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Adults' experiences with faith following the death of a parent : a project based upon an independent investigation

Katherine Britton Novick
Smith College

Katherine B. Novick
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a Parent

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore how adult children's religious beliefs as well as their relationships to God(s) were affected by the loss of a parent. In addition, the study sought to look for possible similarities between parent and God(s) relationships in the face of the bereavement process.

This exploratory study was conducted in 12 face to face interviews. Each participant who was over the age of 21 years old at the time of a parent's death, and who identified as having a religious belief system prior to a parent's death, was interviewed about his or her childhood and adulthood relationships with parents, his or her relationship with faith and God(s) before and after the death of a parent, as well as the bereavement process. Participants were included regardless of denomination or the nature of their parents' deaths.

Major findings included that 8 out of 12 participants experienced a change in faith immediately following their parents' deaths. Additionally, 8 out of 12 participants identified as experiencing a change in their relationship with God(s) following the death of the parent. These changes ranged from a strengthening in the relationship to a weakening/loss of/questioning of their relationship. The remaining 4 participants reported no change in their type of relationship with God(s). Additionally, there were no strong

relationships between participants' descriptions of their parents and their descriptions of their image of God(s).

Results also indicated that the process of meaning-making as well as having the opportunity to say good-bye to a dying parent, were two important experiences for many participants.

ADULTS' EXPERIENCES WITH FAITH FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF A PARENT

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Katherine B. Novick

Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This exploratory study uses qualitative methods to investigate how the death of a parent affects the experiences with faith of adult children. "Adult child" is defined in this study as an adult at least 21 years of age who is still the child of his or her parents throughout the lifespan. This study seeks to use the conceptual framework of attachment theory, which intimately connects children to their parents throughout the life span. It then begins to explore how the loss of an important and powerful attachment figure (the parent) could affect an adult child's other powerful attachment figures, such as their religious relationships to God.

This study is needed because although there is a significant body of literature addressing the experiences of children who lose their parents, and a fair number of empirical studies addressing the bereavement of adults who lose their parents, less research has focused on the religious beliefs of adult mourners and how the loss of such an attachment figure could affect their religious beliefs. The death of a parent is an event experienced by many adults. Therefore just as social workers seek to be culturally competent in other arenas, they need to fully understand the relationship between loss and bereaved people's religious attachments in order to better meet their clients' emotional needs in clinical work.

The implications for social work practice include knowledge of how to sit with a client who is not only managing a major life crisis, but also is now possibly tackling a spiritual crisis. In addition, having more information about how clients' faiths may or may not be affected by parental loss could give clinicians a deeper and more powerful understanding of clients' intrapsychic struggles and support systems. Asking all mourning clients about their spiritual or religious belief systems not only currently, but in the past, may allow the clinician to evaluate whether a change of faith has also occurred as the result of the loss. The reason this is important is that from an attachment perspective, if a person has lost a parent but now feels closer to God figures, this relationship can be used as a support in the therapeutic work. But if a client is now experiencing a crisis of faith (a loss of their previously held relationship with God figures) in addition to the loss of a parent, a clinician needs to know this in order to provide adequate therapeutic help.

For therapeutic work, it may be helpful for some clients to discuss their relationships with God(s) as they discuss the lost parent in an attempt to reconcile both experiences. In addition, since the theoretical framework behind these losses is attachment theory, it is important for the clinician to be warm, supportive and consistent, and to avoid giving her or his own opinions. In this way, the therapist creates a safe and consistent place (in the face of such loss) for the client to decipher his or her loss.

This study also emphasizes the profound effect and pain that the loss of a parent had for all participants, regardless of their previous relationship with the parent. Therefore, although the death of a parent (once the child has reached adulthood) is seen as part of the natural order of things, in terms of micro and macro work, it is important to

understand that some participants felt as if the world had moved on without them and that those around them did not seem to fathom the amount of pain they were in.

In terms of macro implications from the study, it is important for religious communities to understand that for many individuals, the death of a parent calls into question their religious belief systems as well as their basic understanding of how the world works. Therefore religious leaders in particular need to be a visible support to the adult child, while also giving them space to explore how their way of understanding the world and their faith may have changed. Religious communities might consider offering bereavement groups for those who are members of their congregation as well as for those seeking out spirituality in the face of a parent's death.

The purpose of this study is to examine in more detail how adult childrens' religious beliefs (and their perceived relationships to God figures) are affected by the loss of a parent. I seek to investigate the question, "Among adult children with religious beliefs prior to the death of a parent, how are these beliefs affected by the loss of a parent?"

The study has several limitations. The first is that the results will not necessarily generalize to adult children who view themselves as agnostics or atheists, as this study focuses on adults who self-identify as having religious beliefs prior to their parents' deaths. Also, as the information will be gathered through self-report after the loss of the parent has already taken place, hindsight bias may interfere with participants' abilities to assess accurately their previously held beliefs.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review will begin with a comprehensive background on attachment theory and its applications to the parent-child relationship as well as individuals' concepts of and relationships to God. It will then transition to a discussion of the relevant literature regarding bereavement and how survivors mourn and experience their grief. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the meaning-making experiences of the loss.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory centers on the relationship that forms between an infant and his or her caregivers. The focus is on the importance as an infant and as a child of attaining a sense of security, love and the fulfillment of all basic needs. Mary D. Salter Ainsworth and John Bowlby were two of the pioneers in attachment theory. Although they initially worked separately on their theories, their major themes overlapped, eventually leading to a partnership that lasted decades (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991).

Much of Bowlby's early work was studying children who had been separated from their mothers. The results of some of these early studies revealed that overall young children who were separated from their mothers initially became distressed but eventually appeared to lose hope and become detached (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Bowlby found that when these children were reunited with their parents, they were able to attach to them once more, but appeared more anxious. This was especially true,

Bowlby noted, if the separation was for over a week (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). This led Bowlby to search for a theory that would explain the results he had found in his studies, but none of the current psychoanalytic theories satisfied him. What Bowlby began to read instead were writings on the topic of ethology (the study of the behavior of animals in their natural setting). He read Konrad Lorenz who studied imprinting in birds, and this along with other naturalist research, convinced Bowlby that attachment to one's caregiver went beyond the filling of basic needs and was rooted more in a social bond based on closeness to the caregiver (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Later in his career Bowlby began to focus not only on his theory of attachment as it applied to caregiver-infant relationships but also to how it applied to separation and loss in both children and adults. He discussed how people mourn, noting four phases: " a) numbing; b) yearning for the lost figure, and anger; c) disorganization and despair; and d) finally if all goes well, reorganization" (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991, p. 339).

Bowlby's research partner, Ainsworth, began her fascination with human relationships during her undergraduate training where she was introduced to William E. Bratz's theory of security. His theory described different types of secure relationships that people could attain over the course of their lives (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). When Ainsworth's husband was called to Uganda for work, Ainsworth followed but did her own research on mother-infant relationships in Uganda (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Similar to Bowlby, Ainsworth was amazed by the infants she observed who were not passive but instead were in "active search for contact with the mother when they were alarmed or hurt, when she moved away or left even briefly, and when they were hungry…" (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991, p. 338). When Ainsworth returned from

Uganda, she continued her research on the mother-infant relationship. She began looking at the correlations between how the mother and infant were relating to one another and how the infant appeared to attach to his or her mother (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991).

Ainsworth (1989) emphasized that the relationship an infant has with his caregivers is where he first begins to form his ideas about the world and how safe that world is to explore. Ainsworth and Bell (1970) describe the now famous experiment that Ainsworth and fellow researchers conducted, titled the "strange situation", which analyzed infant-mother interactions in order to gain a sense of infants' attachment styles. In the experiment an approximately one year old child was placed with his or her mother in a research room that he or she was unfamiliar with. There were eight episodes observed that occurred each time in the same order. These events included the mother leaving the room at one point and then re-entering. The infant's affect and behavior was noted at different points, including before the mother left, during the absence, and when the mother re-entered the room. The interaction between the mother and infant was also observed. Additionally, part of the strange situation included the entrance of a stranger at different points while the child's behaviors were again observed. Ainsworth & Bell (1970) noted it was when the mothers left the room that attachment behavior was activated and exploration decreased.

Ainsworth (1979) states that the main types of attachment styles noted could be broken into three groups: A (Avoidant), B (Secure) and C (Ambivalent). For those infants categorized in group A, when their mothers left the room they hardly cried and when reunited with their mothers avoided them (Ainsworth, 1979, p. 932). Those infants in group B were able to use their mothers as a "secure base" to explore the room. When

their mothers left they became distressed but when the infants were reunited with their mothers they wanted to be near them (Ainsworth, 1979, p. 932). Many infants in group C however, appeared anxious even before they were separated from their mothers. When they were separated they became "intensely distressed", yet when reunited appeared to oscillate between wanting contact with their mothers and resisting it (Ainsworth, 1979, p. 932).

This leads to the question of where these behaviors originated. Ainsworth (1979) notes that mothers of group B babies (Securely Attached) throughout the first year were "more sensitively responsive to infant signals than were mothers of the two anxiously attached groups…" (Ainsworth, 1979, p. 933). Ainsworth states that the consistency and attunement of these mothers helped the infants to form an expectation that their mothers were available to them and would take care of them, leading to their sense of security. Unfortunately the other side of this is that Ainsworth reports that results indicated that mothers who disregarded their infants' behavioral signals, or did not respond quickly, appeared to leave infants not knowing what to expect from their mothers. This led to infants displaying behaviors that indicated anxiety (Ainsworth, 1979).

These early attachment styles are not only important because they become the foundation for the future relationships that children have with their parents, but also because they form the foundation for other future relationships and roles in society. Ainsworth (1979) found that as one year olds, these patterns of attachment had continued with those in group B (Secure) performing better in peer interactions and developmental tests than those in group A (Avoidant), who were more aggressive than their peers, and those in group C (Ambivalent) who did not do as well overall and who were quicker to

aggravate. Although Ainsworth notes that there are other variables to consider such as the child's natural personality as well as the possibility for the relationship between mother and child to change over time, her research does point to the importance of a strong attachment forming between caregiver and child.

Although attachment theory originally only focused on the relationship between children and their parents, Ainsworth (1989) notes that attachment continues for the entire lifetime through a continued adult relationship with one's parents and with other significant relationships such as siblings, friends and romantic partners. Similarly, Stroebe (2002), in reviewing the work of John Bowlby (1953), noted that Bowlby also felt that "…it is the mother with whom the child forms the basis for the development of subsequent relationships in life" (Stroebe, 2002, p. 129). Therefore it is clear that attachment to one's primary caregivers continues throughout one's lifetime and also influences future relationships.

Strengths and Limitations to Attachment Theory

A weakness in Bowlby's theory on attachment involves feminist critique that his focus on the mother's role with the child leaves little room for any other responsibilities and ignores the role of fathers or other significant caretakers (Stroebe, 2002). Similarly, Ainsworth's article (1979) on the Strange Situation discusses the possible role of other caretakers such as fathers, but still discusses the mother as primary attachment figure.

A strength in Ainsworth's article (1989) is that she is able to envision plasticity within her own original study, realizing that attachment extends beyond infancy and beyond only the parent-child relationship. This acknowledgement paves the way for

future extensions of attachment theory including its application to the person-God relationship.

Overall, another limitation to attachment theory is that it is based on one culture's definition of what normal independence and dependence looks like. These are definitions that are different in cultures all over the world and behaviors risk being pathologized when looked at too narrowly with a specific theoretical lens.

Attachment and Bereavement

Ainsworth states that it is important not to underemphasize the significance that the loss of a parent can have on an adult. Ainsworth (1989) writes, "Moreover, a person's response to the death of a parent usually demonstrates that the attachment bond has endured" (p. 710, 711) .

Stroebe (2002) continues this thought by asking how the attachment patterns themselves may influence how someone experiences the loss of an important attachment figure. In this article she discusses her work with Schut (1999) in developing what they called the Dual Process Model (DPM) which was used to investigate how a survivor's attachment style could influence his or her process of grieving. The model identifies two types of stressors that are present during the bereavement period, which are 1) loss-oriented (stressors focusing on the person who has died and "dwelling on the loss") and 2) restoration-oriented (stressors about how to handle changes in one's life as a result of the loved one's death) (Stroebe, 2002, p. 134). Stroebe (2002) states that healthy adjustment to the loss involves "oscillating" between these two stressors (p.134).

Therefore, returning to Ainsworth's attachment styles, Stroebe (2002) believes that people with secure attachments will oscillate more easily between the two stressors

and that this process will lead to less "complications in their grieving". On the other hand, people with anxious/ambivalent/preoccupied attachment styles might focus more on the loss-oriented stressor in order to cling to the lost object (Stroebe, 2002, p. 135). People with dismissing attachment styles will mostly focus on the restoration-orientated stressor in an effort to avoid grief feelings, while people with disorganized attachment styles will fluctuate between the two stressors in a less organized fashion (Stroebe, 2002). This model links the research on attachment theory to how we experience the death of attachment figures.

An example of this model is the case study by Angell, Dennis, and Dumain (1998) that focuses on a woman named Andrea who presented with a clear connection between her attachment style and her method of grieving. The work with Andrea revealed that she had had a difficult relationship with her mother her whole life, which led her to experience the death of her mother as an abandonment (Angell, Dennis, & Dumain, 1998, p. 626). This connects back to Stroebe (2002) and the DPM model because we could hypothesize that perhaps Andrea's insecure attachment to her mother was now affecting her grieving process, described as a "preoccupation with thoughts about her dead mother", that is reminiscent of the loss-oriented stressor (Angell, Dennis, & Dumain, 1998, p. 624).

Similarly, Bowlby (1980) writes:

…the kind of close relationship that often precedes disordered mourning has little to do with the bereaved having had to rely on the deceased to provide goods and services or to fill social roles…many features of these relationships are reflections of distorted patterns of attachment and caregiving long present in both parties. (p. 176)

Therefore we see that although it is common sense that the loss of a parent would cause significant mourning for many adults, disordered mourning may be the result of the type of attachment previously held with the caregiver.

The loss of a loved one does not only affect the emotional health of the survivors, but it often also affects other attachment relationships that the survivors must maintain while they are grieving. Guttman (1991) discusses how marital conflict can be one such side effect of parental death. Through three case vignettes, Guttman illustrates that part of some survivors' grieving processes involve either intense criticism of the spouse (as a way to stay connected to the parent or to show dismay that the partner does not live up to the parent) or through emotional withdrawal from the partner (Guttman, 1991). Through extension, this researcher is curious how the loss affects bereaved individuals' attachment relationships to God.

Bridging Attachment Theory and Views of God

Beck (2006) discusses how attachment theory has recently begun to be applied to the relationships between people and God. Beck was attempting to look at participants' relationships to God by looking at two factors: Communion (a warm and trusting relationship with God); and Complaint (dissatisfaction with God). What was particularly interesting about the results of this study was that Communion and Complaint could coexist to create a complex and interesting relationship with God. This is reminiscent of the different ways that people can attach to caregivers and loved ones. For example, in Ainsworth's theory of attachment, people could have ambivalent attachments to caregivers, leading them to oscillate between a desire to be close to and to separate from the loved one – in this case God.

Rizzuto (1979) examines not only the person-God relationship, but also how the creation of each person's God image comes into effect and the dimensions that influence its development. Although she is a psychoanalyst and therefore speaks from that perspective rather than an attachment theory perspective, the overlap in her conclusions are worth noting. She writes:

> The God representation does not escape the normal vicissitudes of any other objects, however. Ambivalent feelings mix with longings; wishes to avoid God intermingle with wishes for closeness. The search for love, approval, and guidance alternates with noisy and rebellious rejection, doubt, and displays of independence. The pride of faithful service to God contrasts with painful doubts about being unworthy. (p. 88)

Another example of this is the study done by McDonald, Beck, Allison and Norsworthy (2005), which looks at the relationship between parent-child attachment styles and their later attachment styles to God in adulthood. In this study, the researchers looked at two competing theories of attachment to God, that of Correspondence (your relationship to God will be similar to your other relationships, including caregiver) versus Compensation (your relationship to God compensates for deficits in your other relationships, including caregiver).

Results of the study by McDonald et al. (2005) indicate that authoritarian mothers corresponded to a preoccupied God attachment style and that authoritarian fathers corresponded to a fearful God attachment style in participants. Therefore, their overall results indicated support for the Correspondence viewpoint.

Birgegard and Granqvist (2004) also find support for the Correspondence theory in their study of religious adults and their attachments to their parents and to God. They used subliminal separation stimuli such as "mother is gone" or "God has forsaken me" to trigger responses in hopes of finding support for either theory. The results indicated that

when "…the attachment system is unconsciously activated in relation to God or mother, an individual with a secure history turns to God, whereas an individual with an insecure history turns away from God" (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004, p. 1133). Birgegard and Granqvist go on to state that there are limits to the Compensation theory as the results of their study indicate that when participants were "unconsciously provoked" and had insecure attachment styles, they were unable to rely on God and utilize God to regulate affect (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004, p. 1133). Therefore, they were unable to use God to compensate for their previous insecure attachments, adding additional support for the Correspondence viewpoint.

> Rizzuto (1979) writes:
> Objects who originally provided a referential framework for the formation of the God representation can move, through defensive maneuvers into any of the following positions in relationship to God: (1) direct continuity between one and the other, so that in the case of need one can substitute for the other with minimal anxiety; (2) direct opposition to each other so that they are either antagonistic or at the opposite poles of the representational gamut—God is giving while parents are frustrating, or parents are idealized while God is seen as an object to be avoided; (3) a combination in which some aspects of God are lined up with the parents and others oppose them. (p. 89)

Although Rizzuto is not writing about the Compensation or Correspondence perspectives, the similarities in her perspective are obvious. Her first position bears resemblance to the Correspondence perspective, while her second and third positions share similarities with the Compensation perspective. She, however, does not restrict herself to one side of the argument or the other, but rather states that for different people, different needs and representations may arise.

I will now explore the affects of loss on those who are grieving and then move on to the religious and spiritual meaning that people make of these losses. While many of

these articles focus on the experiences of adult children who have lost a parent, due to a lack of articles found on this specific topic, I also include the experiences of other familial types of losses such as siblings or spouses.

Psychological Effects of Loss on the Bereaved

Mourning the death of a parent, at any age, can be one of the most difficult and painful experiences a human being endures on earth.

For some this profound sense of loss moves past grief and into depression. Thompson, Kaslow, Kingree, King, Bryan, Jr., and Rey (1998); Rotheram-Borus, Weiss, Alber, and Lester (2005), as well as Barnes and Prosen (1985), have studied the emotional affect of this occurrence and how for some, their grieving turns from bereavement into depression.

All losses of important attachment figures have the potential to cause psychological distress. An example of this is the study by Meij, Stroebe, Schut, Stroebe, van den Bout, van der Heijden, and Dijkstra (2005), which indicated that depression is a risk for grieving parents.

The question for many becomes how the loss of these figures will affect their previously held beliefs about the world, their faiths, and their relationships with God.

God and Bereavement

When people are faced with losses of the magnitude of death of a parent, this provides them with an opportunity to step back and to look at their lives. For some this involves attempting to make meaning out of their losses and of their ongoing lives.

Richardson (1997) studied women who had lost their mothers when they were between the ages of 5 and 17 years of age. Through a retrospective, face to face, semi-

structured interview, Richardson interviewed women in adulthood about how their spiritual development had progressed since the death of their mothers. Richardson found that all ten of her participants reported that their "spiritual connection" had changed since the deaths of their mothers but only some of them pointed to the loss of their mothers as the reason for these changes (Richardson, 1997, p. 46). This is an important point to consider as people's faiths may shift and change over time even if they do not encounter events that could potentially challenge or strengthen their beliefs.

Richardson (1997) also reports that a major finding in the study was that, "…most of the women had constructed their own stories to explain what happens to their mother's souls after death" (Richardson, 1997, p. 46). Another important finding in the Richardson study was that the women's partners appeared to play a large role in their spiritual development. Returning to attachment theory, this may relate to the importance of having secure and positive attachment figures to rely on as Richardson also found that all of the women found substitute "mother figures" to relate to after the death of their mothers (Richardson, 1997, p. 61). In terms of attempting to make spiritual or religious meaning of the deaths, Richardson reported that three of her participants reported converting to a different religion after the deaths of their mothers and seven out of the ten participants reported feeling closer to God since the death of their mothers. Interestingly, Richardson also reports that the Protestant and Catholic subjects "did develop more of a God-related story that would help them explain why their mothers died or what happened to their souls afterwards" (Richardson, 1997, p. 63). For some, this meant feeling that the death had been part of God's plan or that "God doesn't give you more than you can handle"; yet another participant reported feeling that the death was "more of a personal insult from

God" done to "pay off a debt she had accumulated from a past life" (Richardson, 1997, p. 53). The idea of making meaning around what God's motives might have been is one that carried into other studies.

A form of meaning-making that came up in several of the studies was the idea that the death was "God's will." Keeley (2004) analyzed the meaning people made from final conversations with a variety of dying loved ones. One participant stated, "…God had a hand and plans things so well" (Keeley, 2004, p. 95). Similarly, in a study of elderly bereaved widows and widowers, conducted by Golsworthy and Coyle (1999), the elderly adults' meaning-making circled around their beliefs in God. None reported abandoning their faith as a result of their loss and most noted that they understood the death in terms of it being part of "God's plan" (Golsworthy & Coyle, 1999, p. 30, 31).

Cook and Wimberley (1983), in their study of parents who had lost a child, noted ways that parents made meaning out of their child's death including the belief that they would see their child in the afterlife or that the child's death was for a noble purpose or part of a higher plan.

Batten and Oltjenbruns (1999) studied adolescents who had recently lost a sibling. The adolescents reported gaining new perspectives on themselves, their family relationships, and their views of life and death. The study noted that the participants' perspectives on a higher Power also changed with some saying the experience increased their beliefs while others expressed anger towards God.

Batten and Oltjenbruns (1999) were not the only ones to note that some participants expressed anger towards God for the loss that they had endured. Angell, Dennis & Duman (1998) note in the case study of Andrea that she experienced God

allowing her mother to die as yet another abandonment, stating that she felt "betrayed and powerless" , as though her prayers to God were left "unanswered" (Angell et al., 1998, p. 623, p. 626). These examples illustrate the different responses that people have to their faith and to God following the death of their loved ones.

Returning to attachment theory, it may also be that God fills a void that is left after a loved one has departed. Cicirelli (2004) studied older adults and their attachments to God. Cicirelli found that although an attachment to God did not exist for all participants, findings did indicate that for some, God might act as a substitute attachment figure when other important attachment figures have passed on. This would fall into a more compensational viewpoint of adult-God relationships.

Similarly, Austin and Lennings (1993) found that for those adults who identified as having Christian belief systems, these religious beliefs helped to limit the possibility of developing depression following the death of an important attachment figure. However, the results appeared to indicate that the level of religiosity did not have an effect. The authors also brought up in the literature review the ideas of Kubler-Ross (1975), who discusses the potential for religious beliefs to provide people not only with a way of viewing the world that focuses positively on the future, but that religion also often creates a community support system that can be helpful to those who were grieving (Austin & Lennings, 1993).

In a study done by Norenzayan and Hansen (2006), the authors found in their Studies 1 and 2, that, "…mortality salience led to more religiosity, stronger belief in God, and in divine intervention" (p. 174). Similarly, another study found that a belief in God and in an aftelife were, "both negatively correlated with death anxiety (p<.01), and

positively correlated with death acceptance…" (Harding, Flannelly, Weaver, & Costa, 2005, p. 253). Both of these studies again illustrate a relationship between belief in God and/or afterlife and feelings about death. In both studies it would appear that beliefs in God and/or an afterlife might mediate negative or anxious feelings people are experiencing in relation to death.

The importance of external supports during the time of mourning one's parents, is also addressed by Bowlby (1980) in regards to the mourning of children who had lost a parent. He notes that in order to have a "favourable outcome" children need to have had a previously secure attachment to the lost parent, been given information about the parents' death, as well as had another secure relationship to turn to after such a loss (Bowlby, 1980, p. 321). The central research question of my study is whether it is possible that in the case of adults, this alternative attachment could take the form of a strengthened, weakened or altered relationship with God following the death of a parent.

Additionally, Kaeton (1998) echoes the need for a community or someone to talk to, when she discusses her experience of being a pastoral counselor at a hospice. She discusses the importance of being present for people and their families, without attempting to provide them answers or to draw from her own opinions or history. In this way she states that her task is, "…not to provide answers for the person's questions but rather to be fully present to the person and the family system as they struggle to find first the question and then the pathway to the answer for them" (Kaeton, 1998, p.285). Kaeton also discusses how times of crisis, such as impending death can naturally lead to a questioning of their previously held beliefs. She notes, "Even the patient or family with deep-seated religious beliefs will have their images of God challenged. This is where we

frequently hear questions such as, 'Why would God do this to me? To us?' . . ." (Kaeton, 1998, p. 287). Therefore, although God can be a support to people in times of crisis, for some the crisis itself can throw into question all previously held beliefs about how the world and God functions.

These studies show how other attachments, such as those to God, may serve as alternative attachment figures for some, and that these alternate attachment figures help the bereaved individual manage his or her grief once the loved one (in this case parent) has passed on. For other individuals, the experience of the loss may call into question their very belief system, including a belief in God. This study undertook to investigate both these possibilities.

Varieties of Study Design

Overall the studies noted here used a research design that complemented what they were trying to study. For instance, those who chose quantitative, relational studies (such as McDonald et al. (2005), Beck (2006) and others) were trying to compare groups or variables to begin to look for correlations, whereas studies that were more interested in gaining new or richer information (such as Keeley (2004)) tended to choose smaller samples and fixed method descriptive qualitative studies in order to accomplish this. Those that used case studies (such as Guttman (1991), and Angell et al. (1998)) sacrificed generalizability for a deeper look into individual experiences surviving parental loss.

Looking at the strengths and disadvantages of these types of studies assisted me in realizing that richness in information was more important in this particular study than generalizability, yet the opportunity to hear multiple experiences was also desired over the experience of a single experience. For this reason I chose a qualitative research

methodology that would yield rich data despite the smaller, non-generalizable sample size.

<div align="center">*Biases in the Studies*</div>

By far, the most common bias present in the literature was invisibility (Anastas, 1999), as racial demographics were not even mentioned in Barnes and Prosen (1985), Guttman (1991), Meij et al. (1998), Batten and Oltjenbruns (1999), and Angell et al. (1998). That is why my study attempted to gain as diverse a sample as possible (albeit with little success). It is also why I reported the demographics of the participants, in an attempt to avoid the invisibility of racial demographics that is often present in research.

<div align="center">*Strengths and Limitations of the Studies*</div>

Limitations

One type of limitation that appeared in the literature was differences in culture. The studies done by Meij et al. (1998), Barnes and Prosen (1985) and Birgegard and Granqvist (2004) took place in other countries and may not generalize completely to the United States.

Strengths

A strength was the inclusion used by Thompson et al. (1998) in that there was a conscious effort made to use a sample mostly comprised of People of Color to combat invisibility in this population of study. Another strength that was present was the clearness in definition of terms that was present in studies such as Keeley (2004) and Beck (2006) that illustrated the importance of clearly defining potentially interpretive or confusing terms.

My study adds to this body of research by focusing on how adult children

experienced their religious faith and relationship to God after the death of their parents. I

focused specifically on the experience of adult children who experienced parental death

in adulthood, because this is an under-researched population who represent an experience

shared by a high percentage of adults. In the following methodology chapter I will

discuss the methodology of my study, the sampling strategy, and the methods used for

data analysis.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Study Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study was to explore how adult childrens' religious beliefs as well as their relationship to God(s) were affected by the loss of a parent. With this in mind, the research question was, "Among adult children with religious beliefs prior to the death of a parent, how are these beliefs affected by the loss of a parent?"

Research Method and Design

The research design selected for the proposed study was a fixed method, qualitative, descriptive study. A qualitative study was chosen because it was felt that richer and more detailed information would be gathered from face to face individual interviews, especially given the sensitive nature of the topic. I chose to do a fixed method descriptive study because I wanted to ask all the participants the same set of questions, so that in the end I could examine and categorize similarities and differences in the participant's answers to the specific questions. In addition, this method allowed me to touch upon certain specific points with all participants, which would not be guaranteed to occur in a flexible method study, as it would depend on the direction the participant went in. Using a qualitative design allowed me to gather the richness in detail that I was seeking in order to better understand the experiences of these adult children. In terms of trustworthiness of the data, I tried to construct questions that would address accurately

the phenomenon investigated. Given the small sample in this study, there is little generalizability, but it is hoped that there is a rich body of information gathered that can guide future studies. By using a fixed set of questions in the interview, there was a certain level of replicability in that other researchers will have access to that set of questions as well as information about the demographics of the participants.

For the purposes of this study, God(s) was defined as a supreme being (or multiple supreme beings) that is prayed to or worshiped by human beings. In terms of what it meant to observe a religion, this was defined as holding a set of beliefs about a diety(s) and about how the individual feels the world works according to this deity(s). The participants did not need to attend religious services, but rather needed to feel that at least before the death of their parent, religion held a place in their lives. With this said, it was assumed that peoples' level of belief would fluctuate based on their life experiences, as well as perhaps, their attachment styles as earlier research has indicated that perhaps a strained attachment to peoples' parents may carry into their relationships with other attachment figures. My goal was to gather examples of different beliefs about God(s)' power and function in daily lives.

Subject Section

Sample

When deciding on selection criteria for the study, I thought about what characteristics of this particular population needed to be present in each potential participant (Anastas, 1999). The original sample criteria included both males and females from any socioeconomic status, location, sexual orientation and marital/relationship status, who were at least 21 years of age at the time of the parents deaths and for whom at

least twelve months had passed since the death in order to avoid causing participants

undue emotional strain while they were in their initial stages of grieving (Keeley, 2004).

Participants had to be at least 21 years of age at the time of their parents' deaths as this is

the age recognized in our society as the age where a person is mature enough to drink

alcoholic beverages, and is therefore an adult. In addition, this age requirement helped to

ensure that the majority of the participants were old enough to be capable of taking care

of themselves.

Participants were also included regardless of age, gender, or cause of parent's

death or whether the participant had lost one or both parents. This was done in order to

investigate a range of experiences and perhaps use this data to fuel more specific studies.

The original sample criteria also required participants to have spent the majority of their

developmental years (0-18 years) with the adult parent and also required the participants

to identify as having a monotheistic belief system prior to the death of the parent,

although they could hold any or no belief currently. The majority of developmental years

was originally put in as a requirement because it was assumed that the attachment styles

of those who spent a short time with a parent, versus their entire development with a

parent, might be different. Additionally, the participant had to have been at least 21 years

old at the time of the parent's death and it could not have been more than 10 years since

the parent's death as it was assumed that people's meaning-making around the death and

around their understanding of their faith would change over time.

I wrote to the Human Subjects Review (HSR) committee twice in order to make

amendments to this original selection criteria. The first amendments, asked for on March

15th, 2007, were for participants to be included regardless of how many developmental

years they had spent with their parent as long as they had had a relationship with the

parent at some point in the life span. This was done because I believed it would be

interesting to compare beliefs of people who had spent different amounts of time with

their parent over the life-cycle. In addition, I asked the HSR committee to extend the

period since a parent's death from no more than ten years to no more than twenty years. I

did this in order to look at how time might influence both the bereavement process as

well as a chance to monitor changes in belief systems over a larger span of time. In

addition to approving my proposal (see Appendix A), the HSR committee approved both

of these amendments (see Appendix A).

The second letter was written to the HSR committee on April 12th, 2007,

requesting that the inclusion criteria of a participant identifying as having a monotheistic

belief be waved and replaced with an inclusion of monotheistic as well as non-

monotheistic belief systems. This was done because I believed that non-monotheistic

belief systems could make interesting comparisons in terms of people's relationships to

God figures as well as to their faiths. The committee also approved this amendment (see

Appendix A).

It was my hope that through sampling technique, a diverse sample in terms of

race, ethnicity, gender, and religious beliefs/affiliations would be collected. I was aiming

for a sample size of 12-15 participants. The final sample size was twelve. Although a

fairly diverse group of participants was gathered in terms of ethnicity, gender, and

religious affiliations, I did not gain as racially diverse a group as hoped for, with eleven

of the twelve participants identifying as Caucasian.

The sampling technique for this study is a non-probability sample strategy. I used a combination of snowball and convenience sampling in order to gain participants. I chose this method in order to make use of people who may know other adult children who fit the criteria. I also attempted to recruit participants by posting flyers in public spaces, where I had been given permission to do so. In my HSR application I also requested permission to possibly advertise in local newspapers and on the Internet at such sites as Craigslist. However, the snowball method and the posting of notices proved an adequate recruitment strategy and I did not end up advertising the study on the Internet or in newspapers. (See Attachment B for a copy of the flyer that was approved by the HSR Committee.)

Although it was hoped that an equal number of participants who identified as People of Color and as Caucasian would be recruited, all participants who fitted the above criteria were accepted after January 15, 2007. This was done to help ensure that the minimum of 12 participants was gained to complete the study.

Data Collection

Type of Data

Demographic data that was important to this study included participants giving basic information through a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix C) about their gender, racial/ethnic background, age at their parents' deaths and current ages, siblings and ages, their parents' age at death as well as cause of death, as well as questions about their parent's religious beliefs and their own prior and following their parents' death.

Interview questions (see Appendix D) included gathering information about the parent-child relationship (in childhood and in adulthood), the bereavement process, and the adult relationship to God figures and religion (before and after the loss).

As mentioned earlier, face to face interviews were conducted with a set of fixed questions that aimed to collect in more detail information about how adult children felt their faith had or had not been altered by the death of their parent. In addition, information was gathered about how their relationships to their parent may or may not be reflected in their relationships to God as well as whether they felt their relationships to God changed as the result of their parents' death. I did not use any standardized measurement scales in this study.

Data Collection Methods

The data collection method for this study was face to face interviews, at a mutually agreed upon location and time, using a fixed set of questions for each participant. Although I expected the interviews to take longer given the length of the interview guide, interviews averaged about 36 minutes. There was also a large range in interview lengths from the shortest taking a mere fifteen minutes to an interview that lasted sixty-seven minutes. Although it is my opinion that all interviews contained rich and useful data, several factors influenced the interview length. One was speed at which the participants spoke. Several participants with shorter interviews, were also faster talkers and took shorter pauses. A couple of participants also tended to answer succinctly and did not often go off on tangents of thought as other participants did. Also, I noted that for many who had a good-bye experience with their parent, their interviews were longer

as this was a subject that people were asked to describe if it took place, as opposed to those who did not have a good-bye experience with their parent.

The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder. I included in my Human Service Review (HSR) application the ability to take field notes based on visual observations about the participant's affect, body language, and any important gesturing the participant might use. I found in actually carrying out the interviews that it was more important to maintain eye contact with participants in order to respect what they were saying, rather than take notes while they spoke. Therefore, basic notes were written down only after the interview had been completed.

Strengths to the fixed question method included that it was the most appropriate way to gather a rich and detailed set of data about the topic while also maintaining a level of consistency throughout the participants' data by asking everyone the same questions. This helped to ensure that useful data would be gathered on the chosen topic.

A limitation to this method was that a participant's affect and mannerisms would need to be interpreted by the interviewer and were therefore subject to potential bias. In addition, the interviewer's facial expressions may have affected how the participant responded or continued in one direction but not others.

Data Analysis

Interviews were conducted in mutually agreed upon locations. Participants read and signed a consent form that included information about how their responses would be recorded and used, as well as a list of resources if they felt as if they needed to talk to a professional after the interview was completed (see Appendix E). In addition, both verbally and in the Informed Consent (see Appendix F), participants were reminded that

they had the right to stop the interview at any time and to only answer those questions that they chose to respond to.

The face to face interviews were recorded along with the researcher's notes about participants' affect and gestures, although these notes were not written until after the completion of the interview. These recordings were then transcribed in full by myself as I did not want to risk only pulling out parts of dialogue and missing crucial patterns or themes that would only be noticed upon closer examination. Data was analyzed by hand (as opposed to using qualitative analysis software) as I felt more comfortable going through the document and finding my own connections within the material that may be subtler.

The data was in narrative form and since I was doing a fixed method study, the participants' responses would already be categorized by the question they were asked. I coded the data by doing a conventional content analysis. This method was chosen because there have been theories about various parts of the thesis topic but not on the researcher's exact topic. Conventional content analysis was used to look for words and phrases that appeared in multiple responses. The data analysis also involved breaking relevant data into thematic categories such as "relationship to God(s)", "meaning-making" or "signs in nature". I used basic descriptive statistics to present the demographic information that was gathered about participants.

Personal perspective

My personal viewpoint on this topic is that faith can be a powerful force in peoples' lives and the loss of a parent can be a life-altering experience. A bias I had going into this study was that I was interested in giving a voice to people who are dealing with

the loss of a loved one as well as a feeling of loss of faith (or a questioning of faith) as a result of the death.

Ethical Considerations

Ethically, I addressed confidentiality by using a coding system so that the name of the participant was not linked directly to the data set. Although there was less anonymity given the nature of the face to face interview, I made it clear to the participants that it was my ethical duty to protect their confidentiality by keeping the data locked up until the time that it is destroyed. I also explained that I would disguise all identifying information when writing the final report.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

The research question under investigation in this study is, "Among adult children with religious beliefs prior to the death of a parent, how are these beliefs affected by the loss of a parent?" Results from the data suggest that for many people the death of a parent is an event powerful enough to affect change in people's religious beliefs. For some, the effect is a strengthening in faith, for others it is a change in practice, and for some it causes a break with their previously held beliefs. Yet, still others experience no noticeable change in belief.

In addition, there were findings that suggested that a person's childhood, adult relationship with a parent, type of relationship with God(s) prior to the death, or a belief in the afterlife were all factors that influenced, for some, the path their religious beliefs took following the death of a parent. In this chapter, I will present the collected data according to thematic categories and will then begin to draw together related data where appropriate.

I also wish to note that four participants identified as having lost both of their parents. They were encouraged to answer the questions as they chose, either talking about one parent, the other parent or both parents. As a result, for different questions, these

participants chose to discuss different parents. Therefore in the results, I chose to acknowledge that in a given section the participant may have felt differently about one parent than the other, yet I used the data from whichever parent the participant chose to discuss. For instance, in adulthood a participant may have stated that he had a strained relationship with his father, but later in the interview when answering a specific question, indicated a close relationship with his mother. When coding for answers to that question specifically, it was noted that he had a strong relationship with one parent whom had passed, rather than pulling information from another section.

In this chapter, I will first present relevant demographic information and then will move on to religion and changes in religion, the participants' relationships to God(s), their parents, and changes in these relationships. I will then discuss the bereavement process including good-bye experiences, meaning-making around the deaths and how the participants felt after their parents' deaths. I will then conclude with information about participants beliefs around the possibility of an afterlife, God(s)' ability to intervene on earth and whether the participants took advantage of therapy or religious communities following the deaths of their parents.

Demographics

Race and Ethnicity

In terms of race, one participant identified as Asian American and eleven participants identified as Caucasian/White. In terms of ethnicity, three participants identified as English/British. One participant identified his ethnicity as Hindu, two participants as Jewish, one as Russian, one as Scottish, one as Italian, two as American, and one as Irish/Canadian/Native American.

Age and Gender

Participants' ages ranged from 28 years old to 63 years old. One participant was in her twenties, two participants were in their thirties, two participants were in their forties, six participants were in their fifties, and one participant was in her sixties.

Three participants identified as Male and nine participants identified as Female.

Cause of Death of Parent/ Warning of Death

Causes of death of parent ranged from heart attack and accidents to cancer and pulmonary failure. Four participants had lost both of their parents. Six participants experienced the death of at least one of their parents as being sudden and unexpected, preventing them the opportunity to say good-bye. Eight participants had the opportunity to know that at least one of their parents was passing prior to the parents' deaths.

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Religion

</div>

Participants' Religious Affiliations prior to Parent's Deaths

Three participants identified as Catholic, three participants identified as Jewish, one participant identified as Hindu, three participants identified as Congregational, one identified as Episcopalian, and one identified as Christian (generic).

Parents' Religious Affiliations prior to their Deaths

Three parents were identified as Catholic, three were identified as Jewish, one was identified as Hindu, three were identified as Congregational, one identified her father who passed away as Agnostic (although she also identified her mother who was still living as Episcopalian), and one identified her father as not having any religious affiliation or belief that she knew of.

Comparing Religious Affiliations of Participants and Parents

Prior to their parents' deaths, 11 participants identified as sharing the same religious affiliation as their parents, even if there were spiritual beliefs or images of God(s) that differed.

Changes in Religion

In the demographic questionnaire participants were asked to describe their identified religion prior to the parents' deaths, as well as their parents' affiliations, if any, prior to death. This information was reported above. In addition, the participants were asked to also describe their belief systems immediately following the death, and their current belief systems (if any).

Of the twelve participants, 9 identified as experiencing some form of change in their faith following the death of a parent. One of these 9 participants did not experience a change immediately following the parent's death, but currently has a different belief than prior to the death. Three participants did not experience a major change in their religious beliefs as a result of their parents' deaths.

The Table 1 illustrates how similar many participants' beliefs were to their parents, prior to their parent's passing, as well as tracks the changes that some participants experienced in their belief systems following the death of their parents.

Table 1: Tracking Religious Beliefs

Participant #	Parent's identified religion prior to death	Participant's identified religion prior to parent's death	Participant's belief immediately following death	Participant's current belief, if any
A*	Catholic	Catholic	More spiritual, not identified with specific religious affiliation	Spiritual, some form of Catholic
B*	Catholic and Spiritual	Catholic	Spiritual	Spiritual Belief in God
C*	Culturally Jewish, Belief in God	Culturally Jewish	Spiritual/Belief in God/Karma/ Culturally Jewish	Same
D*	Congregational	Congregational	Agnostic	Unitarian
E	Jewish	Jewish	Jewish	Jewish
F	Jewish	Jewish	Jewish	Jewish
G	Hindu	Hindu	Hindu	Hindu
H*	Congregational	Congregational	Congregational, but "enhanced"	Congregational
I*	Congregational	Congregational	Low-key Protestant/Spiritual belief in God	Congregational
J*	Mom: Catholic/ Dad: Unknown Both passed on	Catholic	Stopped attending church	Belief in God/ Practice no religion
K*	Mom: Episcopalian Dad: Agnostic Father passed on	Episcopalian	None	Congregational/ Spiritual
L*	None	Christian (generic)	Christian	Unsure

*Star indicates a change in religious affiliation after the death of a parent.

Balancing Personal Beliefs with Organized Religion's Beliefs

During the face to face interview, participants were asked, "Did you attend any religious services or engage in prayer or religious reading before the death of your parent?" (Question 21) as well as, "Has your religious attendance, prayer, or religious

reading fluctuated in any way since the death of your parent? Have you developed other routines or rituals?" (Question 22). The responses below were mostly drawn from these questions as well as from other questions addressing religion in childhood and adulthood. Four participants discussed how after their parent's deaths, they searched out new religious communities and/or belief systems that matched their personal beliefs. One participant stated, "I finally found a parish, a Catholic parish that is accepting of everyone . . . They seem more welcoming, so it's a matter of having the time to go there." Another participant echoed the importance of finding a new community that matched her new belief system. She reported, " . . . I started going again every Sunday because I missed having that community and wanted to be in a smaller church that wasn't so theocratic and a church that was more in line with what I found myself believing . . ."

Two participants stated that they did not feel they had to be a part of an organized religious community in order to have a belief system or a relationship with God(s). One stated, "I don't believe I belong to any religious belief. Very culturally Jewish and have a very strong belief in God but not by any man standard of how that should look."

Childhood Religious Rituals

Eleven participants identified weekly services or frequent religious rituals as being part of their childhood experience within their families. The one exception to this was a participant who reported that although she and her family maintained their religious identity, they no longer went to services after being offended by an incident that transpired between themselves and their congregation.

Discussing Religion/God(s) with Parents in Adulthood

Nine participants reported having had a parent discuss religion or God(s) with them in adulthood. Six of these nine participants reported these being talks that centered around God's powers, prayer, or religious readings/attending religious services with the parent. One participant reported, "She always had a way of connecting with God. She was very-she prayed everyday. I know she did. And we talked about that and the importance of that." Two of the participants reported that their talks with their parent was around them not attending religious services regularly, as their parents did. One participant reported discussions with his parents around his questioning of God. He stated, "And not that I was announcing it as I don't believe in God to them, but I threw it out to them that I wasn't sure. And they were taken aback. Especially my father . . ."

The remaining three participants reported that they did not recall their departed parent discussing religion or God with them.

Relationship to God(s) Before and After Parent's death

Eight of the twelve participants identified as experiencing some form of change in their relationships with God(s) as a result of their parents' deaths.

Strengthened Relationship

Five participants stated they experienced a strengthened or heightened relationship with God(s) as a result of their loss. One participant stated, "[it is] strengthened. It's very deep. After that night that mom passed I said I would never ever doubt, and I hadn't before, but there isn't anybody that's not going to tell me there isn't someone watching out who makes things happen. It's very deep." Another participant stated, "I think it was a feeling of connecting, always of feeling that there was a higher

power, a being, it was just the belief and the intensity of the belief and the reinforcement of the belief became even stronger after my parents passed away." One participant stated, "I think the heightened awareness of God is prevalent from the recent deaths of both my parents . . ." Another participant noted that her actual relationship with God was strengthened as the result of her father's death as well as her recovery from alcoholism (a process which she began following his death). She stated:

> I don't know if I believed up until that time that I could have a relationship with God. It was really more the God up there, and sort of a punishing God…But really it wasn't until after I, dad died and I got into recovery that I developed that sense of relationship…I don't see God, as my God, as judging or punishing, not at all. So very very different.

Uncertainties and Loss of a Relationship

Three participants experienced uncertainties in their relationships with God(s) or experienced no longer believing in God(s). One participant stated that before her mother's death, "I felt there was a God. I don't think I ever thought there wasn't. I never really questioned my faith very much. And if there's a God, about it being accepting, loving, spirit." Following the death of her mother she stated:

> I stopped believing in a God…I probably never actually thought about this before – I believed less and less in God sort of because of what was happening to her [mother] and more in the power of people because there were so many people on this 150, 200 people email list that I would email everyday…

As a result of her parent's death, this participant's focus went from a relationship with God to a relationship with the people that surrounded her and supported her during her mother's illness. This is also illustrated by the line " . . .because of what was happening to her" as if God was not able to change this nor make her feel better, yet what did make her feel better was her friends.

Another participant stated that before the death of her parent, "I respected God . . .God scared me because I was told, you know, growing up, if you don't do this, you're going to go to Hell." After her mother's death she stated:

> I kind of strayed a little. Not sure if I believed in God anymore. And I think now I do believe in God. I think it took me a little while to come back. I think for a little I didn't want to even believe that he existed because I thought, 'How could a God do this to me?' But now I do believe in God. I do believe He's there. But I still don't practice any religion at this point.

This participant went on to say:

> I think maybe I had a little bit more fear of God, I always wanted to make sure I did the right thing. Now like I said, I joke, 'Oh, go to church? Oh, I don't care' . . . But it probably did come after my mother's death though because I lost belief in a lot of things after she died.

Here the participant is noting that her expectations of God's role in her life were not met: "How could a God do this to me?" Additionally she is illustrating how the death of her mother caused her to not fear God in the way she had previously, but that this change did not come out of a sense of acceptance from God but perhaps from feeling as though if God did not have to uphold God's responsibilities to her, than she no longer should worry about her responsibilities, such as going to church. Additionally, the later quotation emphasizes how the loss of a parent can lead to a questioning of one's belief in multiple aspects of how the world works, not just in one's relationship to religion or God.

Another participant stated that before the death of her parent she felt close to God. She stated, "We were pretty close. Um, I was one of his favorite children just like everybody else." She stated that following her father's death, "I was angry, 'Why did you let this happen?' kind of thing, but that didn't affect my relationship with God as it was at that time." She stated, however, that now she feels, "Confusion. A sense of questioning.

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Trying to figure out who and what he is, she is, it is." This participant also stated that part

of her questioning involves wondering what God's role is in her life. She reported, "I

don't know who or what God is, or what if any interest or influence He has in my life."

For this participant, there is a questioning of what her relationship with God is, and who

in fact God is, as well as what God's interest is in her life.

Four participants did not report a change in their relationships with God. Of

these, one participant did note that when she was ten her sister died and that this

experience did have an effect on her belief system, which at the time was Catholic. She

stated, "I was very angry with God and basically gone through the motions of going to

church because that's what I was supposed to do. And that's also when my spirituality

started forming. I don't believe you have to go to church to pray . . . so I do think outside

the norms, rules of the Catholic church . . . "

Relationship to Parent in Childhood

Participants were asked, "Can you tell me about your childhood relationship with

your parent?" (Question 1) as well as the follow-up question, "Can you tell me about an

important event from childhood that occurred between your parent and yourself?"

Two participants reported having been raised by only their mothers. One reported

no relationship with her father. The other reported that her father left when she was seven

and no longer wished to see her (although they reconnected in adulthood). In addition,

two participants noted the loss of a sibling during their childhood.

One participant reported that her parents divorced when she was a child, but that

she continued to see her father regularly on weekends.

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In terms of childhood experiences with parents, seven participants reported memories of feeling loved by their parent or being made to feel special by their parent. One participant reported, "I think in our religion, for better or worse, the son is supposed to be, like, special child versus daughters . . . so yeah, it was a close relationship." Another participant echoed this idea of feeling special. She stated:

> I remember my first ballet recital and I was the lead dancer. And I was very young and I remember my parents making a big deal and taking me out for dinner and inviting friends and having flowers for me. And when it was over and I felt really really special because of that.

Another participant also recounted a special event. She stated, "One was that my father took off from work to walk us to our first day of school, my sister and I. And I just felt like I was so special, walking to school with my daddy."

Three participants reported negative memories when asked questions about their childhood experience with their parent. One participant recounted her parents divorcing and her desire as a child for them to get back together. Another participant, who reported a strong relationship with her parent, reported a memory of her parent breaking a promise to her. Two participants additionally mentioned mothers who expressed themselves physically at some point. One participant stated, "She was raising multiple children who were difficult to raise, so she would often show her frustrations and anger in-occasionally physically expressing that…it was always expressed with love, if you will, and I don't think there's been any long term effect from that."

Two participants reported memories of family events, such as family trips or, in one case, a relative's funeral where the participant told his father that he loved him.

Five participants mentioned the theme of their own rebellion in their adolescent relationships with their parent. One Participant stated, "I went through my teenage years where you're defiant, and you talk back, and they don't know but I always knew deep down that my mother knew what was right." Another participant stated, "I was very close to my mother, except for adolescence when I we didn't speak for a couple years more or less."

Parents' Responsibilities to Children

Participants were asked the question, "In your opinion, what are parents' most important responsibilities to their children?"(Question 3) .

Themes that emerged in terms of parental responsibilities to children included: giving love, care for/nurture, keep safe/protect, give child confidence/self-respect, morals/how treat others, education. For the purposes of analyzing the data, I combined the themes of Care for/Nurture/Keep Safe/ Protect into a single theme called Care For/Protect as they are all related to protecting a child as he or she grows. Education and Teaching of morals/How to treat others was also combined as they are related to teaching the child things they feel are important. Table 2 details these themes of parental responsibility that emerged.

Table 2: Themes of Parent Responsibility

Theme	Number of Participants to Identify this Theme
Giving Love	6
Care for/ Protect	7
Give child confident/Self-respect	3
Education/Teaching of Morals	7

Have Parents Upheld these Responsibilities

As shown in Table 3, when asked to identify their childhood relationship with their parent(s) as better than most, not as good as most, or about average; ten of the participants identified as having a "Better than" childhood relationship with their deceased parent(s). Two participants identified as having a "Not as good as most" relationship with their parents in childhood. It is worth noting that although "Average" was an option, no one chose to identify their childhood relationship in this way.

Table 3: Parent Responsibility Upheld

Identified Answer	"Better Than"	"Not as Good as Most"	"Average"
Number of Participants	10	2	0

Images of God

When asked the question, "Did one our both of your parents ever talk to you about God?" (Question 13) as well as the follow up question, "What is the image of God that was discussed in your home as a child?", there was a range in answers given, from loving, to fearsome, to a man in the sky. Images are organized by sub themes as follows.

Fear of God

Two participants reported imagining God(s) to be someone who should be feared. One participant stated, "Someone to fear, um, someone strong, kind stern-looking is the image I have as a childhood remembering what I thought God would look like. Very stern and not forgiving, I guess is the word I'm looking for."

God Loves/Comforts/Watches over

Four participants reported that the image they had of God(s) when they were children, involved an image of God(s) being there to care for them in various ways, whether it was to love them, comfort them, or watch over them. One participant stated, "God was good. And He watched over you. Those were the things that I remember." Another participant stated, "A spiritual being, not actually a physical person being, who was all loving, all caring, all directing, all creating, all encompassing." In this account, the image of God goes beyond just caring for or loving, but becomes the foundation and direction of all things.

The Man in the Sky/The Bearded Man/ Santa Claus

One participant identified the childhood image of God as being. "The man, up in the sky, kind of thing." Two participants referenced a "Santa Claus" type image of God. One participant stated, "What I call the long white beard Santa Claus God."

God(s)' Responsibilities to People

Participants were asked the question, "In your opinion, what are God's most important responsibilities to people?" (Question 25). As shown in Table 4, the themes that emerged for God(s)' responsibilities were overall quite similar to Parents' responsibilities. The major themes that emerged were: love; values/principles/guide people; nurture/care for in times of trouble; forgiveness; and, one surprising theme, that the responsibility is the reverse. Table 4 details these sub themes regarding God(s)' responsibility. I chose these themes by identifying any participant who mentioned the word love, and by combining into one theme all those comments that stemmed from a teaching of morals/values or guiding people in the right direction, type of answers. The

theme nurture/care for was established by combining all words or answers that denoted

caring for the participant or helping the participant to get through a difficult time.

Interestingly, three participants switched the question from "God's

responsibilities" to "Our responsibilities to God." One participant stated, "What are our

responsibilities to God. Um, which again goes back to trying to do the best we can do . . .

His responsibility is to try to bring goodness back to where it started." Another

participant noted that, "God expects us to at least follow some if not all of his or her

principles that were laid out." Similarly, another participant stated, "I think it's people's

responsibility to God."

Table 4: Themes Identified with God(s)' Responsibility

Theme	Number of Participants Who identified this Theme
Love	4
Nurture/Care for	2
Values/Principles/Guide People	5
Forgiveness	1
No Longer Having a Relationship/Unsure of Relationship with God	3
Our responsibilities to God (not the reverse)	3

Has God Upheld These Responsibilities

Participants were asked, "Do you feel that God has upheld these responsibilities

to you?" (Question 26). As detailed in Table 5, eight participants stated that "Yes" they

felt God(s) had upheld God(s)' responsibilities to them. One participant stated, "I'm sure

He has and we sure as heck try, everyday." Another participant stated, "Yes. I've been

very blessed. And I guess I feel very blessed that I've had the opportunity to grow."

Four participants did not feel this was the case. One participant stated she did not believe in God and therefore God had no responsibilities. Interestingly, this participant when discussing how she felt after her parent died, stated:

> I just thought . . . somehow I would have this sense of my mother's spirit or place or that I would feel like this comfort that came from without and I didn't feel any of that. And so I thought, you know what, there really isn't any God. I just kind of didn't feel any of that and because I was expecting it without even realizing that I was expecting it, when I didn't get it, I just thought well that's it. There really isn't any God. People have made this up to comfort themselves.

Another participant did not feel he had an established relationship with God to base this on. A third participant stated:

> . . . I don't believe in there being a Heaven or Hell, so I don't believe He's going to do anything for me in an afterlife. So what's his responsibility to me now? I don't think He can do anything for me. I don't think He can save me from anything.

The remaining participant indicated that she did not know the answer.

Table 5: God(s)' Responsibilities Upheld

Theme Identified	Yes, responsibilities upheld	No/Unsure if responsibilities upheld
Number of Participants	8	4

Comparing Parents' Upheld Responsibilities to God(s)' Upheld Responsibilities

For the purpose of this analysis, upholding parent's responsibilities to children is categorized by coding "not as good" responses as "No" (parent not upholding responsibilities) and "better than" responses, as "Yes" (parents upholding responsibilities). As there were no "average" reported as answers, this choice was not included in the comparison. The yes and no answers for parent's upheld responsibilities

to children were compared to God(s)' upheld responsibilities, already categorized as "yes" upheld versus "no" not upheld.

As detailed in Table 6, six participants identified as feeling that both their parents had upheld their responsibilities as well as God(s). Two participants identified as feeling God(s) had upheld God(s)' responsibilities, but not parents. Four participants identified as feeling their parents upheld their responsibilities, but not God(s) (or were unsure of God's responsibilities or whether they were upheld).

It is important to note that of those participants who lost both parents, several noted differences in their relationship to one parent versus the other. Yet, whichever parent was mentioned by the participant in answering the question about childhood relationship to parent was the answer quantified for this result.

Interestingly, there is no overlap in participants feeling that both God(s) and their parents did not uphold their responsibilities. Each participant either felt both had or that either God(s) or their parents had upheld responsibilities to him or her.

Table 6: Parent and God(s) Responsibility Upheld

Theme of Responsibility	Yes God(s) and Parent Upheld	No, neither God(s) nor Parent Upheld	Yes, Only Parent Upheld	Yes, Only God(s) Upheld
Number of Participants	6	0	4	2

Relationship to Parent in Adulthood

Although some of the participants who had lost both parents experienced a different relationship with one parent than the other in adulthood, overall all participants had something positive to say about their adult relationships with at least one of their

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parents whom had died. Eight participants explicitly used the words "Strong/Stronger, close, excellent, great, and good" to describe their adulthood relationships with their parents. Another four cited examples of strengths in the relationship such as still looking towards their parent for advice/support, friendship, or to be a role model for their children.

Six participants mentioned that once they had children, they found their parents to be a support for them in terms of helping them emotionally or physically to rear the children. Some relied on their parents for advice or support and others had parents who became role models for their children or who helped support them during their spouses absences.

Struggles in Maintaining the Relationship

The most commonly reported struggle between parent and child (when parent was still living) was balancing the relationship commitments with the parent with other relationship commitments, such as romantic partners or partners' families. Six participants cited this as a main struggle in maintaining this adult relationship with the parent. Three specifically noted trying to balance time with spouses/partners with time with family. Another participant noted that her parent did not approve of the person that she married, but noted that her parent was still there for her despite this fact. Another participant described his experience of coming to the United States and dating. He stated:

> . . . she wanted me to get married to a girl of her choice because that's the way
> things are in our culture and I had promised her that. But when I was here and you
> go to school, you meet members of the opposite sex. And it's fine to go out on a
> date or just be friends, nothing serious. But I could never talk to her about it
> because I felt if she found out that I'm going out or I'm just seeing someone
> socially that would just make her upset.

Other struggles included two participants who described one of their deceased parents as being alcoholics, one participant who felt a parent's temper got in the way of the relationship, and one participant who wished to feel emotionally closer to the parent.

In addition, one participant noted that her father had left when she was latency age but had returned upon the death of her mother. The participant reported that at this time she and her father lived near each other until he relapsed into alcoholism and was forced to move farther away where he could afford to live. She reported that her contact with her father was intermittent after that although she did see him again when he was ill, before his death.

Connections Between Relationship to God(s) and to Parents

Four participants reported incorporating their parents into their belief systems following the parents' deaths. One participant stated when asked about her image of God(s), "I don't know if he watches over us, because there's such terrible things that happen, but I guess I would like to believe that there is something that I can talk to." Then, when asked if there had been any changes in her relationship with God following the death of her parent, she stated, "None. The difference is now when I step outside, I think I'm talking more to her [mother]." Similarly, another participant stated, "I talk to them now [mother and father]. I talked to them before but I talk to them now. And I ask myself what they would do in any given situation." Yet another participant stated, "Probably the only change is in the concept of seeing the spirit of both my parents come from a place that most likely involves God. . . Easter service I felt the presence of both my parents and God from the same place." Finally, the fourth participant (who currently believes in God) stated in regards to her father, "I think he's watching over me." In all

these examples, the common factor is a belief that with the parents' deaths comes an overlap between the parent and God(s) relationships.

Other participants did not necessarily overlap their parents and God(s), yet the death of the parent had an effect on the relationship with God(s) or with their faith. One participant stated that as a child she deeply admired her father. She stated, " . . .He was like God." And she went on to say, " . . . I think I idolized him a lot, so I'm not really sure he quite measured up all the way, but yeah, I would say I always felt loved." Yet, in terms of God, she described feeling that she did not know she could have a relationship with God and that her image of God was very punitive. After the death of her father she stated, "I felt very afraid in my world because if something like that could happen, a sudden death, than anything could happen . . .But it wasn't really until after I, dad died, and I got into recovery [from alcoholism] that I developed that sense of relationship." She goes on to say of her relationship with God now, "So having developed a faith in that relationship, it's made me stronger . . .Yeah, obviously it's changed since I had no relationship with God before." In this way, the death of her Father (whom she identified as being "like God") was what enabled her to seek a relationship with God because when he died her structure for understanding the world and it's rules seemed to crumble as well. It provided an opportunity for her to reconstruct her view of the world and of her faith. There appears here to be a compensatory effect.

The death of a parent did not draw all participants closer in their relationships with God. The following two examples illustrate this. The first participant stated of her childhood relationship with her father, "We were very close . . . I think I was his favorite. We all might think we were his favorites, I don't know, but I think we had a special

bond." Then in terms of describing her relationship with God prior to the death of her

father she stated, "We were pretty close. Um, I was one of his favorite children just like

everybody else." There is an obvious similarity here in how the participant viewed her

relationship with her Father and with God prior to her Father's death. The participant

then notes that after her father died, her faith changed as well. She stated:

> I miss my dad and I miss God. I miss my relationship with both of them. I
> miss being certain about my relationship with God and exactly who God
> was. I miss that a lot. And I miss my dad a lot.

In this case, the participant's relationship with God parallels with her relationship with

her father in the sense that it almost appears to "die" with the death of her parent.

In the second example, a participant discussed how she had a strong relationship

with her mother and God prior to her mother's death in comparison to following her

mother's death. Before her mother's death she stated she relied on, "My mother." She

also stated that at this time she believed in God as she had her entire life. She stated, "I

felt there was a God . . .I never really questioned my faith very much." Then in terms of

who she relied on following her mother's death she stated:

> I rely on my husband for some stuff, I rely on my friends for a lot of stuff. Some
> stuff I would actually go to my father's new wife for. It's sort of specific to the
> situation but I would rely on my mother for every situation. . . and without her
> now, I sort of go to different people for different things.

Similarly, instead of believing in one God as she had up until this point, following the

death of her mother she stated:

> And I would say now that I don't necessarily believe in God… I believe
> that there's a force, a power that more people together can create
> something more than one person. That there's an energy that a lot of
> people can create between them and that's sort of my version of God. So
> before when I felt God as an entity . . .I think of God now as sort of the
> power of people working together.

In this case, the participant has gone from relying on her mother to relying on many, just as she has gone from believing in one God to believing in the power of many people working together.

Who Relied on Before and After Death of Parent

The question was asked of all participants: "Before the death of your parent, whom did you rely on in times of trouble?"(Question 6) as well as the question, "Who do you currently rely on?"(Question 7). Eight participants answered that their departed parent was one of the main people they relied on prior to the parents' deaths.

Table 7, below, illustrates the eight participants' answers who identified their departed parent as being the person or one of the people they relied on in times of trouble. The table notes the shifts in their support system once the parent has departed.

Table 7: Who Did Participant Rely on Before and After Death?

Type of Support	Relied on Before Parent Death	Relied on After Parent Death
Departed Parent	5	0
Parent and Partner, Relative, or Self	3	0
Spouse/Partner	0	2
Other Family Members	0	1
Partner/Spouse and Other Family Members	0	2
Partner/Spouse and Other Family Members and Friends	0	1
Other Family Members and Self	0	1
Self	0	1

This table indicates how those who relied on their departed parent, even in conjunction with another relative, had to re-evaluate who they needed to rely on after

their parent's parting. It is worth noting that the only participant who mentioned God either in terms of relying on a God figure before or after the parent's death was a participant who identified as relying on her husband and God both before and after the death of her parent. No participant mentioned adding a reliance on God(s) after the death of his or her parent(s).

The table does indicate that after the passing of such an important support system for these participants, they did in fact search out and identify other support systems, whether they were other relatives, spouses/partners, friends or a combination of these. Only one participant identified as only relying on themselves following the death of the parent they previously relied on. This finding is particularly interesting as the participant who identified as only relying on herself, also identified as having a strong relationship with her parent and with God prior to her loss, but now identifies as being unsure if she still has a relationship with God. In this case, she has lost two large supports for herself and has chosen instead to rely on herself.

For the most part, the results also indicate that other family members and spouses/partners were the most common replacements for support following the participants' parental loss.

Good-bye Experiences

Participants were asked the question, "Were you able to say good-bye to your parent before his or her death? Can you tell me about that experience?" (Question 8). Six participants reported having had a formal good-bye experience with at least one of their parents before the parents' deaths. Of those who lost both parents, some participants had the opportunity to say good-bye to one parent and not another. Some had no

opportunity to say good-bye because the parents' deaths were sudden, and still others

expected the parents' deaths but had no formal good-bye. Table 8 below details this

experience for participants.

Table 8: Goodbye Experiences for Participants

Participants Who Lost Both Parents			Participants Who Lost One Parent		
Said Good-bye to Both Parents	Said Good-bye to One Parent, Not the Other	Knew Parent Dying, But No Formal Good-bye (other death sudden)	Said Good-bye to Parent	Death was Sudden, No Good-bye	Knew Parent Dying, But No Formal Good-bye
1	2	1	3	3	2

Types of Good-bye Experiences

Of the six participants who identified as having an official good-bye experience

with at least one of their parents, five reported the experience as being a good experience,

even if at times emotional or difficult. One Participant stated:

> . . . all our families all came up to my parents' house and one by one our
> children said good-bye to her and it was an incredibly heartbreaking thing
> to watch. It was just, um, it was just incredible. And to see her have to do
> that, it was one of the most heroic things I've ever seen anyone do.

Another Participant stated, "It was very important to be there. I wanted to be there. I was

afraid to be there, but it was great. And it kind of completed a cycle."

The idea of ending a cycle or leaving nothing left unsaid or done was one echoed

by several participants. One participant stated, " . . . but to be able to say everything that

you need to say to your parents at that moment, I would never not have that if given the

choice. It was really an incredible thing." Another participant stated that she had been

present during her father's illness, but chose not to discuss the actual experience of his

passing. She did state that she preferred knowing that his death was coming, in contrast to her mother's death which had been sudden.

Yet another participant, who had had a good-bye experience with his parent, stated the experience had been very difficult because he had not wanted to accept that his mother was in fact dying.

Three participants noted that the parent who was dying was surrounded by family at the time of the death. For all three participants this was noted as a positive part of the process for the parent and themselves. One participant, in describing the time before her father passed, stated:

> It was a wonderful day. It was mother's day . . . he called my mother into the room and he actually sang to her and gave her the brooch and then throughout the afternoon all of us were in and out of the room, sitting on the bed, talking, just – it wasn't really saying good-bye. It was just an acceptance that this was it and he was just taking each one of the family members as they came into the room and holding a hand or whatever it was.

The participant added that later in the day, she and her son were by her father's side in his last moments. She stated:

> . . . he was very agitated and his grandson came home and realized what was happening and climbed up on the bed with him and just put both of his arms around him and just rocked him like this. And he went to sleep and never woke up.

Another Participant stated, " . . . she had all her family around and absolutely loved it."

Religion in the Good-bye

Although no participant reported directly discussing religion with their parents during their good-bye experiences, five participants identified religion as playing a part in the good-bye experience as a whole.

Two participants discussed a religious ritual that was a part of the experience. One participant discussed how his Mother continued with her prayers and daily rituals as she had always done. Another participant discussed how his Mother, who had gotten to the point where she received nourishment through a feeding tube, made a conscious choice to link her passing with her religious practice. She was Jewish and decided to use the holiday of Yom Kippur to take out her feeding tube, as this was when the fast naturally took place. He stated, "So she decided that she was going to do that and she was going to use – because she was a religious woman as both my parents were – they were going to use Yom Kippur as her time to start that process." He also noted the Rabbi coming to visit her and their family.

One participant noted that she had given her mother (who was very religious) her cross to wear because she sensed that her mother was nearing the end and she had always liked the participant's cross. Another participant recalled her parents praying together on her father's death bed. While yet another Participant stated that his mother, who died second, had told him that she would see his father again soon.

Following the deaths, it is worth noting that two participants, who both identified as Jewish, found comfort in the prayers for the dead that are said at Yom Kippur.

No Chance For Good-byes

Six participants stated they had not had a chance to say good-bye to at least one of their parents, as the parent had died suddenly and unexpectedly. One participant reported:

> But with my Mother, on the other hand, it was traumatic. She had a sudden heart attack, she was young. We had no idea that was going to happen. So when it's sudden like that it's the worst. It's a lot different.

Another participant stated that her father had also died suddenly and when asked if she had gotten a chance to say good-bye she stated, "Not knowingly. Fortunately, the standard thing is 'I love you, good-bye', so I'm pretty sure that's the last thing I ever said to him, but it was unexpected, so not really."

Feel after Death of Parent

Participants were asked, "Can you describe how you felt in the months following the death of your parent?" (Question 10). Participants identified multiple feelings that were experienced during their bereavement process.

The following table, Table 9, represents the four most common types of answers reported by participants. Many participants mentioned more than one feeling that they had after their parents' deaths. Many experienced feeling numb, vacant or emotionless. These answers were categorized as "Numb/Vacant". Others expressed feeling some relief that the parent was in a better place or no longer suffering. These answers were categorized as "Relief/ No Longer Suffering". Others expressed feelings of sadness, devastation or of missing their lost parent. These answers were categorized as "Sadness/ Miss Parent" and those who expressed feeling in shock were categorized as "In Shock".

Table 9: Emotions During Bereavement

Emotion Felt	Numb/Vacant	Relief/ No Longer Suffering	Sadness/ Miss Parent	In shock
Number of Participants	6	4	6	2

Numbness

As the table indicates, six participants identified feeling numb/vacant after the parents' deaths, making it one of the two most common answers given to express how participants felt following their loss. One of the participants who expressed a numbness following her parent's death stated:

> I felt like I was wrapped in gauze and underwater. Not drowning, just so absolutely wrapped in layers and layers of gauze. Everything was fuzzy. I don't remember a lot of those months. I don't think I was feeling much of anything. I was numb, just so numb.

Another participant stated, "I felt very numb through the whole process. I just went through it mechanically. So I think subconsciously my mind was just blocking all that out."

Sadness and Relief

Six participants also identified as feeling sad or as missing their parent, following the parents' deaths. Four participants identified as feeling some relief that their parent was either no longer suffering or was in a better place. Three participants noted that they felt both sadness and relief as a result of their parents' deaths. One participant stated, "There was sadness but there was also relief."

Of the nine participants who had at least one parent whose death was expected, four noted being glad that the parent was no longer suffering or was in a better place.

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Shock

        Two participants noted feeling that they were in shock following the death of their parents. Both of these participants lost a parent to a sudden and unexpected death. One participant stated, "I was just, I don't even know what the word would be. I was in shock, really." What is interesting is that both of these participants also noted that the sudden death of their parent led them to feel as if the world had changed overnight. One participant stated, "I had this strange thing where I couldn't listen to music. I don't know why. I think it had something to do with not wanting to believe that everything else in the world was moving on and going on when my life was just destroyed." The other participant stated, "I remember looking at people and saying, 'How can you laugh? How can you be having fun? Don't you know that the world has changed?'"

        In addition, as a result of these sudden deaths, these two participants also both expressed the feeling that it took them a while to believe that their parent was in fact dead. One participant reported, " . . . I had never seen anyone die when my dad died and with him dying so suddenly, it took me years to really believe that he was actually dead. Truly, actually dead, since I hadn't seen him or anything." The other participant who identified as experiencing shock stated, similarly:

> It was traumatic. It took me a very long time to accept it. I know it
> probably sounds horrible but there were times where I really wanted to
> believe that she had fooled everyone and it was a big joke and she was on
> an island somewhere taking a vacation.

        Other responses to the parent's deaths included one participant expressing anger at the loss of her parent. She stated, " . . . and I was very angry then, afterwards. I was so mad." Another feeling that was expressed by a participant was a feeling of fear. The

participant stated, "I felt very afraid in my world because if something like that could happen, a sudden death, than anything could happen."

Finally, one participant noted how hard it could be when both parents had died. The Participant reported, " . . . but when you realize you're at the top of the pyramid or near the top, as opposed to having a parent above you it's a very odd feeling."

<center>*Meaning-Making Around the Parents' Deaths*</center>

Although participants were specifically asked, "What meaning, if any, do you make of your parent's death?"(Question 27), participants' answers around meaning-making were taken from sections throughout the interviews as they seemed relevant, as well as in response to this question; because throughout the interviews, several participants expressed more than one form of meaning-making around the deaths of their parents. For instance, participants may have felt that the death of a parent reminded them that life is not infinite and that they needed to utilize their time on earth and also have stated at another time that everything was part of God's plan. Therefore, all answers were organized and represented in the paragraphs below.

The Death Was Part of God(s)' Plan

Four participants made statements that indicated a belief that a parent's death had been part of a greater plan orchestrated by God(s). None of these participants expressed anger at their God(s) for a plan that ended their parents' lives. To the contrary, these beliefs appeared to provide them with comfort that there was a meaning to their loss.

One Participant discussed how after work, she always took the same route to visit her mother. Yet, on the evening of her Mother's death, she found herself taking a different route. She stated:

I'm coming up on my exit where I would usually put on my blinker, but I couldn't. I couldn't. And I wanted to go to the right and I couldn't…I took a route that I never took. I kept going faster and faster, not knowing why I was feeling the way I was feeling . . . the Big Guy had his hands in it.

The same participant said at another point, "He knows that it's time and that you can't do anymore, that He relinquishes you from what you're going through . . ."

Another participant stated:

I was going to say it happened too soon, but then I have to believe it happened at the perfect time because that's when it happened. I guess that's it. What was supposed to happen, happened when it was supposed to happen, in the way it was supposed to happen, even though it didn't thrill any of us too much.

In both accounts, there is the sense that there was purposefulness on God(s)' part, in the timing of their parents' deaths.

Lessons Learned from God

Two participants identified that God(s) had meant their parents' deaths to provide them with a learning experience. One participant stated:

I think it's our losses, our sacrifices, for lessons that we need to see and perhaps that's why He maybe that's why – I needed to see some things and I don't think my mother was going until she saw, heard, that I'd made those realizations . . .

The participant stated that there was a lesson that she was supposed to learn as the result of her Mother's death, but what is interesting about this example is that she combined God and her Mother as if to state that they both needed her to learn something before her mother could go.

Another participant stated,

. . . I look at things the way they happened as there's a reason people enter your life and events happen and He has something to do with it and He's

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trying to get you to learn a lesson and I think I see that more now than I did before my Father's death.

Lessons Learned from Their Parents' Lives and Deaths

Three participants stated that they had learned lessons from their parents' lives.

One participant stated that her lesson had been learned as a child from her sibling's death.

The participant stated:

> . . . it kind of teaches me again, because my sister was 16 when she died, that life is short and you don't know how much time you have here so if you have to say something, say it and if you have to do something, do it.

Another participant echoed this sentiment. She reported, "And I think it gives us an appreciation for how short our time is. We think we have forever and we don't. So you have to make the most of the time you do have." Yet another participant identified his mother's strength through her illness as a life lesson for him and his children.

Two participants understood some of their parent's short-comings in terms of lessons for their own lives. One participant reported:

> And unfortunately, I use that with my Father's life, where he chose to express his anger and frustration in ways that have-and then one day he's gone and you realize, 'Was that all worth it? What did you get from that?'

Another participant stated:

> I guess it's in a way, a life lesson for his children. That not taking care of yourself and being a Type A personality will kill you far earlier than you should go. Absolutely, that's one of his biggest teachings in his passing, I think.

Appreciating Relationships

Two participants expressed how the death of their parent, emphasized to them how important their loved ones were to them. One participant stated, ". . .it just hits you so much more, how important the people you care about and love are."

Mortality

Two participants, who it is worth noting were the two eldest participants, noted

that the passing of their parents reminded them of their own mortality and time on earth.

One participant stated:

> The meaning is that it taught us that life is a cycle and that their departure
> from earth is very much a part of the cycle of life as much as ours will be
> when our turn comes . . . And I think it gives us appreciation for how short
> our time is.

No Meaning

Two participants reported that they did not feel their parents' deaths held

particular meaning. One participant stated:

> I think she lived and she died and it was sad and she died young, but I
> don't think it has a meaning. I don't think she died to teach me a lesson or
> to help other people or to show – I mean, I don't feel like it has a meaning
> per se.

Personal Growth

Finally, one participant stated that her parent's death was able to act as a catalyst

for personal growth. In discussing how she felt after her parent's death, she reported:

> I came to a place that I didn't feel like I could go any lower emotionally. I
> cannot, I cannot, my heart will die, my heart will break if I, you know?
> And I really – that's when I was able to recognize that I was using alcohol
> as a coping tool. And that led me to, second only to my Father's death, as
> one of the most important experiences of my life. Life changing, was
> recognizing that I was using alcohol in that way and that I was spiritually
> dead . . . I don't know who that woman was anymore, but I know I was
> that woman at one time.

This participant went on to explain that it was at this time that she began to develop a

relationship with God, in a way that she had not previously experienced.

Participants were asked, "What do you believe happens to people after they die?", with the follow-up question, "Does this belief help you to feel connected to your parent?" (Question 11).

Six participants noted that they had a belief in an afterlife and that this belief helped them to feel connected to their lost parent. Four participants expressed some level of belief/desire for belief in an afterlife (although with differing degrees of uncertainty), and two expressed feeling that there was no afterlife.

Several participants expressed either feeling that their parents were now with other previously departed members of their families or were now with God. One participant stated, "I guess I do believe in Heaven. I really do. I believe their soul or their spirit goes to Heaven and that they [both parents] are together." Another participant stated, ". . . but his dog died a week before he did. That his best buddy was waiting for him. That's what I felt, that they were together." Another participant stated, "I believe that he's reunited with my sister, his daughter, and his family." A participant echoed this sentiment when she stated, ". . . those three days before she passed she said I just want to see your brother again . . . so that helps me cope all the time." Lastly, a participant reported, "I felt the presence of both my parents and God from the same place."

Some participants did not hold this belief. A participant stated, "Now, I believe the human body is a shell. I don't know, I don't believe in life after death. I believe that when you die, that's it. You just go to sleep forever."

Others expressed uncertainty about their beliefs. One participant stated, "I'm not sure. I used to think that people who believed in reincarnation were nuts, but now I'm

starting to think that way myself . . . I don't really know." For some, they expressed this

uncertainty in terms of wanting to believe in an afterlife so that they could see their

parent once again, but not being sure whether this was something they really believed. A

participant stated, " . . . and it would be very nice to be reunited with them in a spiritual

sense after I die. I don't really believe that, but I have some minimal hope that perhaps

that could happen." In these cases it is clear that there is a desire to believe in an afterlife

but this is not a belief that they securely hold.

<center>*Signs/Symbols of the Lost Parent*</center>

Five participants expressed seeing symbols or signs that their lost parent was still

alive. What is particularly interesting about these results is that participants were not

asked during the interview whether they ever saw signs or symbols of their departed

parents. Rather, this was a theme that emerged on its own in response to other questions.

Signs in Nature

One participant noted several examples of signs in nature that had allowed herself

and her partner to feel connected to their lost parents or to help them make decisions in

their lives. She stated:

> She [partner] was over at my house having dinner and there were two frogs out on
> the patio and it was weird. And we both said it was my father and her mother. We
> looked up frogs and it resembles friendship.

> Similarly, another participant also pointed to signs in nature. She said:

> And we spread the ashes in between this vista of mountains and when we
> were starring at the ashes, this crow flew right between the two mountains
> and cawed right in the middle, and that was freaky because mythology
> says that they carry the souls away, so it's kind of strange. So I feel her
> every now and then.

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Lost Ones Making Their Presence Known

One participant, who lost her brother in childhood, recalled when her mother was dying. She stated,

> . . . In the interim when I was making sure she was still breathing, I was trying to call my sister on my cell phone to let her know what was happening . . . but for whatever reason, the cell service wasn't working. It was dead. Dead. And I got service in her room, always . . . I was trying to call my sister and that was ironic for the fact that it went out and I think that was my brother. My brother knew and he was waiting.

This participant noted another event that occurred when she was out walking her dog, after her mother had passed, " . . . all of a sudden I just froze and it, the warmth through my body was unbelievable. It was mom. She came to me. She was there and she stayed, she stayed for a while."

Another participant reported, "You can feel things physically sometimes. And sometimes I could feel this chill, or in a dream, or something like that."

Yet another participant stated:

> I was with my dad at home and I could just feel, sense her. I could feel her, her presence in the house. And it had a very nice, a very calming effect. Whether it's true or not, I don't know, but that's how we feel about it.

Lastly, a participant recalled the Easter Sunday service he recently attended at his parent's church and the presence he felt there as well. He stated, "We're not regular members of that church and I felt a calling and a need to go to my parents' church. And I felt them looking down and say "Oh, glad you're here" and it was spiritually rewarding."

Can God(s) Intervene on Earth

Participants were asked the question, "Do you feel God has the power to intervene on earth?" (Question 24). Participants' answers ranged from yes, to no, to unsure but hoped that God(s) had the power to do so.

Yes

Five participants reported believing that yes, God(s) has the power to intervene on earth. Of these five, two participants identified this belief less as an intervention and more as God creating the direction to begin with. One participant stated, "Absolutely, no doubt. We're just the puppets. He's got the strings. He does it. He does it all." Another participant stated, "The word 'intervene' makes me stumble. I think He directs. I don't know whether He intervenes. I think the direction is already set."

No

Four participants reported that they did not feel God(s) had the power to intervene on earth. One participant responded:

> I don't believe so because one of the beliefs that my Mom and Dad taught
> me is that you are in charge of your own destiny, and God creates the
> basic foundations. He or she brings you here, but once you're here what
> you do with your life is up to you.

Another participant stated, "No. Because if He could, he would have. September 11th, I mean, let's look at some of these major catastrophes that have happened and all these innocent people who have died. He cannot intervene. I don't believe He can." Of the participants who answered "No" to this question, one participant had strong beliefs in God(s), one stated earlier that she no longer believed in God, and two participants were strongly questioning if they still had a relationship or belief in God.

Unsure, but Want the Answer to be Yes

Three participants stated that they were unsure whether God(s) has the power to intervene on earth. All three, however, stated a desire to have God(s) be able to intervene. One participant stated, I'd like to believe that, but I'm not so sure it's true. But I'd like to believe it." Another stated,

> I hope so. I feel practically and emotionally that we're in a very tumultuous time . . . I believe to some extent that intervention is going to be our savior because the 'powers that be' are going the other way and we need to balance the act.

One participant echoed similarly the previous statement as well as the statement made about September 11th, when she stated, "That's what I'm trying to figure out. Well, if He doesn't, then what's the point. And if He does, then He's in big trouble." There is an expression in those statements about the negative events that are transpiring in the world, and a hope by two of the participants that God(s) will be able to intervene.

Then there is the statement by one that these worldly events act as proof to her that there is no intervention.

Combining Data on Type of Death, God(s)' Power on Earth, and Relationship with

God(s) After Parents' Deaths

Information about the nature of the death (sudden death or expected) was taken from participants' answers in the demographic questionnaire as well as their answer to the question of whether or not they had an opportunity to say good-bye to their parents before their deaths. Information regarding whether God Does or Does Not Have Power to Intervene came directly from the question asked of all participants, "Does God have the power to intervene on earth?" Those answers were categorized above as "Yes, No,

Unsure but want the answer to be Yes" and are detailed in Table 10, below. Those who answered "Unsure but want the answer to be yes" had the answer shortened to "Unsure, want yes" for the table. Information regarding Relationship with God after death: Strengthened, Weakened, Same, was gathered from questions pertaining to the participants' perceived relationships with God before and after their parent's deaths. It is worth noting that if the answer was "same" this did not denote a strong relationship with God. For instance, one participant questioned his relationship (if any) with God both before and after his parents' deaths.

For participants who lost both parents, both types of deaths are noted.

Table 10: Combining Type of Death, God(s)' Powers and Relationship with God(s)

Participant #	Death Sudden or Expected	God(s) Does or Does Not Have Power to Intervene on Earth	Relationship with God(s) after Death: Strengthened, Weakened, Same
1	Sudden	Yes	Same
2	Expected	Yes	Strengthened
3	Expected	Unsure, want yes	Same
4	Expected	No	Weakened
5	Expected	Yes	Strengthened
6	Expected	No	Same
7	Sudden Expected	No	Same
8	Expected Sudden	Yes	Strengthened
9	Expected Expected	Unsure, want yes	Strengthened
10	Sudden Expected	No	Weakened
11	Sudden	Yes	Weakened
12	Sudden	Unsure, want yes	Strengthened

When looking at the concepts of God(s) Intervening and Relationship with God(s) after Death, there are some noteworthy relationships. The five participants who believed

their relationships with God(s) was strengthened after the death of their parent all felt that either God(s) had the power to intervene on earth or that they were unsure but wanted God to be able to intervene on earth. No one who felt God(s) did not have the power to intervene on earth felt that their relationship had been made stronger by the loss. Four participants answered that they did not believe God(s) had the power to intervene on earth and of these four, two felt their relationship was weakened or no longer present and two felt their relationship was the same as before the parents' deaths.

When looking at Sudden/Expected death and Relationship with God, the results were very variable. Of those who lost one parent to a sudden death and one to an expected death, one participant reported a strengthened, one a weakened, and one a same relationship with God. Of those who reported a Sudden death with their one lost parent, one participant reported a strengthened, one a weakened and one a same relationship with God as well. For those who experienced an expected death with either their one parent or with both parents, three experienced a strengthened relationship, one a weakened, and two a same relationship with God.

When looking at Sudden/Expected death and God(s) Intervening, of those who lost one parent to an expected death and one to a sudden death, one said yes God(s) could intervene and two said no. Of those who experienced the sudden loss of their one parent, two said yes and one said unsure. Of those who experienced the expected loss of their one parent, two said yes, two said no, and two said unsure. Therefore, like the Sudden/Expected death and Relationship with God variables, these results are quite spread out.

Finding Support in Religious Communities

Of the twelve participants, 10 reported that they did not find comfort in a religious community following the death of their parent, either because they did not have a community, the community did not reach out, or they did not seek out a community.

Two participants (both of which were Jewish) noted that they did find support from their religious communities following the death of their parent(s). One participant noted that going to services during the holidays was a comfort for her during her bereavement, as were the Jewish prayers that are said for the deceased. Another participant remarked on the people aspect of the community. He stated:

> Even locally, my rabbi and other people we know through our temple, have been very supportive and I've seen other instances where people would otherwise be not left alone emotionally, but there is a greater sense of emotional support given to a family whose in need, whose mourning and I just think it's very important.

Religious or Psychological Counseling

Five participants stated that they had not received religious or psychological counseling in relation to their loss. Five reported receiving psychological counseling and of these, four reported it being a helpful experience whereas one reported it not being a helpful experience. Of those who felt it was helpful, reasons given included helping with the individual's growing process, helping get through the grieving period, and giving helpful interpretations. The reason given for one participant's unhelpful experience was that the participant's therapist had also recently lost a parent and she ended up feeling as if she was counseling her therapist, instead of the other way around.

Two participants identified as having received some form of religious counseling. One reported this as a positive experience as the participant felt the religious leader was

able to support her and her family through a difficult time. The other participant noted personality of the religious leader as the block in connection. The participant stated, "It's a personality thing. I think a different person in the role, or acting as rabbi could have helped."

One participant who did not seek out religious or psychological counseling stated, "People actually go for help? When this happened to me my family was just 'go for help? Well it's a natural thing to lose a parent, you don't need help.' But maybe I could have used it, you know?" When asked what would have made it helpful, she responded:

> Just to have someone to talk to. You know, because I kind of felt as though a couple months after my mother's death that everyone was going on with their life . . . and the holidays were coming up – mother's day was coming up and no one even thought to even come and see how I was doing.

This participant echoed what many participants stated in different ways, which was how important it was to have someone that they could share the experience of their loss with, whether it was a counselor, a family member, friend or partner.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

In this chapter, I will first discuss the major findings of this thesis within the context of previous research and theory, and will then move on to discuss strengths and limitations of the study, implications for social work, and suggestions for future research.

Current Findings and Previous Research

The following section will discuss the major findings of this thesis in the context of previous research and theories. Overall, the findings supported and added to several aspects of existing research and theory in terms of the importance of parental attachment figures and God figures, as well as the changes is religion and beliefs that can come in times of bereavement or crisis.

Religious Denominations and Changes in Faith after Parents' Deaths

I was surprised by the number of participants who identified as still having the same belief systems as their parents before the parents' deaths, as well as by the number of changes in religious beliefs immediately following the death of the parent. When tracking religious affiliation, 11 of 12 participants identified as having the same denomination as their parents before the parents' deaths. Nine participants reported that their parents discussed religion or God with them in adulthood. Yet, after their parent(s)' deaths, 8 of the participants identified themselves as immediately experiencing a change

in faith, with an additional participant identifying herself as currently having a different belief system than she did before her parent's death (although her beliefs remained the same immediately following the death).

The results of this study complemented Richardson's (1997) study of women who lost their mothers when they were between the ages of 5 and 17 years of age. In her study, she noted that 10 out of 10 participants experienced some form of shift in their spiritual connection over their lives, but that not all shifts were attributed to their loss.

Relationship Changes with God(s)

Much like the changes in religious denominations and beliefs following the parents' deaths, 8 out of 12 participants also reported a change in their relationships with God(s) following the death of their parents. These changes ranged from a strengthening in their relationships with God(s), to a weakening/loss of/ questioning of their relationships with God(s). It is worth noting that the 4 participants who did not report a change in their relationships with God(s) also ranged from feeling they had a strong relationship with God(s) before and after, to questioning if they had a relationship with God(s) both before and after.

In Richardson's (1997) study, she noted that 7 of 10 participants stated that they felt closer to God after the loss of their mothers. Interestingly, in my study, 8 out of 12 participants noted a change in their relationships with God(s) following the death of their parent, although unlike Richardson's study where 7 participants stated they felt closer to God, in my study there was more variance around the type of change they experienced. In my study, 5 out of 12 participants stated they felt their relationship with God(s) was strengthened and 3 out of 12 stated their relationship with God(s) was weakened or called

into question. The remaining 4 out of 12 stated they did not experience a change in their relationships with God(s).

Therefore, the results of my study support the idea that loss of a parent can effect both a person's religious affiliation/spirituality, as well as their relationship with God(s), whether the loss of the parent occurs in childhood or adulthood. This study, however, found more variation in the types of changes than did the Richardson study.

Correspondence between Parents and God(s)

In two separate sections, participants were asked to identify tasks they felt God(s) and their parents were responsible for in their lives and also then answer whether they felt God(s) and their parents had upheld these responsibilities to them.

A major finding in this study was that 8 of the 12 participants felt God(s) had upheld God(s)' responsibilities to them and 10 of the 12 felt their parent(s) had upheld their responsibilities to them.

Six participants believed that both God(s) and their parents had upheld their responsibilities, 4 thought their parents only, and 2 thought God(s) only. What is interesting about this result is that no one felt that neither God(s) nor their parents had upheld responsibilities to them. This meant that all participants felt that they could either rely on their parents or on God(s) to provide them with basic care/comfort/love.

When looking at the data gathered in this study, it appears that the majority of the participants felt they had a better than average relationship with their parent in childhood, possibly indicating a fairly secure attachment style. Interestingly, the data on the participants' adult relationships with their parents would support Ainsworth's belief that

attachment is a process that continues throughout the life span as many indicated

remaining close to, and still relying on, their parents.

The idea that there would be a correspondence between the child-parent

relationship and the participants' other adult relationships is one made by Bowlby, who

believed that the parent-child relationship formed the basis for future relationships. This

viewpoint echoed that of the McDonald et al. (2005) study that found support for a

Correspondence between parent-child relationships and participant-God relationships. In

this way, that study is a natural extension of Bowlby's belief that the relationship with

one's parent forms the basis for future relationships (Stroebe, 2002), in this case with

God figures. The competing theory with Correspondence is Compensation, which is the

theory that a God relationship could make up deficits from the parent-child relationship.

The results of this study gave support to both the theory of Correspondence and to

the theory of Compensation. Evidence that supported Correspondence is as follows.

Lending further evidence to the ideas of Bowlby and McDonald, Beck et al., are the

results which indicated that of the twelve participants, six felt that both their parent and

God(s) had upheld their responsibilities to them. This shows a similarity perhaps between

the way participants attached to their parent(s) and to God(s). In addition, there were

many similarities between the responsibilities attached to parents and the responsibilities

attached to God figures, such as "love" and "care for".

Yet, contrary to the expectations of the Correspondence theory, there were no

strong relationships between people's answers to their childhood images of God(s) and

their relationships with their parents in childhood. For instance, those who reported

believing in a God who should be feared, did not report similarly fearful experiences with

parents, and some of those who reported believing in a loving God did not report having particularly strong relationships with their parents in childhood. This is in contrast to other studies that have shown relationships between these two variables. Yet, in this case it is important to note that the small sample size prevents generalizing statements to be made.

Still, support for the Compensation theory was indicated by two participants who felt that God(s) had upheld responsibilities to them, but not their parents. This result may indicate that for some, God(s) can act as a replacement type figure. Further evidence is that no participant reported not having a relationship with God(s) and their parents. Every participant felt that they either had responsibilities upheld by their parent, by God(s) or by both. This may indicate that people will seek out some form of attachment, rather than a Correspondence theory, which might state that if a parent could not uphold responsibilities there would be an assumption on the part of the participant that neither could God(s).

Although the sample is too small to generalize, further evidence of the Compensation theory may come from the fact that 8 of the 12 participants experienced a change in their relationships with God(s) following the death of the parent. For five of these participants it was a strengthening of the relationship and for three, the death led to questioning of or loss of relationship with God(s). Although it is my understanding that the Compensation and Correspondence theories are based on childhood attachments to parents in relationship to attachment to God, it is worth considering whether Compensation may become more poignant following the loss of a parent, versus when a parent is still present. For instance, in the study by Cicerelli (2004) of older adults who

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lose important figures, Cicerelli stated that perhaps God may act as a substitute attachment figure for some. Perhaps this may be the case for adults who lose parents, as their first and often most relied on attachment figure is no longer present.

In this way, the results also supported Guttman's (1991) study which indicated that the loss of a parent can effect other relationships. In this article, Guttman was referring mainly to participants' spouses and partners, but perhaps the researcher's study contributes to the idea that God(s) is one of these relationships that may be affected, for better or worse, by a profound loss.

Afterlife

It is interesting to note that of the six participants who identified as believing in an afterlife, four of them felt their relationship with God(s) had been strengthened after the parents' deaths, and the remaining two felt their relationships with God(s) was the same. Also of the total five participants who believed their relationship with God(s) was strengthened, four felt God(s) had the power to intervene on earth and one reported being unsure, but hoped that this was the case.

Of the three participants who reported a weakened or non-existent relationship with God(s), two reported no belief in an afterlife or in God(s) having the power to intervene on earth and the remaining participant identified as being unsure on both counts.

These results indicated a possible connection between the type of relationship one has with God(s) and what powers that God(s) holds. What is unclear is which might lead to the other. For instance, if people believe they have a strong relationship with God(s) following the death of a parent, they might be more likely to believe in other religious

aspects such as God(s) having power in their lives or of there being an afterlife. Or, after a parent's death, some people might desire for an afterlife so that they might see their parent(s) again, or for a powerful God(s) who can intervene in their lives, now that they do not have a parent in the role of protector.

In the study by Norenzayan and Hansen (2006), their studies 1 and 2 indicated that, "mortality salience led to more religiosity, stronger belief in God, and in divine intervention" (p. 174). Their study suggested that a belief in God or in an afterlife can make the acceptance of a death more tolerable. In addition, it suggested that, perhaps for some, religiosity is even increased in the face of one's own mortality or the mortality of a loved one.

Results of my study lend some support to the results found in Norenzayan and Hansen (2006). Of the 5 participants who indicated a strengthened relationship with God(s) following the death of a parent, 4 stated they believed God(s) had the power to intervene on earth and the remaining participant stated that she was unsure, but hoped this was the case. Of the 3 participants who stated their relationships were weakened or in question, two indicated no belief in an afterlife or in God's ability to intervene and one indicated being unsure on both counts. Therefore there appears to be a loose relationship between the parents' deaths and some participants experiencing an increase in their beliefs in God(s) and in divine intervention. For others who do not hold a belief or desire for a belief in an afterlife or divine intervention, they might not feel the same drive to increase their religiosity.

Meaning-Making Around Death

The participants reported a variety of meaning-making experiences regarding their parents' deaths. Six participants noted God(s) as being part of their meaning-making process, with four participants feeling the death was part of God(s)' plan and two feeling the death was in part a lesson from God(s).

Others saw meaning in the way their parents had lived their lives or in the manner of their deaths, or saw the death as a reminder about appreciating loved ones or as a reminder of their own mortality. Two participants did not identify a particular meaning with their parents' deaths.

These results indicated that for many people, finding a way to understand the death of a parent, or attaching a meaning to it, was a comfort to them.

Several studies (Cook & Wimberly, 1983; Golsworthy & Coyle, 1999; Keely, 2004), all noted that for some people, the loss of a loved one can lead them to create religious or spiritual meaning-making around the death in order to understand it in a greater context. For instance, participants in these studies who had lost a variety of people including elderly partners, family members and children, reported the deaths as being part of God's plan, being a lesson or punishment from God, or as being part of a nobler purpose.

The results of my study indicated the same desire in participants to create meaning around their lost parents' deaths. What was interesting though was again the variety in the types of meaning-making experiences. Some participants reported more than one type of meaning-making, for instance a lesson learned from the parents' deaths as well as the death being part of God's plan.

Counseling

Only two of the twelve participants stated that they had received religious counseling in relation to their loss and only one of these participants reported it as a positive experience. Five participants stated that they had received psychological counseling and four felt the experience was helpful. In addition, another participant stated that she had not received psychological counseling but felt in retrospect that it may have been helpful to talk to someone about how she was feeling, as she felt the world had moved on, but she had not.

In the reflection written by Pastor Kaeton (1998) she wrote that for a counselor who is sitting with a person's or a person's loved one's impending death, the pastoral person, "…is not to provide answers for the person's questions but rather to be fully present to the person and the family system…" (p. 285). She goes on to say, "This is especially important so that the pastor's issues stay the pastor's issues and the patient's issues stay within the patient's own personal boundary" (p.286). These statements about some of the important aspects of counseling those dealing with death were reverberated in the accounts by participants of their religious and psychological counseling. Those who found counseling useful, noted the person's ability to support their family (being present), to help them make meaning of the event, or to help with the participant's personal growth process. These answers reaffirm the idea of, as a counselor, being able to sit with the person and help them to make their own meaning of the experience, without bringing one's own views and experiences into the room.

In my study, this appeared to be especially true for those who had received religious or psychological counseling and had not found it to be useful. Their criteria for

the failure appeared to fall within Pastor Kaeton's description of avoiding allowing one's own beliefs and issues to be part of the process. For instance, one participant who received religious counseling stated that he felt that on a personality level he was unable to connect to his religious leader. Another participant stated that her psychological counselor had recently lost a parent as well and left the participant often feeling like the therapist, instead of the reverse.

Therefore the overall theme of the successful counselors in my results were those who supported the participants in their own journey for whatever it is they needed at that time. For some it was simply support, for others it was help deciphering the meaning around the death, and for others it was about helping them to move towards personal growth in the wake of their loss.

Limitations and Strengths of the Study

Limitations

One limitation to this study was that it is hard to know who would be attracted to participate in the study. Although to some extent this is always an issue, especially when reimbursement is not offered, I wonder if there were experiences not reported in this thesis because people who had a certain experience did not wish to discuss it with a stranger.

Additionally, I had hoped for much more racial diversity in the sample. Also, although I attempted to interact with all participants in the same manner, the nature of the face to face interview meant that I could inadvertently influence the participants based on how I reacted (or did not react) to their statements. Also, when conducting the interviews I noticed that it was sometimes difficult to judge whether a participant was done talking

or just pausing, leading me to be unsure about whether it was time to ask the next interview question or not. As a result, I sometimes felt like participants may have been compelled by the silence to say more than they might have otherwise, or still others may have felt cut-off when I asked the next question.

Additionally, I allowed the participation of those who had lost one or both parents as it was an exploratory study and I was interested in both experiences. In the case of one interview however, the participant qualified as one of her parents had died after she was 21 years old, but what I did not realize until the interview was underway was that she had lost her other parent in her teenage years and chose to mainly speak of this parent during the interview. Therefore, this resulted in data that was used, but mainly came from a participant under 21 years old at the time of one of her parent's deaths.

Strengths

Strengths to the study included the breadth of the questions that were asked of participants about both their childhood and adulthood experiences with their parent(s) and with God(s), as well as their bereavement experiences. What resulted from this and from the hard work of my participants, was incredibly rich and candid interviews that gave me a true sense of the participants' life experiences. Another strength to the study was that all participants were asked the same questions and therefore I was able to go back later and look at how different participants responded to the same questions.

Additionally, several participants thanked me for the opportunity to participate in the study because they did not feel that they had had many opportunities to speak about it, and it felt good to do so. Lastly, the intimacy of the face to face interview, allowed a

candidness to responses that I do not believe would have been achieved through phone conversations or surveys.

Ethical Issues

An ethical issue that was raised in the proposed study was the emotional effect that discussing the loss of a parent has on a grieving adult child. Through sensitivity and reminding participants that their participation was at all times voluntary, I believe valuable research was done without causing harm. Additionally, each participant was given an informed consent form (see Appendix F), which reminded them that they could refuse to answer any questions and had the right to end the interview at any time. The informed consent also let participants know that I would code all data so that their names would not be attached to any of their answers, and identifying information contained in quotations would be carefully disguised when quoted in the thesis or in future presentations and publications. In addition, the informed consent stated that all data would be locked and stored for three years as is required by Federal regulations. After that point it would continue to be locked and stored until I destroyed it. All participants also received a list of resources (see Appendix E) in case they chose to seek additional services following the interview. They were also given my contact information in case they felt the need to reach me for questions.

It is also my hope that although I did not achieve as diverse a sample as I would have liked, that I was able to avoid issues of invisibility by clearly stating the demographics of the sample in the study.

Implications for Social Work Practice

When counseling someone who has recently lost a parent or who is in the process of losing a parent to illness, there are several aspects of treatment that one must keep in mind, following the results of this study.

The first is that whether you are a psychological or religious counselor, the results of this study indicate that for many people, their parents' deaths acted as a catalyst for change in their religious affiliations as well as in their relationships with God(s). Therefore, especially in psychological counseling where it can be difficult to ask questions about religion or faith, these results indicate that for those who identify as having religious or spiritual beliefs before their parents' deaths, discussions about their faith might be valuable areas to explore with them. For instance, they may be experiencing a strengthening of faith that could act as a natural support system for them or they may be experiencing a crisis of faith. If they are experiencing a crisis of faith, it is important to remember that this may feel like they have lost yet another close attachment figure (God(s)) at the same time as their parents. Additionally, if they are experiencing a loss of or questioning in their faith systems, this may leave them (as it left some of the participants) feeling very unsure about the world they are living in and how the world works. For these clients it may be important to work with them on reconstructing their belief system about what they feel the rules of the universe are, even if these rules and values no longer include a religion or belief in God(s).

Also, many participants identified as feeling that they did not receive support from a religious community for a variety of reasons. Yet, many participants were going through different forms of religious growth or struggle. In may be useful for religious

communities to host some form of bereavement groups in an attempt to bridge

bereavement and religious experience.

Meaning-making was an important aspects of 10 out of the 12 participants'

process of grieving their parents. Some of these participants incorporated beliefs in

God(s) into their belief systems and some found meaning in their parents lives or deaths.

Yet, overall this finding indicates that for many clients that therapists might sit with,

finding a way to make their own personal meaning of the loss may be an important step

in beginning to grieve in a productive and therapeutic manner. Yet, it is also important to

remember that when asked about people's positive and negative experiences with

religious or psychological counselors, those who had negative experiences seemed to feel

that too much of the therapist had entered the therapeutic room in one way or another.

Therefore, it is also important to remember that 2 out of the 12 participants did not

identify a specific meaning with their parents' deaths and that when doing therapy with

all clients who are grieving, there should be space for ideas but no pressure to find

meaning where for some there is none.

For those clients who identified as having a good-bye experience, all but one

identified it as a very important and helpful experience-even if at times difficult.

Therefore when counseling someone who has a parent who is dying, it might be useful to

bring up the question of whether they intend to have a good-bye experience at some point

with the parent. Again, it is important not to make this suggestion as if it is the right one,

but simply to offer it as an idea to a client. For those clients who come to counseling

following the sudden death of a parent, they may come in a state of shock or in disbelief

that their parent is actually dead. Additionally, they might feel as if they do not have

closure on such a difficult event as they were not given the opportunity to say good-bye. For these clients, it may be important for some to create a good-bye ritual within therapy, whether it be a letter written to the parent, or a discussion of what the client wished they could have said to the parent.

Several participants discussed that following the death, they experienced feelings of numbness or vacantness following the death of their parents. This was reported by people who had experienced sudden deaths of their parents as well as those who had expected parental deaths. Therefore as a therapist it is important to keep in mind that this may be the natural reaction to such a loss for many people and should not necessarily be labeled as a form of depression or as unhealthy grieving. Although it is always important to look for signs of depression, for some the numbness may help to moderate the intensity of emotion that they are experiencing.

It is also worth noting that several participants thanked the researcher for the opportunity to speak about this topic, as it was not one they often felt they had the chance to discuss. It may be important for therapists who are working with those who are grieving the loss of a parent or loved one to make space for this to be an ongoing part of therapy, as several participants described feeling as if there was no place for them to talk about it or as if the world had moved on but they had not.

Lastly, I would encourage the inclusion of more trainings around how to discuss people's faiths with them in a respectful and engaging manner. For those who are religious prior to the parents' deaths, many will either have a system of beliefs to understand their parents' deaths, or for some their belief systems and way of understanding the world will crumble as the result of their parents' deaths. Either way, as

counselors (both religious and psychological) it is our duty to be equipped to sit with people through this bereavement and help them to lean on their system of understanding or be there to help them reconstruct a new one.

Future Research

There are several areas that invite future research, based on the findings from my study.

Relationships with God(s)

Future researchers might use a larger sample to see whether there are any recognizable patterns between people's types of relationships with God(s) and the religious denominations that they participated in as children or adults. Additionally, future empirical researchers might look at whether there are more statistically significant relationships between the type of powers people believe God(s) possess and how their relationships change in the face of a loved ones' death.

Further research might also be done into whether the Compensation theory, originally designed for God(s) replacing deficits in the parent/child relationship to be extended to include God(s) making up for the attachment lost once a parent is deceased.

Demographics

Future researchers might conduct a similar study with a more racially and or religiously diverse group of participants in order to get a wider range of experiences to add to the knowledge base. Researchers might also explore the influence of having one's own children versus those who do not have children to better understand how this variable might influence how people experience the death of their parent as well as how they view mortality.

Signs and Symbols

I was surprised by the number of participants who identified having seen signs or symbols that their parent was still present in some way. Additionally, I was particularly surprised by the accounts of creatures in nature as being the conduits for some of these symbols. Further research might explore meaning-making particularly around those who feel they have experienced these signs and symbols of their deceased parents.

Conclusion

Although there is no way to take away the pain that many experience following the death of a parent, through this study and through others it is hoped that a greater understanding of the overlap between religion and familial attachments will help clinicians better support their clients in their time of need.

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Appendix A

HSR Approval Letter

January 15, 2007

Katie Novick
155 Milk Street, Apt. 4
Westborough, MA 01581

Dear Katie,

Your amended materials have been reviewed. You did a very good job and all the revisions we suggested have been made. Everything is now in order and we are glad to give final approval to your study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project. It is both complicated and interesting to search for the linkages between very different bodies of thought and experience. It will be most interesting to see what you come up with. I would think there would be many things that would enter in to this. For example, I would think a 22 year old who lost their parent of 43 to a ravaging cancer would have a very different experience from a 65 year old whose aged parent went peacefully off after a full and happy life!

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Faith Little, Research Advisor

Amendment One

From:
Ann Hartman
To:
knovick@email.smith.edu
CC:
Lwyman@smith.edu
Date:
Thursday - March 22, 2007 9:54 AM
Subject:
Re: amendment to thesis

Dear Katie,

Thanks for keeping us up to date on your thesis. Your amendments are approved. Please send us a copy of the amended documents when you have a chance. Ann

>>> Katherine Novick 03/15/07 12:29 PM >>>
Dear Dr. Hartman,
I have attached an amendment to my criteria for selection that I would like to make. Thank you for your time in reviewing this material. I will be away the week of the 19th, but will return on the 24th. I will be accessible by email while I am away.
Sincerely,
Katie Novick
knovick@email.smith.edu

Amendment Two

From:
Ann Hartman
To:
knovick@email.smith.edu
CC:
Lwyman@smith.edu
Date:
Thursday - April 12, 2007 2:54 PM
Subject:
Re: HSR revision

Your amendment is approved.

Ann Hartman

>>> Katherine Novick 04/12/07 12:41 PM >>>
Dear Dr. Hartman,
After some thought, I would like to make another revision to my original HSR
application.
I would like to request to revise the inclusion criteria as follows:
I would like to change the requirement that participants must have a monotheistic belief
system in order to participate in the study. At the outset of the study I felt that limiting
the religions practiced by participants to those that are monotheistic would permit a more
standardized analysis, but I have come to realize that inclusion of people with non-
monotheistic beliefs, such as Hinduism, would have valuable contributions that would
enrich the analysis and allow for interesting comparisons. Therefore, I would like to
remove the requirement that participants be monotheistic.
Thank you for your time.
Sincerely,
Katie Novick

Appendix B

Flyer

PARTICIPANTS <u>SOUGHT</u> FOR RESEARCH STUDY!!!!!

➢ Graduate student seeking participants to be interviewed for a study examining the connection between parental loss (by death) and religious beliefs.

➢ <u>To Participate:</u> You must have been at least 21 years old when your parent died. You must identify as having had a belief in God (no matter the religion) before the death of the parent. You may currently hold any or no religious or spiritual belief.

➢ <u>What you will be asked to do:</u> If you choose to participate, you will be interviewed face to face for approximately 60 minutes depending on the length of your answers to a series of questions. The interview will take place at a time and place of your convenience.

➢ <u>Purpose:</u> It is hoped that the research gained will benefit future adult children who seek counseling or guidance following the loss of a parent.

<u>If you think you might be interested, contact the researcher to learn more:</u>
Katie at 203-530-2255 or <u>knovick@email.smith.edu</u>
Smith College School for Social Work

Katie	Katie	Katie	Katie
Research study	Research Study	Research Study	Research Study
203-530-2255	203-530-2255	203-530-2255	203-530-2255

Appendix C

Demographics Questionnaire

1. What is your gender?

2. What is your current age?

3. What is your race?

4. What is your ethnicity?

5. What was your age at the time of your parent's death?

6. Do you have any siblings? Age and gender of each?

7. How much of your developmental years did you spend with your parent?

8. What is the gender of your parent whom has passed? Follow up if both have

   passed: Can you please discuss the year that each of your parents died?

9. What was your parent's cause of death?

10. What was your identified religion prior to your parent's death?

11. What was your belief system immediately following your parent's death (if any)?

12. What is your current belief system (if any)?

13. Do you know what your parent's religious belief system was (if any) prior to

    death?

Appendix D

Interview Guide

<u>**If the participant indicates in the demographics questionnaire that both of his or her parent's have died, ask the following questions in the plural, such as: Can you tell me about your childhood relationship with your parents?</u>

Childhood Relationship to Parent

1. Can you tell me about your childhood relationship with your parent?

<u>Follow up if trouble answering:</u> Can you tell me about an important event from childhood that occurred between your parent and yourself?

2. Do you think of your childhood relationship with your parent as being better than most people you knew, not as good as most, or about average?

3. In your opinion, what are parents' most important responsibilities to their children?

Adult Relationship to Parent

4. Can you tell me about your relationship with your parent in adulthood?

5.What struggles, if any, did you face in maintaining this relationship?

6. Before the death of your parent, whom did you rely on in times of trouble?

7. Who do you currently rely on?

Bereavement

8. Were you able to say good-bye to your parent before his or her death? Can you tell me about that experience?

9. Was religion or spirituality mentioned in this good-bye?

10. Can you describe how you felt in the months following the death of your parent?

11. What do you believe happens to people after they die? Follow-up: If the participant

indicates a belief in an after-life: Does this belief help you to feel connected to your

parent?

Religion as a Child

12.Tell me about the religious beliefs (if any) that were practiced at home when you were

a child.

13. Did one or both of your parents ever talk to you about God?

 Follow up if God was discussed: What is the image of God that was discussed in your

home as a child?

14. Did you attend any religious services as a child? If so, whom did you attend them

with?

15. Were there any religious events observed in your home as a child, such as major

holidays or daily prayers?

Religion in Adulthood

16. Before the death of your parent, would you identify as belonging to a specific

religion? If so, which one? Follow up if they answer "No": What were your religious

beliefs?

17. Did your parent ever discuss religion with you in adulthood? If so, how did you feel

about this?

18.What was your relationship with God like before the death of your parent?

19.Has the death of your parent had any effect on your relationship with God?

20. What emotions do you associate with how you feel about God currently? Are these

different in any way from how you felt before your parent's death?

21. Did you attend any religious services or engage in prayer or religious reading before the death of your parent?

22. <u>Follow up:</u> Has your religious attendance, prayer, or religious reading fluctuated in any way since the death of your parent? Have you developed other routines or rituals?

23. Did you find any religious communities to be a support for you during your bereavement?

24. Do you feel God has the power to intervene on earth?

25. In your opinion, what are God's most important responsibilities to people?

26. Do you feel that God has upheld these responsibilities to you?

27. What meaning (if any) do you make of your parent's death?

28. Have you received any religious or psychological counseling in relation to your loss? Did you find it helpful?

29. <u>Follow up:</u> If NO, can you think of what may have made it feel more helpful? If YES, what made it helpful?

30. Is there anything you would like to add that you feel has been missed?

Interviewer will say to all participants: Thank you for your time. It is my hope that this project will help people in the future who are coping with the loss of a parent. At this time I would like to check in with you to see how you are feeling emotionally.

Appendix E

Referral List for Participants

Counseling:
YOU inc. Counseling Center. Located on 81 Plantation St, Worcester, MA
Phone number: 508-849-5600

Wayside Youth and Family Support Network. Located on 10 Asylum St, Milford, MA.
Phone number: 508-478-6888

Information on Bereavement:
Caring Connections. This website offers information about bereavement as well as a list
of resources and support networking.
Website: www.caringinfo.org

Appendix F

Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant:

My name is Katie Novick and I am a graduate Social Work student at Smith College School for Social Work. The purpose of this research study is to better understand how adult children's monotheistic beliefs may be changed as the result of a parent's death. The information that I gather will be used for my thesis in partial fulfillment of the Master's of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work as well as for future presentations and publications on this topic.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you were an adult (<u>at or over</u> the <u>age of 21</u>) when you lost a parent and this loss occurred within the last ten years (with at least twelve months having passed since your parent's death). <u>This means that you are currently 22 years or older.</u> In addition, you have been asked to participate because you held monotheistic beliefs prior to the death of your parent (although you may or may not hold the same beliefs now). If you choose to sign the consent form, I will then give you a brief form that asks for basic information about you such as your gender, age, race/ethnicity, what age you were when your parent died and the nature of your parent's death. I will then ask you a series of interview questions about the nature of your relationship with your parent as well as the relationship that you feel you have to your religion. If at any point you feel uncomfortable or would prefer not to answer a question you always have the right to do this as well as to stop the interview completely. There will be a series of interview questions and the length of the interview will depend on how much you wish to share about your experience. It is estimated that the interview will take approximately one hour. I will be recording your answers to the interview questions using a digital recorder as well as possibly a second recorder as back-up to ensure that your answers are heard. You may also see me taking notes on certain points that you bring up or on gestures that you make which could add to the understanding of your words. If you do not want the interview recorded you have the right to refuse this, in which case I will rely on notes I take during the interview.

When deciding whether or not to participate in a study, it is also important to consider the potential risks you may be exposed to by participating. The loss of a parent is often a painful and profound experience for people of all ages and it can be hard to discuss such a difficult topic with someone that you do not know. It is possible that by participating in this study, you may stir up feelings that you have not had for a while as well as experience new feelings altogether related to your parental and religious experience. Each participant will be provided with a list of referral resources in case you feel that you need additional services following the study. I would also like to take this opportunity to remind you that if you find anything upsetting or you do not feel comfortable, you should let me know right away and we can either proceed to a different

question or end the interview immediately. Ending the interview will not affect any other services that you may be receiving.

It is my hope that participation in this study will be a helpful and useful experience for you as the participant. Additionally, this data will have the potential to better inform Social Work clinicians and religious leaders of issues that are specific to the grieving process of adult children and to the role of religion in this process. This may help adult children seeking treatment or counseling to receive a more informed and comprehensive treatment. There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

I want to reassure you that several measures will be taken to ensure that your confidentiality is protected. All data will be coded so that your name will not be attached to any of your answers and identifying information contained in quotations will be carefully disguised when quoted in the thesis or in future presentations and publications. In addition, all data will be locked and stored for three years as is required by Federal regulations. After that point it will continue to be locked and stored until the researcher destroys it. The researcher, the researcher's thesis advisor and a paid professional transcriber will be the only people who will handle the data and all handling will be done in a professional, respectful and confidential manner. In addition, any transcribers used will be asked to sign a confidentiality pledge.

Again, I wish to remind you that participation in this study is voluntary and you have the right to refuse to answer any question at any time. In addition, you have the right to withdraw from the study both during it and after you have already completed the interview. You have the option of withdrawing your participation and having your data destroyed up until March 1st, 2007. My contact information is included at the bottom of this consent form and you have the right to contact me at any time after the interview is complete to ask additional questions or to ask to withdraw from the study.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION; THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of participant:_____   Date: _____

Signature of researcher: _____   Date: _____

If you have any questions or wish to withdraw your consent, please contact:
Katie Novick
Phone: 203-530-2255
Email: kbnovick@yahoo.com

Please keep this copy for your records so you can contact me later or use the referral numbers!