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Bereaved Parents' Negotiation of Identity Following the Death of a Child

By: Paige Toller

Abstract: This study examines changes in bereaved parents' identities following the death of a child. The bereaved parents in this study experienced two dialectical contradictions of identity, which are: (a) a parent without a child to parent and (b) I'm an outsider-I'm an insider. Results describe how parents used communication to negotiate these contradictions of identity. Implications for the study of parental bereavement, communication, and identity are discussed.

Keywords: Communication, Dialectical Contradictions, Identity, Parental Bereavement

Introduction

For parents, no loss is as devastating and painful as the death of their child. A catastrophic event, the death of a child shatters parents' worldview (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) and assails their parental identity (Rando, 1991). When a child dies, parents experience a profound change in status as they are stripped of their role as a care-giver and nurturer (Riches & Dawson, 1996). A child's death "leaves parents with an identity that has internalized the patterns of parenthood but with the object of their relationship no longer there" (Riches & Dawson, 1996, p. 144). In essence, the death of a child means parents can no longer enact their parental identity through the parent-child relationship. The loss of the parent-child relationship ultimately symbolizes the loss and absence of opportunities to carry out a desired and expected social role on behalf of the parent (Riches & Dawson, 1996).

To cope with these identity changes, bereaved parents must grieve their old identity and create a new sense of self in order to acknowledge the reality of the child's death (Rando, 1991). These shifts in identity require parents to transition from seeing themselves as parents of a living child to seeing themselves as the parents of a deceased child (Rando, 1991). This radical change in identity means that parents must also find new ways of being and interacting with the world around them (Attig, 1996). Mourning one's identity and relearning their place in the world are both daunting tasks as parents are hesitant to relinquish their parental role, fearing that doing so means their child will be forgotten or overlooked (Klass, 1997).

Scholars have found that talking with others about their child's death and creating accounts about their grief experiences allow parents to reconstruct a new identity (Harvey, 2000; Hastings, 2000). According to Hastings (2000), sharing memories about the deceased child allows parents to work through identity changes and brings a degree of coherence and purpose to their fractured lives. Similarly, Sedney, Baker, and Gross (1994) argued that telling the story of the child's death over and over allows parents to incorporate the child's death into their own personal narratives and life histories.

Unfortunately, bereaved parents are frequently denied opportunities to talk about their deceased child (Toller, 2005; Brabant, Forsyth, & McFarlain, 1995; Hastings, 2000). Feelings of stigmatization and isolation are common among bereaved parents as family and friends avoid parents, treat them differently and in some cases even blame parents for the child's death (Riches & Dawson, 1996). It is no wonder that

bereaved parents carefully monitor their interactions with others in order to protect themselves from further harm and ridicule (Toller, 2005).

While Hastings (2000) and others (e.g., Riches & Dawson, 1996) have provided scholars with insight into some of the identity challenges faced by bereaved parents, unanswered questions still remain. For instance, if family and friends deny parents the opportunity to talk about their child's death, what, if any, resources do parents draw upon in order to reconstruct a new sense of self? Further, how do bereaved parents use communication to manage changes in identity brought about by their child's death? The goal of this study was to explore these questions by examining bereaved parents' use of communication to negotiate identity changes following a child's death.

Theoretical Perspective: Relational Dialectics

To examine how bereaved parents used communication to negotiate and to manage changes in their identity, this study was grounded in the theory of relational dialectics (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Relational dialectics theory is well suited to examine issues of communication and identity because it positions identity as being constituted and created within communication and relationships (Baxter, 2004a, b). Similar to other scholars (e.g., Gergen, 1991/2000; Mead, 1934; Mokros, 1996, 2003; Shotter & Gergen, 1989), scholars adopting a relational dialectics approach view identity as both the process and the outcome of interaction as individuals develop both their sense of self and other within relationships (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998).

In particular, taking a relational dialectics approach means viewing the self as multifaceted and fragmented instead of unified and sovereign (Baxter, 2004a,b). In essence, one's selves are composed of contradictory and rival discourses that compete for acknowledgement and recognition within relationships (Baxter 2004a,b). It is within these contradictory discourses that selves and relationships are constructed and enacted (Baxter, 2004b). Thus, scholars using a relational dialectics approach seek to understand how these rival discourses animate identity in the form of contradictions (Baxter, 2004a,b). Contradictions, or unified opposites, are at the center of relational dialectics theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) as they simultaneously reveal and conceal the varied identities of relational partners (Baxter, 2006).

Researchers have found relational dialectics to be a rich theory in furthering our understanding of loss and bereavement. For instance, Golish and Powell (2003) argued that the communication of parents with prematurely born infants was rife with instances of both joy and grief as they celebrated their child's birth and simultaneously mourned the loss of a full-term pregnancy. Baxter, Braithwaite, Golish, and Olson (2002) discovered that wives of Alzheimer's patients experienced the contradiction of presence-absence when their husband's ongoing physical presence and simultaneous mental absence thrust their marital relationship into a state of perpetual limbo. Finally, Toller (2005) argued that bereaved parents experienced the tension of presence-absence and openness-closedness when communicating with their social network about their child's death.

While these works have been informative, scholars have yet to examine how relational dialectics theory may illuminate issues of communication and identity postbereavement. In particular, scholars have yet to examine the contradictory discourses of identity that may be present following the loss of a relationship, such as the death of a child. Identifying how individuals experience competing and often contradictory identities will help scholars to better understand how individuals communicatively negotiate identity following loss. Using relational dialectics theory to explore the contradictory nature of identity also answers Baxter's (2004a) call for scholars to examine identity through a multivocal and dialogic lens. As such, it is the intent of the present study to examine the possible contradictions of identity experienced by bereaved parents following the death of a child. The research questions guiding the study were:

RQ1: What dialectical contradictions animate bereaved parents' identities following the death of their child?

RQ2: How do bereaved parents communicatively negotiate and manage these dialectical contradictions of identity?

Methodology

I grounded the present study in the qualitative/interpretive tradition in order to privilege the voices, grief experiences, and stories of bereaved parents (Creswell, 2007; Spradley, 1979; Tashakori & Teddlie, 2003). Sampling was purposive (Tashakori & Teddlie, 2003) and the primary criteria for participation was that parents had to have experienced the death of a child and the child's death had to have occurred at least six months prior to the interview. Following approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, I recruited participants via support groups, posted flyers in various community locations, and electronic flyers that I emailed to various campus and community contacts.

Participants

Of the 53 bereaved parents interviewed, 36 were women and 17 were men. I conducted a total of 41 interviews, with 12 taking place with both parents present. Twenty-nine interviews were conducted with only one bereaved parent present; however of these 29 parents, 8 of the participants were married to one another. In other words, four married couples were interviewed but at separate times.

Forty-seven of the participants were currently married to their child's biological parent, two parents were currently married to someone who was not the biological parent of their child, and four parents were divorced and not remarried. The length of marriage for bereaved parents ranged from 1.5 years to 45 years with 25.1 years being the average length of marriage. The age of participants ranged from 27 to 64 with an average age of 47.5 years.

Fifty-two of the parents were Caucasian (98.1%) and one parent was Hispanic (1.9%). Twenty-four parents had only one surviving child (45.3%), 17 had two surviving children (32.1%), 11 had three surviving children (20.7%), and one parent had no surviving children (1.9%). Twenty-four parents currently participated in a bereavement support group, 14 had participated in a bereavement support group at one time but were no longer participating, and 15 had never participated in a bereavement support group.

The time from the child's death to the interview ranged from 6 months to 29 years with a mean of 9.7 years. The age of the child at the time of death ranged from 0 years of age to 42 years, with a mean age of 7.7 years. The reported causes of death were: 10 from illness (25.6%), 11 from stillbirth or birth defects (28.2%), 6 from suicide (15.4%), 11 from accidents (28.2%), and 1 from SIDS (2.6%).

Interviewer Procedure

The semistructured interview guide was modeled after the retrospective interview technique and questions encouraged parents to describe communication with their spouse and members of their social network before and after their child's death (Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981). Parents were also asked to describe communication with these same parties in the present.

I conducted interviews with participants at two different points in time over a span of two years and participants were interviewed only once. Of the 41 interviews conducted, 22 took place in the participants' homes, 14 took place over the phone, and 5 took place at a local café. To keep participants identities

confidential I used pseudonyms throughout the study. Interviews ranged from 90 minutes to 3 hours, with the average interview lasting about 1.5 hours.

Participant/Researcher Voices

Because of the intensely emotional and difficult nature of the subject matter it is important to recognize and to acknowledge how the interviews affected both the participants and me as the researcher. For parents, these interviews were often emotional and tear-filled as talking about their child's death was still painful; however, most parents remarked that participating in the interviews was cathartic and meaningful. Parents often thanked me for the interview and expressed appreciation at having the opportunity to tell their story of grief and loss. As an interviewer, I found parents' stories and grief experiences heart wrenching and moving. I also found conducting these interviews to be an exhausting experience, both emotionally and mentally. However, I also found these interviews inspiring as each held stories of courage and healing in light of tremendous loss.

Data Analysis

Each audio-taped interview was listened to in its entirety and I transcribed each verbatim as quickly as possible after the interview. All audiotapes were number coded and the transcripts were identified with the corresponding number code and pseudonyms. The transcribed interviews yielded a total of 1220 pages of single-spaced data.

I analyzed data using a modified version of the constant-comparative method in order to develop categories and thematic patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, I read through each transcript in its entirety. As transcripts were read, I examined raw data with an eye towards identifying possible dialectical contradictions, as a relational dialectics perspective served as a sensitizing framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

I then subjected data to open coding, where whole paragraphs were separated into categories of information (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding in this study was organized around Spradley's (1979) attribution semantic relationship, where "X is an attribute (characteristic) of Y" (p. 111). I compared categories with each other for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). When differences were found, a new category was added. During open coding, categories were added, combined, and revised until the coding categories required no further adjustment.

Following open coding, I implemented axial coding. During axial coding categories are compared to their subcategories to create a more comprehensive explanation of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding is similar to Spradley's (1979) semantic relationship of Strict Inclusion, where "X is a kind of Y" (p. 111) and in this case "Y" represented contradiction. For the present study, axial coding involved looking for simultaneous occurrences of identity based on the categories created during open coding. As contradictions were identified during this stage, categories from open coding that were not dialectical were removed from analysis for a later project.

Finally, I conducted member checking interviews with 8 participants to confirm the veracity and trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2007). Member-checking interviews involve soliciting participants' viewpoints regarding the accuracy of results (Creswell, 2007). During member-checking interviews, participants indicated that the study findings did accurately represent their experiences of parental bereavement and identity.

Results

The first research question asked what dialectical contradictions animated bereaved parents' identities following the death of their child. Analysis of interviews revealed two primary dialectical contradictions related to bereaved parents' parental and individual identities, which are: (a) a parent without a child to parent and (b) I'm an outsider-I'm an insider. Each is discussed below.

A Parent Without a Child to Parent

Many bereaved parents in the present study discussed how they often experienced a connection or emotional bond with their children in spite of their child's death. For parents, maintaining this connection was important as this allowed them to feel close to their deceased child and to keep their child's memory alive. At the same time, parents saw this emotional connection as second best to having a relationship with a living child. One mother, whose teenage daughter died, commented:

I miss her a lot and I always will. With my last breath I'll miss her but I also know she's right here in my heart and she talks to me all the time and I still have her as my daughter. It's just different than what I would choose. (23: 478–481 ¹)

As this mother claimed, she still has a daughter and her daughter continues to be an ongoing part of her life. At the same time, her daughter's physical absence means that this mother is not able to interact with her daughter and to have a mother-daughter relationship as most mothers would. For this mother and many other bereaved parents, staying connected with their deceased child meant that parents continued to experience a relationship with their child. Sadly, the child's permanent physical absence meant that parents could not interact with their children as they normally would, leaving parents with the paradoxical identity of being a parent but without a child to parent.

Many bereaved parents discussed how in spite of their child's death they continued to see themselves as a mother or father to their deceased child. Simultaneously, parents commented on how challenging it was to still view themselves as their child's parent when they no longer were given opportunities to communicate like parents. One mother tearfully reflected on this, stating:

If you lose a child, well yeah, you're still a mother, but it's not the same. You go to anything with a group of women and they're always talking about their kids, and it's very weird, um, I don't always feel a part of the group. I feel very separate from the group sometimes, um, but now you're the parent of a dead child, and that's weird. (14: 838–842)

As this mother suggested, she is still a mother but her identity has changed to being the mother of a dead child rather than a living child. Unlike mothers of living children, she is unable to talk with others about her son's activities. Being left out of this social circle of mothers only amplifies her experience of being a parent but without a child to parent.

Similarly, another mother discussed how hearing others talk about their living children only reminds her that her child is no longer alive, even though she feels as though her daughter is still a part of her life:

I don't think people have any idea that it's always there. She's always going to be our daughter, and you know, at Christmas, that's what you think of, when they're saying their daughter learned to ride a bike or got a dog, whenever they compare something about their baby, well, she's one of my babies, it comes to my mind. (10: 525–528)

As this mother indicated, she still thinks of her deceased daughter as “one of her babies.” Thus, hearing other people talk about their living children and their activities painfully reminds this mother that she is

missing out on many of the joyful events of parenting. For this mother and many other bereaved parents, having their deceased child be an ongoing part of their lives while being denied the opportunities to experience parenting milestones and to interact with their child left parents still seeing themselves as a parent but without a child to parent.

Managing “A Parent Without a Child to Parent”

The second research question concerned how bereaved parents communicatively negotiated and managed dialectical contradictions of identity. In the present study, bereaved parents enacted rituals such as grave tending and celebrating the child's birthday in order to negotiate the tension of *a parent without a child to parent*. According to Baxter (2004a), rituals allow individuals to fully and simultaneously respond to both competing needs of a tension without compromise or dilution. Rituals are powerful tools that help individuals to negotiate changes in identity (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998) and reconstruct contested identities (Suter, Daas, & Bergen, 2008).

For bereaved parents, rituals such as grave tending and celebrating the deceased child's birthday allowed parents to continue parenting their deceased child. At the same time, the child's absence during these rituals helped to remind parents that their children were gone and that they, as parents, were not able to parent and care for their child in typical fashion. Thus, the enactment of rituals helped parents to perform parental actions while simultaneously reminding them that they were not parents in the traditional sense. For instance, one mother described how she tended her infant daughter's grave in order to take care of her daughter:

I still needed to be a mom after she was born even though I didn't have her here. So I spent a lot of time at the cemetery. I'd decorate her grave and I'd go back the next week and make sure there were fresh flowers. (20: 277–279)

For this mother, the death of her daughter did not erase her own need to nurture and to care for her little one. By tending her grave this mother acted out her parental identity by caring for her daughter just as a mother would care for a living, newborn baby. At the same time, her daughter's absence and the very act of tending a grave reminds this mother she is not caring for her daughter as most mothers do. Likewise, a bereaved father described how going to the cemetery allowed his wife to continue taking care of their deceased son:

There was definitely a lot of tension over going or not going to the cemetery. There was such a difference in our feelings toward it and our counselor kind of put some light on it in that Maggie still has a need to nurture Aiden and that was the only way she could do that was to take care of his gravesite. (26: 223–226)

For this mother, tending her son's grave was and is the only way she can parent and care for her son. At the same time, tending her own son's grave serves as a sorrowful reminder that he is gone and grave tending is the only means of being a mother that she has left.

In addition to grave tending, parents enacted rituals to mark what would have been significant events in the deceased child's life, such as the child's birthday. For example, one bereaved mother discussed how she bakes a special cake to celebrate her deceased daughter's birthday:

For her birthday we always make angel food cake and have strawberries and whipped cream on it. Every year we make angel food cake and we don't make angel food cake any other time of the year. The kids, we always have a birthday plate that we use, it's a family birthday plate so that comes out, that's what her cake is on. (20: 728–732)

For this family, celebrating their daughter and sister's birthday is a way of remembering her and including her in their ongoing family traditions. As a family, they perform this ritual to honor the deceased child's place in their lives and to perpetuate their identity as parents and siblings. Just as they would celebrate the living children's birthdays with cake and a special plate they also commemorate the deceased's special day as well. Rituals such as celebrating a birthday ensured the child's ongoing place in the family while allowing parents to act like a parent toward their deceased child.

I'm an Outsider-I'm an Insider

A second dialectical contradiction that animated bereaved parents' identities following the death of their child was the tension of *I'm an outsider-I'm an insider*. For bereaved parents in the present study, including their deceased child in family rituals or tending their child's grave were meaningful practices as these activities allowed parents to nurture and to care for their children. Despite the importance of these rituals, parents reported that friends and family members were often critical of these events, characterizing these activities and parents themselves as strange and even pathological. In addition, parents described being ostracized by friends and family as these individuals often avoided them, treated them differently and even criticized them for how they were handling their grief.

At the same time, parents believed they were profoundly changed by their child's death and they too saw themselves as vastly different from individuals who have not experienced grief of such magnitude. Being treated differently by others and also seeing themselves as different from others led parents to see themselves as outsiders. A bereaved father commented on his outsider identity, stating, "It's almost like we have a disease and if they associate with us, they might catch it" (6: 671–673). Like this father suggested, bereaved parents feel members of their social network treat them as though they are contagious or sick. As a result, the lack of interaction and support from family and friends left bereaved parents seeing themselves with a marginalized identity as an outsider or "other."

A bereaved mother had similar comments, "People shy away from you, they don't know what to say. Just talk to me, I'm a regular person, so I've lost a child, that doesn't mean that I'm any less any human" (4: 548–550). Her husband added, "Yeah, they treat you like, like there's a stigma about you or something. Like you're not right or something" (4: 553–554). For this couple, how their friends and family interacted with them only amplified their outsider identity, causing them to adopt an identity that is deviant or strange.

Even though bereaved parents saw themselves as outsiders when interacting with family and friends, they also saw themselves as insiders when interacting with other grieving individuals who had also experienced similar hardships and loss. Parents reported experiencing a connection and kinship with other grieving insiders as these individuals were able to understand their profound grief and loss. Having a connection with other grieving individuals allowed parents to manage their insider-outsider identity because bereaved parents were able to interact with and to share their pain with other grieving insiders. As one bereaved mother suggested, bereaved parents often form a "club" of grieving insiders that support and comfort each other:

One person told us that we've joined a new club, which is not the club you want to be a part of but at the same time there is a club of people out there. In a lot of ways you don't have to even talk with them you can just, you just know that they're part of the club. And there is, all of sudden, another level of communication in there with people, with that understanding. (33: 106–110)

As this mother suggested, bereaved parents gain an insider's knowledge of the pain and grief of loss and are able to communicate this understanding in such a way that fellow insiders feel supported and

comforted. This connection and sense of community enhances parents' insider identities while helping them feel less like an outsider.

Indeed, bereaved parents remarked that only other insiders could truly understand the pain they were experiencing. One mother discussed how only another insider from the bereavement support group was able to understand how profound her grief was:

Mindy is, uh, she saved my life. She'd already lost her baby years prior. So, instead of, most of my other friends would say, "well, it's time to move on" or "we miss the old Emily," and I'll tell you, that person's gone. She's not coming back. (12: 209–212)

Although her friends wanted the "old Emily" this mother believed that identity did not exist anymore. For this mother, talking to another insider who also had a baby die brought her a great deal of comfort and supported her insider identity. At the same time, her friends' urging her to be "the old Emily" only reminded this mother that she was an outsider to those who have not experienced a child's death.

Managing I'm an Outsider-I'm an Insider

For bereaved parents in the present study, the negotiation and management of the second dialectical contradiction of identity involved careful monitoring of their communication with others. Because family and friends did not understand the degree to which their child's death had changed them, bereaved parents often assigned members of their social network an outsider identity as well. To protect themselves from these outsiders who did not understand their grief experiences, parents limited communication with these individuals and instead reached out more to other grieving insiders.

Often bereaved parents would limit the time they spent interacting with those who were unable or unwilling to try to understand their grief experience. This monitoring of communication allowed parents to protect themselves from the judgment and ridicule of others that in turn helped parents feel less like an outsider and in essence perpetuated the outsider identity of family and friends. For example, one bereaved mother discussed how she is very discerning about what she discloses to others:

I share things with people that I want to share, how much I share, when I share, I'm very, very selective about that... I feel that that's the best, that I will determine the kind of relationship I have with people, just based on my own judgment. (1: 530–535)

By deciding whom and what she will talk about this mother is able to determine the degree to which others know about her and her son's death. This allows her to have control over these relationships and to manage her identity as an outsider with others. Likewise, a bereaved mother discussed how her husband curtailed a relationship with a friend following their son's suicide:

He was just, just very judgmental, and there's only so much of that you can take. He just got so, he could take him on an occasional basis, they used to get together once a week, and he just quit doing it, so then when he did see him, he could put up with him for a few hours. (4: 478–481)

As this mother suggested, being around this judgmental friend was not helpful and supportive for her husband. Her husband limited contact with this individual in order to protect himself from further ridicule and criticism by this outsider that in turn helped her husband manage his own outsider identity.

At the same time that parents were cautious about who they interacted with, they would often spend time with and open up to other grieving insiders. Parents felt supported by other insiders and in turn felt they could also reach out to others who were struggling with grief. One mother suggested:

I could not help grieving people, if you don't know the loss you cannot really say, "I know how you feel." You can't say that, um, there's just some kind of a bond that happens in the emotional state of just knowing that, you know how it hurts because you hurt too. (1: 497–500)

Because of her son's death, this mother tries to reach out to others as she too intimately knows the heartache of a child's death. By reaching out to others, she is privileging her insider identity. Similarly, a bereaved father indicated that he is also more likely to reach out and to comfort someone who is grieving, "you know, five years ago if somebody said, 'well, I lost a child,' well, you know that's tough. But now, if somebody says that I'll sit down and cry with them you know" (4: 521–523). As both of these quotes illustrate, bereaved parents' insider identity allows them to reach out to others as they now have an acute sense of empathy and heightened sensitivity to pain.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the death of a child profoundly impacts how bereaved parents view themselves as parents and as individuals. Parents in the present study reported experiencing simultaneous and competing identities of being a parent without a child to parent and being both an insider and an outsider. From a theoretical standpoint, the present study supports Baxter's (2004a,b) contention that the self consists of multiple identities that interface and compete with each other for legitimacy and recognition. Further the present study demonstrates that communication was indeed the driving force behind how parents managed contradictions of identity by enacting rituals, monitoring their communication with outsiders, and reaching out to other grieving insiders. This is important as Baxter (2004b) urged scholars studying identity from a dialogic lens to focus intently on the role of communication in the construction and maintenance of multivocal selves.

The present study also extends relational dialectics theory by identifying contradictions that have not yet been identified and that are nuanced to the setting and context of bereavement. This is important as a frequent criticism of relational dialectics theory is that scholars often reiterate the same dialectical tensions over and over (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). The present study rejects using previously identified contradictions as a template and instead articulates new dialectical tensions of identity.

Finally, parents' careful and deliberate monitoring of their private information regarding their child's death is reminiscent of Petronio's (2002) theory of communication privacy management. In the present study, bereaved parents created privacy rules regarding who they disclosed to and what they disclosed in an effort to manage their identity. Using Petronio's (2002) theory to explore negotiation of identity certainly appears to be a fruitful area for future research.

The present study also demonstrates the powerful role of rituals in helping individuals negotiate contested and competing identities. Individuals perform their identities through ritual (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002) and rituals are often enacted in situations where the identities of an individual are challenged or in disarray (Eisenstadt, 1982). Through rituals such as grave tending, parents in the present study were able to continue parenting their deceased child. At the same time, the child's physical absence during these rituals helped parents to work toward acknowledging and accepting the child's death. For bereaved parents, a significant part of the grieving process is to grieve and to let go of their former parental identity and to create a new parental identity that incorporates and embraces the child's death (Rando, 1991). This study found that the symbolic nature of rituals did help parents to work through their grief and to create an identity that accommodates the loss of day-to-day interaction with their child (Riches & Dawson, 1996; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998).

Parents' negotiation of identity via rituals raises interesting implications regarding the co-construction of identity through communication. Several scholars, including those within the communication discipline (e.g., Carbaugh, 1996; Mokros, 1996, 2003) argue that identity is largely constructed through interactions and relationships. The current study demonstrated that bereaved parents sustained their parental identity without interacting with their child. However, it is important to note that parents often performed these rituals with other family members such as their spouses, children, and sometimes even extended family. Bereaved parents' inclusion of family and friends in these rituals suggests that identities are not completely terminated by the absence of a relational partner but that other relational parties may play a role in the construction and reconstruction of identity in situations of loss. This speaks strongly to Gergen's (1991/2001) notion of the relational self, where identity is created and recreated through multiple relationships.

Despite the inclusion of family and friends, sustaining parental identity via rituals was difficult for bereaved parents as rituals could not fully meet parents' needs to care for and to interact with a living child. Just as Baxter, Braithwaite, Golish, and Olsen (2002) found that wives of Alzheimer's patients struggled to maintain a relationship with an emotionally and cognitively absent husband, parents in the present study struggled to maintain a relationship with their deceased children. This was largely due to the fact that parents could only act parental *toward* their children rather than *with* their children. That grieving individuals can work to sustain identity via rituals is a rich and insightful finding; however, these rituals are clearly second best to having an actual relationship with a living child.

This study also found that the death of child influences how parents view themselves as individuals located in the larger culture. When interacting with members of their social network, parents perceived themselves as being outsiders. Parents' outsider identity stemmed from being treated differently by others and from seeing themselves as being different from others. Concurrently, parents became insiders in the culture of bereavement (Hastings, 2000; Riches & Dawson, 1996). Like Hastings (2000), the present study found that parents viewed individuals outside of the bereavement culture as unable or unwilling to understand parents' new insider status. This study also found that bereaved parents sought out other bereaved individuals for comfort and support.

During a member-checking interview, one father commented that bereaved parents inadvertently place friends and family members in a double-bind when it comes to communicating. He acknowledged that grieving parents want members of their social network to recognize and to honor how changed a parent is by their child's death. At the same time, bereaved parents are often angry or hurt if others acknowledge these changes too much by treating parents differently. In essence, this father suggested it was sometimes unfair of grieving parents to say to their friends and family members "treat me differently, but don't treat me too differently." This father's comments strongly speak to the dialectical nature of bereaved parents' identity, in that parents wished to be seen as somewhat of an outsider, but not too much of an outsider.

Indeed, a number of parents in the present study were frustrated and hurt when others acted strange or awkward around them, which amplified their outsider identity. At the same time, parents wanted others to recognize how profound and life-changing the death of a child is. In essence, parents wanted acknowledgement that they were different from others. This certainly creates a perplexing situation for individuals in bereaved parents' social networks. While individuals may want to support grieving parents they may not know how to do so in a way that honors the changes in the bereaved parent and at the same time doesn't draw too much attention to these changes. More research is needed on how individuals in parents' social networks can negotiate this difficult situation.

Finally, the present study found that parents were cautious about interacting with others (Toller, 2005) but reached out to other grieving individuals as a way to negotiate their outsider-insider status. That parents reached out to others who were grieving may explain why bereavement support groups are so helpful for some grieving parents. By going to support groups and interacting with other grieving insiders, parents' feelings of being an outsider in the mainstream culture is validated and acknowledged by other grieving insiders. During member-checking interviews a number of parents indicated that going to support groups allows them to vent to other grieving insiders about how family and friends treat them. By talking and venting with others who have had similar experiences, parents feel they are better able to cope and are less alone in their grief.

Limitations and Future Research

Many of the limitations of this study could be resolved with future research. According to Mokros (1996, 2003), a truly constitutive approach to studying identity involves looking at how identity is negotiated during interaction. Instead of looking at actual interactions, this study relied on bereaved parents' recollection of interactions. Hence, future studies that incorporate either ethnographic methods or conversational analysis would get more at the constitutive nature of communication and identity.

Another limitation of the present study is the length of time elapsed between the time of the child's death and the time of the interview. For some parents it had been nearly 30 years since their child died; for others it had only been 6 months. Interestingly, no matter how long ago the child died, parents could vividly recall the pain and heartache of their child's death. While time certainly influenced parents' memories, parents were able to recall and recount their grief experiences with relative ease. Nevertheless, interviewing bereaved parents whose child had died relatively soon may reveal richer data and greater insight into the experience of parental bereavement.

Another possible limitation of the present study is that participation in the study was not limited to a specific age at the time of death or cause of death. Like DeVries, Dalla Lana, and Falck (1994), I believed that "in all cases of the death of the child, there is a loss of connection to the future, of dreams unfulfilled and plans realized" (p. 56). Moreover, I did not limit participation in the present study because I believed it important to include a range of grief experiences, particularly the grief experiences of parents whose children died at birth and children who died as adults. Unfortunately, the parents of infants and adult children are often overlooked or neglected (Doka, 1989). Even so, it is possible that the age of the child and the way in which the child died could affect parental identity. Future research could certainly remedy this limitation by exploring, in more detail, how the cause of death and/or the age of the child affect identity.

Finally, the vast majority of participants in this study were Caucasian. In order to explore the nuances of identity as it relates to culture and ethnicity, the perspective of bereaved parents from varying ethnic and racial backgrounds is also needed. There are other aspects of bereaved parents' identity that should be explored as well. For instance, it is plausible that the death of a child affects one's marital identity, spiritual or religious identity, and so on. Scholars need to investigate how identity changes in these and other areas influence parents' communication as well as their overall sense of self.

In conclusion, the death of a child has a far-reaching and life-altering impact on parents. Bereaved parents use a variety of communication strategies and activities in order to cope with and to grieve their child's death. From enacting rituals of remembrance to reaching out to other insiders, bereaved parents demonstrate that communication plays a large role in how they sustain and recreate shattered identities.

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Notes

Numbers denote interview number and the line number(s) of the corresponding transcript.

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