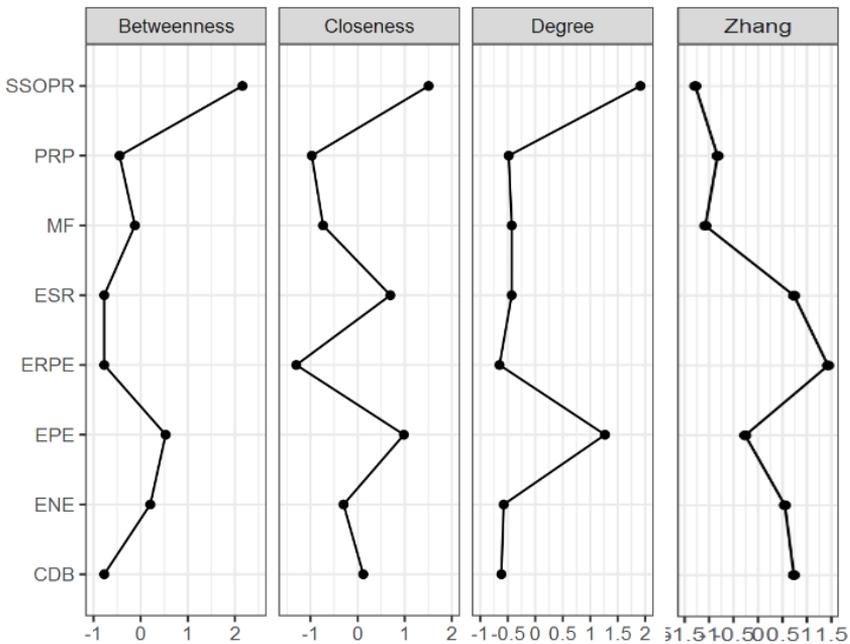


Figure 3. Centrality plot and Zhang clustering coefficients.

Mediation analysis

The mediation analysis was done solely for the relationships for which the stability was confirmed. The analysis showed that Social support/offering practical help completely mediated the effects of empathy dimensions on Minimizing feelings and Complimenting the deceased/bereaved. Weak correlations of Empathy with positive emotions and Empathy as a social role with Minimizing feelings (Table 2) became insignificant partial correlations

(Figure 2) in the network model. Moderate correlations of Complimenting the deceased/bereaved and Empathy with positive emotions, Empathy with negative emotions, Empathy as a social role with, as well as weak correlation with Emotional reactions provoked by empathy became insignificant. Additionally, Empathy with positive emotions mediated the effect of Empathy with negative emotions on Social support/offering practical help. The moderate correlations of Empathy with positive emotions and Social support/offering practical help became insignificant partial correlations.

Discussion

The death of a beloved person is universally one of the most profound stressors that everyone will experience sooner or later in their life (Arambašić, 2005). Although various forms of social support are consistently reported as significant predictors of the grieving process outcomes (Aoun et al., 2019), it is widely recognized that the bereaved often do not receive adequate and sufficient support (Genc i sar., 2018). For the support to be beneficial, the need for help must be properly identified, the potential supporter must be willing and capable of providing the support, and the supportive strategy must be perceived as helpful by the receiver (Logan et al., 2018). Not every bereavement support strategy will serve as a protective factor. If the supporter is unable to effectively communicate empathy with the griever, some forms of support may even lead to the bereaved experiencing greater distress (Aoun et al., 2019). The potentially ambiguous outcomes of social support prompted us to examine the relationships between empathy dimensions and different types of bereavement support strategies.

The results of this study showed that respondents with higher scores on empathy dimensions mostly chose support strategies with high person-centeredness, while they rarely chose strategies with low person-centeredness. This finding is in accordance with the already widely accepted and empirically confirmed knowledge that empathetic understanding contributes to fostering open communication and trust (Clark, 2010).

In line with previous research, both empathy and support for the bereaved were conceptualized in a multidimensional manner, and they were operationalized with questionnaires previously validated in the Serbian language. We identified a four-dimensional structure of empathy: Empathy with negative emotions, Empathy with positive emotions, Empathy as a social role, and Emotional reactions provoked by empathy. The different support strategies were categorized as Social support/offering practical help, Minimizing feelings, Providing a religious perspective, and Complimenting the deceased and/or bereaved.

Participants in our study achieved higher than average scores on all empathy dimensions, except on Empathy with negative emotions, where they had symmetrical scores around average. This could indicate that the respondents in our research are generally more empathetic than the average person. However, the respondents could have been aware of the social desirability of being empathetic. Moreover, research has shown that women are generally more empathetic than men (Benenson et al., 2021; Hwang, 2022; Miller & Hübner, 2022; Toussaint & Webb, 2005), and our sample consisted predominantly of females. On the other hand, the somewhat lower mean scores on the dimension Empathy with negative emotions (compared to other empathy dimensions) could potentially indicate the activation of personal distress as a special vicarious emotional response in some of our respondents (Grynberg & López-Pérez, 2018). Considering that the bereaved experience predominantly negative feelings such as sadness, guilt, anxiety, etc., it is not surprising if some supporters become overwhelmed with their personal distress, as a reaction to the identification with the grieving person's suffering (Andreychik & Migliaccio, 2015; Guendelman et al., 2022; Toffol et al., 2022).

The respondents showed a slight preference to choose supportive messages from the Social support/offering practical help and Complimenting the deceased and/or bereaved subscales over those from the Minimizing feelings and Providing a religious perspective categories. High person-centeredness is the common characteristic of the predominantly chosen support strategies.

This characteristic indicates that the individual recognizes the bereaved's emotions, but will also encourage them to open conversation and help them find meaning in their loss (Bodie & Jones, 2012; Burlison et al., 2009; Samter, 2002).

In contrast, the strategy of Minimizing feelings does not recognize the bereaved's feelings, instead trying to impose a cheerful mood, giving them unwanted advice, and not accepting their perspective – these are characteristics of low person-centered messages (Bodie & Jones, 2012). The participants in our study chose this strategy less often than average, as was expected, considering their high scores on empathy dimensions. There was a positive correlation between the strategies of Minimizing feelings and Providing a religious perspective. This result could be due to the similar formulations of the messages belonging to these types of support strategies: they both imply the acceptance of the loss as necessary, without recognizing the bereaved's feelings or needs (e.g. "Don't cry, tears won't bring him back"; "Prayers will certainly help you").

The results of network analysis led us to additional insights into the structure of relationships between bereavement support strategies and empathy types. According to the main finding of this analysis, Social support/offering practical help represents a central strategy in supporting the bereaved, since it was correlated with all other strategies. The results have shown that people who are more inclined to use the support strategy Social support/offering practical will also be more likely to use the strategy Complimenting the deceased/bereaved and sometimes even the strategy Minimizing feelings. Since messages within Social support/offering practical help and Complimenting the deceased/bereaved are moderate to highly person-centered, their connection could have been expected (Genc i sar., 2018). However, the strategy Minimizing feelings includes messages with low person-centeredness. Therefore, the connection of this strategy to Social support/offering practical help was surprising. Although the respondents did not tend to choose the support strategy Minimizing feelings, the results have

shown that if they found themselves in a situation of providing social support to the bereaved, they would have been inclined to use this strategy. This means that in circumstances where people spend time with the bereaved ("I'm here if you need me") or help them in everyday situations ("Can I help you with your daily chores?"), they sometimes advise them to stop talking about the loss (" Don't worry so much about it") and they also suggest suppressing the unpleasant feelings ("Don't cry, tears won't bring him back"). Moreover, Social support/offering practical help is the only strategy that is significantly and directly influenced by empathy – more precisely by Empathy with positive emotions and Empathy as a social role. Mediation analysis confirmed its important status in the model, by showing that it mediates the effects of empathy on Complimenting the deceased/bereaved and Minimizing feelings. Mediation analysis also showed that the effect of Empathy with positive emotions mediates the effect of Empathy with negative emotions on Social support/offering practical help, suggesting that Empathy with negative emotions contributes to the choice of this strategy, only in the circumstance when Empathy with positive emotions is also present. An important finding of network analysis is that Empathy with negative emotions has stronger partial correlation (than Empathy with positive emotions) with Emotional reactions provoked by empathy. This indicates that Empathy with negative emotions contributes significantly to stronger unpleasant emotions in the supporter, which can lead to their emotional exhaustion.

Providing effective support to the bereaved who are dealing with often severe distress is a challenging task (Andreychik, 2019). Empathizing with another person's negative feelings comes at an "emotional cost" for the supporter, as it can sometimes lead to their own emotional exhaustion (Guendelman et al., 2022). According to the literature on emotion regulation, it is not uncommon that when a potential supporter sees a person in despair, he or she is more likely to turn to regulating his or her own unpleasant feelings evoked by listening to the griever (Jauniaux et al., 2020). This form of emotional distancing is not surprising, given that further identification and

confrontation with the bereaved's intense emotional state can be experienced as "unbearable" (Toffol et al., 2022). Therefore, supporters most likely use Minimizing feelings as a support strategy when they are overwhelmed by their own negative emotions caused by empathizing with the bereaved person's suffering.

The finding that the difficulty of empathizing with the negative emotions of the bereaved can lead to the choice of less effective support strategies can also be viewed from a different, theoretically and empirically grounded perspective. Namely, the messages that fall into the category of minimizing feelings ("Don't cry, tears won't bring him back") suggest that the person providing support is, on the one hand, trying to avoid confronting the grieving person's unpleasant feelings and, on the other hand, encouraging the bereaved person to avoid his or her own negative emotions. Thus, this finding can be related to coping strategies. Coping has been described as a phenomenon that assists people in maintaining an adequate level of psychosocial adaptation when facing stressors (Bannon et al., 2022). Coping strategies can be divided into adaptive and maladaptive ones, depending on whether they help reduce the level of distress, or make the situation even worse (Sun et al., 2019). Avoidance coping strategies involve keeping feelings to oneself, avoiding the source of stress, and avoiding being with people during stressful life events (Jacob et al., 2022; Thomassen et al., 2022), which is why they can be seen as maladaptive. The tendency to mirror the griever's pain and experience distress and emotional exhaustion themselves in response to the other's suffering, may evoke an "egoistic" motivation in supporters to diminish their own unpleasant emotions by using avoidant coping strategies (Jauniaux et al., 2020). Hence, when supporters send messages that belong to the dimension Minimizing feelings, they themselves use avoidance coping, and at the same time, they encourage avoidant coping in the bereaved, which can easily result in providing poor social support (Toffol et al., 2022). The existing literature on the relationship between empathy with negative emotions and avoidance suggests that personal distress as a reaction to empathizing with another person's unpleasant

feelings is positively related to the frequent use of avoidance coping (Grynberg & López-Pérez, 2018).

While this study makes an important contribution to the understanding of the relationships between social support strategies in bereavement and different empathy dimensions, it has several limitations, the most important of which is its cross-sectional design. This prevented the investigation of temporal and causal relationships between the examined constructs. Secondly, the results rely on self-report measures, which are known to be subject to various biases (Cacciatore et al., 2021). Even though the present study did not aim to examine the existence and nature of gender differences in all measured variables, another limitation is the questionable representativeness of the sample, as it consisted predominantly of highly educated females, which may have somewhat skewed the findings, because women tend to be generally more empathetic (Benenson et al., 2021; Miller & Hübner, 2022). It is also reasonable to assume that men and women may desire and offer different kinds of bereavement support strategies (Logan et al., 2018). Moreover, the data was collected through social media (Facebook), which limits the generalization of the results to the broader population. Because of these limitations, future studies should rely on more balanced samples in terms of education and gender. To ensure a higher degree of generalizability of the results, it would be useful for future research to combine online data collection with the more traditional face-to-face approach.

Conclusion

Our research, particularly the results of network analysis, showed that people with higher scores on the empathy dimensions generally chose more comforting messages with higher person-centeredness for supporting the bereaved. However, the results have also shown that sometimes supporters opt for less adequate bereavement support strategies. That is, they tend to minimize the bereaved's feelings in order to protect themselves from their own distress evoked by vicarious emotional responses to the bereaved's person suffering (Jauniaux et al., 2020).

Several implications and guidelines for the practice of bereavement support can be derived from the results of this study. While most grieving individuals manage to successfully process their loss with the help of their existing social networks (family and friends), some of them seek support from professional sources (psychologists, counselors, psychotherapists and psychiatrists) (Aoun et al., 2019; Plaud & Urien, 2022). According to experts in the field of thanatology, the public is generally unprepared and uneducated in providing support to grieving people (Cacciatore et al., 2021; Logan et al., 2017). In addition, most mental health professionals have little to no exposure to evidence-based grief information and adequate training in loss and bereavement (Aoun et al., 2018). Few protective factors in bereavement can be consciously and deliberately modified to the extent that social support can (Logan et al., 2017). Thus, it would be very useful to design educational seminars and training courses intended for both the general population and for mental health professionals. One of the aims of these trainings should be to teach the trainees how to formulate and use highly person-centered messages when talking to the bereaved. Furthermore, empathy is widely accepted as a ubiquitously desirable characteristic of counselors, because it increases the clients' adherence to treatment, fosters the satisfaction with the therapeutic relationship and improves therapeutic outcomes (Bayne & Hays, 2016; Clark, 2010; Johnson & Karcher, 2019). The abovementioned trainings should incorporate teaching of communication skills that integrate empathetic understanding with specific counselor interventions such as reflection, cognitive restructuring, confrontation, reframing, etc. (Clark, 2010). Our findings suggest that supporters may sometimes use less adequate support strategies because of their hyperidentification with the unpleasant feelings of the bereaved. Therefore, it would be necessary to practice distress tolerance and strong emotional regulation capacities with training participants, in order to prevent the manifestation of maladaptive empathy patterns (Guendelman et al., 2022; Jauniaux et al., 2020).

Conflict of interest

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data availability statement

Data files are available upon a reasonable request.

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Appendix A

Table 1

KMO measure of representativity, Bartlett's χ^2 , and fit measures

Measure	BSQ	EAQ
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin	.90	.89
Bartlett's test χ^2	8380.47	5897.15
df	1431	861
p	< .01	< .01
Chi-squared Test	2477.02	1585.73
df	1221	699
p	< .001	< .001
RMSEA	.07	.07
RMSEA 90% confidence	.058 - NA	.064 - .073
TLI	.79	.78

Table 2

Factor Loadings, Uniqueness, MSA, extracted variance and correlations between factors for BSQ

Items		SSOPR	MF	PRP	CDB	Uniqueness	MSA
God's will should not be questioned.	BS1			.49		.60	.90
Would you like us to do something together you enjoy?	BS2	.64				.56	.90
Do you want to talk about it?	BS3	.61				.63	.91
Thank God he saved him from suffering.	BS4		.40			.71	.87
Whenever you want to talk about it, I will gladly listen.	BS5	.86				.42	.93

Some events we simply cannot control.	BS6		.28		.79	.83
It is normal that it is difficult now, but your pain will pass.	BS7		.59		.68	.88
It's okay if you don't feel like hanging out.	BS8	.57			.69	.90
Life goes on.	BS9		.64		.65	.87
Don't worry so much about it.	BS10		.69		.66	.88
Can I help you with your daily chores?	BS11	.57			.66	.87
Why don't you get a pet so you don't feel lonely.	BS12		.44		.78	.87
You're a true fighter!	BS13	.47	.30		.60	.92
Time heals all wounds.	BS14		.77		.43	.91
What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.	BS15		.63		.55	.89
I'm here if you need me.	BS16	.81			.51	.92
Asking for help does not make you weak.	BS17	.60			.65	.93
Fortunately, you have people you can rely on.	BS18	.59			.57	.94
It's hard for me to see you suffer.	BS19	.30	.30		.71	.88
You are a strong person, you will overcome sadness.	BS20	.30	.40		.57	.94
God takes those He loves the most.	BS21			.66	.56	.87
There is no point in crying, there is no going back.	BS22		.71		.56	.86

I admire your strength.	BS23	.53	.26		.56	.91
He was very dear to me.	BS24			.74	.35	.89
I understand how you feel.	BS25	.33		.28	.65	.91
Prayers will certainly help you.	BS26		.84		.33	.84
Maybe a self-help book would help.	BS27		.33		.72	.92
It will help you the most if you rely on your faith in God.	BS28			.85	.30	.83
I'm here for you if you want to talk.	BS29	.80			.45	.92
God has a plan for everyone.	BS30			.67	.43	.89
It was a pleasure knowing him.	BS31			.78	.33	.90
You have to be strong for your loved ones.	BS32		.34	.36	.57	.91
Maybe you'd like to go shopping together.	BS33	.29		.28	.65	.92
God helped him not to suffer anymore.	BS34		.31	.48	.51	.89
Everything happens for a reason.	BS35		.42		.65	.87
Don't cry, tears won't bring him back.	BS36		.71		.55	.87
You will help other mourners if you don't show them how difficult this is for you.	BS37		.54		.67	.89
I am here for you.	BS38	.89	-.25		.38	.91

At least he doesn't suffer anymore!	BS39		.37		.80	.78
I always enjoyed his company.	BS40			.80	.27	.89
It will be easier if you talk about it.	BS41	.38		.26	.65	.91
Do you want to go for a walk?	BS42	.44		.31	.57	.90
I care about you.	BS43	.66			.49	.90
My door is always open for you.	BS44	.76			.41	.94
I know someone with a similar experience. Would you like to talk to him?	BS45	.38			.79	.90
At least he had a fulfilled life.	BS46		.42		.68	.90
Don't allow yourself to be weak now.	BS47		.71		.48	.89
Don't think too much.	BS48		.76		.52	.88
If it's easier for you not to be alone, count on me.	BS49	.81			.44	.94
It is completely natural to feel this way now!	BS50	.59			.59	.94
You are doing great in this difficult situation.	BS51	.43	.35		.59	.90
Do you need help with household chores?	BS52	.55			.56	.90
He was a wonderful person.	BS53			.69	.32	.92

I don't know what to tell you, but I can see that it is hard for you.	BS54	.33			.32	.67	.91
SumSq. Loadings		9.60	6.73	3.88	3.34		
Proportion var		.18	.12	.07	.06		
F1							
F2		.33					
F3		.11	.61				
F4		.63	.22	.08			

Note. Applied rotation method is Promax. SSOPR = Social support/offering practical help, MF = Minimizing feelings, PRP = Providing a religious perspective, CDB = Complimenting the deceased/bereaved.

Table 3

Factor Loadings, Uniqueness, MSA, extracted variance and correlations between factors for EAQ

Items		ENE	EPE	ESR	ERPE	Uniqueness	MSA
People consider me to be a person who can listen.	ED1			.52		.52	.87
People often ask me for advice.	ED2			.83		.31	.82
A lot of people seek my advice when they have problems.	ED3			.88		.24	.83
I am happy for my friends' success.	ED4		.57			.64	.85
People gladly tell me their problems, because I can listen.	ED5			.72		.36	.90

When I find myself in a situation where my friend is experiencing success, I also feel proud.	ED6	.50	.65	.90
I am a person who typically recognizes other people's needs.	ED7	.54	.62	.88
People don't hesitate to ask me for advice.	ED8	.57	.66	.94
I can leave others alone if I feel they need it.	ED9	.38	.82	.85
My friend's cheerful mood brightens me up as well.	ED10	.58	.66	.90
I always listen carefully to what others are telling me.	ED11	.48	.69	.88
I can often feel what others need.	ED12	.49	.56	.85
I understand my loved ones even without saying a word.	ED13	.55	.55	.90
When a friend says that they experienced something nice, I am happy for them.	ED14	.88	.36	.91
Sometimes I don't need words to understand a loved one.		.64	.57	.87

	ED15				
Sometimes I can tell the other person's feelings by their facial expressions.	ED16	.43		.59	.94
It makes me sad when my friend is feeling down, even if I don't know their reasons.	ED17	.70		.40	.94
My friend's fear makes me upset also.	ED18	.45	.43	.54	.91
I also get sad when I am in the company of someone sad.	ED19	.50		.54	.94
The sight of a couple in love cheers me up.	ED20			.73	.90
A failure of my friend makes me unhappy.	ED21	.41	.50	.47	.93
I like to watch people open presents.	ED22		.34	.75	.84
I feel nervous when I see someone getting confused on an exam or in some other important moment.	ED23	.62		.61	.88
I can't stay relaxed while I am with a tense person.	ED24	.61		.62	.93
I feel like crying myself when I see others crying.	ED25	.75		.42	.91

I get scared when I see movie heroes in dangerous situations.	ED26	.69		.58	.91
When I see a frightened person, I also get chills.	ED27	.93		.33	.90
It annoys me when I see old people without help.	ED28	.35		.65	.89
For me, laughter is usually contagious.	ED29			.77	.89
I also feel uncomfortable when my friend is embarrassed.	ED30	.65		.57	.86
Other people's cheerfulness, usually brightens me up.	ED31		.33	.73	.89
I am also very uncomfortable when I see someone getting embarrassed.	ED32	.75		.50	.90
When I watch a quiz show, I feel almost the same tension as the contestant.	ED33	.58		.71	.87
When I see a child with a disability, I wonder how his parents are doing.	ED34			.40	.73
I get very upset and angry when I see or hear that someone is abusing their child.	ED35			.79	.47
					.80

It makes me very angry when I see that someone is unfair to a person weaker than themselves.	ED36			.78	.45	.80
I feel goose bumps on my body when I see someone being tickled.	ED37	.57			.73	.83
When I see a person with a disability, I think of different problems they are facing.	ED38			.48	.69	.81
I get annoyed when I see an animal being tortured.	ED39			.63	.58	.91
I get upset when I see a person suffering.	ED40	.45			.53	.93
I feel a lump in my throat when I see someone crying.	ED41	.76			.39	.90
I get chills when I see that someone is cold.	ED42	0.60			0.65	0.92
SumSq. Loadings		6.65	5.08	3.89	2.44	
Proportion var		.16	.12	.09	.06	
F2		.47				
F3		.20	.58			
F4		.56	.62	.45		

Note. Applied rotation method is Promax. ENE = Empathy with negative emotions, EPE = Empathy with positive emotions, ESR = Empathy as a social role, ERPE = Emotional reactions provoked by empathy.

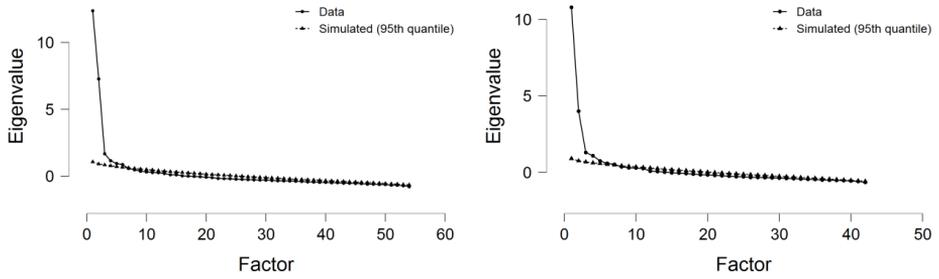


Figure 1. Scree plots (BSQ-left, EAQ – right)

