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THE HOME AS A SITE OF FAMILY COMMUNICATED NARRATIVE SENSE-MAKING: GRIEF, MEANING, AND IDENTITY THROUGH "CLEANING OUT THE CLOSET"

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THE HOME AS A SITE OF FAMILY COMMUNICATED NARRATIVE SENSE-MAKING:

GRIEF MEANING AND IDENTITY THROUGH "CLEANING OUT THE CLOSET"

By

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The Home as a Site of Communicated Narrative Sense-making: Grief, Meaning, and Identity Through "Cleaning Out the Closet"

Chairperson: Christina Yoshimura, Ph.D

This study utilized communicated narrative sense-making theory to explore the process of sorting through a deceased loved one's belongings and changing the home after loss (referred to as "cleaning out the closet"), as the site of family communication and storytelling. Through storytelling, families make order of the disordered experience that is bereavement by negotiating meaning, identity, and family. The stories told about and within the process of "cleaning out the closet" elicit rich insight on each family's experience with bereavement, loss, and life with each other. "Cleaning out the closet" narratives shed light on the interactions that occur between family members experiencing grief across a timeline, providing insight on grief communication, sense-making, and communal identity performance. "Cleaning out the closet" narratives provide insight on the discursive and material influences upon grief experiences and storytelling processes. Finally, analyzing storytelling content and processes of "cleaning out the closet" yield awareness of broader themes within the family and grief communication, providing translational implications for scholars, practitioners, and grieving families alike. Through 14 semi-structured interviews, retrospective storytelling content and interactional storytelling behaviors are identified. Family stories about "cleaning out the closet" included content of motivations, communication, and impacts. Storytelling interactions are discussed, including engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence. The findings suggest that the home is not merely a backdrop where grief takes place, but a dynamic and polysemic place imbedded in sense-making, identity, grief, and family. Changing the home, then, is an agentic and rhetorical act: a dense and significant story within the family's whole grief narrative.

Keywords: grief, family grief, communicated narrative sense-making, death and dying, home

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Stories connect us to the world, to each other, and to ourselves. At few points are stories as necessary and as pivotal as when following tragedy, trauma, and loss. Through narrating, we make sense of our experiences, make meaning of our experiences, and share our experiences with others. Such processes discursively shape and are shaped by broader narratives in the public sphere. Narratives surrounding grief, death, and dying are of no exception.

Families who grieve the loss of a member often undergo a period of transition when adapting to a new normal (Doka & Martin, 1998). Historically, scholars and practitioners have viewed adaptation to bereavement as a process, steps taken either linearly or in a recurring fashion when adjusting to loss (Bowlby, 1980; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Parkes, 1998). More recently, scholars have argued that grief is a lifelong narrative, a story continuously written and rewritten (Goldie, 2011; Neimeyer et al., 2014). In any case, loss is a story understood retrospectively and interactively (Gilbert, 2010). Taking a more nuanced approach, my intention for this thesis is to isolate a chapter within the narrative: exploring communicated narrative sense-making surrounding the process of changing the home following the loss of a family member. This study aims to support the claim that the home plays an important role in family storytelling and sensemaking following the loss of a family member. The home is not merely a backdrop where grief takes place, but a dynamic and polysemic place imbedded in meaning, identity, grief, and family.

Review of Literature

According to Watson (2009), "*human beings are cultural animals. Narratives and stories play their part in the lives of all of us regardless of whether we are particularly self-conscious*

about it" (p. 429). Narratives, however, are not just a way of describing our lives. They are intertwined with the discourses that shape them, are shaped by them, and *are* them. Thus, narrating is a communicative act in storytelling content, structure, and process (Koenig Kellas, 2018).

The family is an example of a site where narratives and discourses intersect. Family narratives are co-constructed, challenged, told and retold through family communication. Disruptions to a family's conception of itself and its narrative can instill a sense of disorder and meaninglessness to which members have to adjust individually and collectively (Buzzanell, 2018), making each family's discourse dependence particularly salient (Braithwaite, Suter et al., 2018; Galvin, 2006). A death in the family is one example of an event that may alter the family's discourse and identity as a system (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). Certainly, storytelling serves as one of many forms of family communication that may occur during times of change, loss, and grief.

A Synopsis of Family Communication

While families have historically been investigated across many disciplines, the study of family in communication is relatively new, tracing back to the late 20th century and stemming from the interpersonal communication discipline. Galvin et al. (2015) define *family* as "Networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by marriage, blood, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share a significant history and anticipated future functioning as a family" (p. 8). The study of *family communication,* then, focuses on communication as central to the family and its self-concept. Families are communicatively co-constructed, negotiated amongst members, and discourse dependent (Braithwaite, Suter, et al., 2018). While families attempt to construct a shared family

identity through communication and performance, being a member of a family includes expectations both within and beyond the family unit. Further, individual family members have their own unique identities and, therefore, communication in families is tied to the various identities at hand (Soliz & Colaner, 2018).

Family communication researchers have historically adopted either post-positivistic perspectives to produce generalizable explanations of social interaction, or interpretive perspectives to focus on patterns of meaning in families (Braithwaite, Suter, et al., 2018). Often cited interpersonal communication theories, such as appraisal theories (Metts, 2018), attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980; Guerrero, 2018), communication accommodation theory (Soliz & Colaner, 2018), and communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2018), to name a few, are applied to the family unit in family communication research. However, scholars in the interpersonal and family communication (IFC) discipline have called for a turn toward critical perspectives that highlight various power struggles that empower some to the disinterest of others (e.g., Allen, 2018; Moore, 2017; Suter, 2016). Family communication scholars are integrating critical theories of gender and feminisms (Sotirin & Ellingson, 2018) and intersectionality (Few-Demo et al., 2018) with traditionally post-positivist and interpretive literature.

Studying the communication of grief in families calls for an inter-paradigmatic lens. To understand grief fully, there is a need to address generalizations of grief experiences across populations, to identify and interpret patterns of meaning, and to agitate pervasive notions of grief that empower some to the disenfranchisement of others. This study, in particular, will take an interpretivist perspective to explore grief and communicated narrative sense-making in the context of family communication.

An Overview of Grief Theory

Grief is "a natural human response to separation, bereavement or loss … describ[ing] an individual's personal response to loss and [having] emotional, physical, behavioral, cognitive, social and spiritual dimensions" (Buglass, 2010, p. 44). This thesis will isolate *bereavement-* related grief (i.e., following the loss of a loved one through death; Dennis & Kunkel, 2012). This overview will explore the evolution of grief theory related to bereavement, including the grief work hypothesis, stage theories, and more recent transitions in grief scholarship to argue that grief is not a linear and finite experience, but a lifelong and infinite one. Further, I will provide an overview of grief as it relates to meaning and communal identity in families.

Stemming from the mid-20th century, several scholars conceptualized grief as a medical condition wherein mourners either navigated their "grief work" normally (uncomplicated) or pathologically (complicated; Lindemann, 1944). This perspective largely stemmed from Freud's work, *On Mourning and Melancholia* (1917/1957). According to Freud, the purposes of "grief work" are to regain autonomy, leave behind the deceased, and form new attachments (Kofod, 2017; Neimeyer, 2014). The effectiveness with which one completes their grief work determines their psychological function (Buglass, 2010). The grief work model stressed the significance of "moving on" and returning to "normal" in a relatively short time, though ironically, Freud wrote about his attachments to his deceased daughter roughly 30 years after her death (Hall, 2014).

Stemming from the grief work hypothesis, scholars later developed patterns or stages within the grief process (e.g., The 5 Stages of Loss; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). More recently, scholars criticize stage theories, critiquing their 'one size fits all' implication (Neimeyer, 2014). Stage theories can bring a sense of conceptual order to the complex processes of grief but fail to capture grief's complexities and diversities (Hall, 2014).

Implementing stage theories into practice can result in inefficient support and leave bereaved persons feeling as though they are not grieving appropriately (Wortman, 2007). More recent grief scholars argue that grief ought to be understood in more nuanced and multifaceted terms (Spaten et al., 2011).

Transitioning from grief work and related stage theories, contemporary paradigms question the necessity for all mourners to confront and work through loss (Neimeyer, 2014). Since the end of the 20th century, grief theories push toward an understanding that grief is largely nonlinear, recurring, and order-less in nature. For example, Klass et al. (1996) reject traditional notions that detachment ought to be the goal of grief. Rather, they suggest that post-physical relationships transform to *continuing bonds*, wherein bereaved individuals and families maintain interdependent and dynamic relationships with deceased loved ones. Research on continuing bonds suggests that such ongoing relationships between survivors and deceased is integral to adaptation (Asai et al, 2010; Foster et al., 2011; Packman et al., 2006), but can be comforting or distressing depending on several factors (e.g. time since the loss; Field & Friedrichs, 2004; Field et al., 1999). The notion of continuing bonds counters the notion of grief work by allowing space for ongoing attachment with the deceased. The dual process model of coping with bereavement (DPM) serves as another example of modern grief theory that contests the grief work hypothesis. This model suggests that mourners oscillate between confronting (Loss Orientation) and compartmentalizing the loss so they can attend to the substantial changes that are also consequence of the loss (Restoration Orientation; Stroebe & Schrut, 1999). The DPM challenges the grief work hypothesis by agitating the notion of linearity: grief represents a "coming and going," rather than a "going, going, going, gone." Despite the empirical evidence in support of these theories, these conclusions have yet to widely translate to popular discourse.

Individuals and families who experience grief often report both personal and social pressures to conform to others' narrow expectations of what grief is and ought to be (Goodrum, 2008; Ironside, 1997; McInerny, 2016; Winkel, 2001). These include the assumptions that grief should be "gotten over" efficiently (Barney & Yoshimura, 2020; Goodrum, 2008), enacted privately, and performed according to gender norms (Doka & Martin, 1998). The assumption that grief ought to be experienced in certain ways to be considered "normal," and the fact that this "normality" entails linearity, leaves a discursive gap in logic between that of grief and that of storytelling, as narratives do not make bygones of experience. As Hedtke (2014) so elegantly states, "We are always in the process of becoming" (p. 5). Given grief's nonlinear nature, grief narratives are largely subjective between family units and family members. The push toward subjectivity and away from linearity is a push against discourses insinuating that bereaved people ought to eventually "get over" their grief and detach from their lost loved one.

In summary, the study of grief theory over the last century has highlighted many different perspectives on how grief is conceptualized, operationalized, and experienced. Despite assumptions that one must "move on" from loss, grief is beginning to be understood as a lifelong narrative (Barney & Yoshimura, 2020). Individuals and families affected by loss do not move on from their grief, but move forward with it (McInerny, 2018). As such, grief need not be conceptualized as a passing moment, event, or mental state, but a narrative evolving over time (Goldie, 2011). The narrative becomes as the family becomes, and telling this story is can be powerful, therapeutic, and legitimizing as mourners make sense of their own becoming (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Gilbert, 2010; Hedtke, 2014). Narrating loss makes an active performance of passive experience, providing opportunity for ownership over experience through meaning reconstruction and identity evolution.

Grief and meaning. Meaning does not lie in events in and of themselves. Rather, we make meaning through the stories we create about our experiences and, further, anchor hope in action (Hedtke, 2014). The content of the stories we hear and tell in the family affect and reflect our perception of meaning: our values, beliefs, behavior, and health (i.e., retrospective storytelling; Koenig Kellas, 2018). Storytelling, then, is a deliberate attempt to identify meaning in and create meaning from experience (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; McAdams, 1990).

In the case of bereavement, research has shown that mourners struggle to find a sense of meaning following significant loss, especially following sudden and violent deaths (Currier et al., 2006; Niemeyer, 2014). As one example, Janoff-Bulman and McPherson (1997) theorized that when mourners attempt to find meaning, their own vulnerability becomes salient, yet they also experience a newfound gratitude for life and sense of value in their existence; mourners create meaning in a seemingly meaningless world.

Individuals and families often engage in three activities when reconstructing meaning following loss: sense-making, benefit finding, and identity change (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Amidst *sense-making,* mourners attempt to find reasons why the death happened. According to Gillies and Neimeyer, "We find ourselves asking what caused the death, why it happened to our loved one, why the burden of grieving came to us, why such deaths occur, and what the experience means about the life we thought we knew" (p. 37). *Benefit finding* entails developing new meaning structures following loss, life lessons, or raw materials offered by the loss. The third component, *identity change,* entails reconstructing the self post-loss.

Neimeyer et al. (2014) present a social constructionist model of mourning that recognizes the role that meaning plays in the grief experience, while also recognizing the role of social

interaction in conveying that meaning. Making meaning of grief involves narrating the bereavement as well as about the deceased (Walter, 1996). Through narrating, one seeks validation of their grief experience, whether individually or collectively. Bereaved individuals often report that being able to tell their story to a supportive confidant helps to order and legitimize their experience with grief (Gilbert, 2010). Through storytelling, mourners participate in "actively conjuring a dead person's voice and legacy to produce meaning and purpose" for survivors (Hedtke, 2014, p. 12). Further, transactional views of grieving suggest that individual meaning of loss cannot be separated from familial, communal, and cultural meanings ascribed to the death (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004), discourses that will manifest in communal storytelling.

Take the example of re-membering through storytelling. Myerhoff (1982) identified that one's personal identity and sense of belonging are reinvigorated when he/she "re-members" by telling stories about deceased loved ones. Telling stories about the loved one's life aided legacy building and purpose for survivors: "Re-membered lives are moral documents and their function is salvific, inevitably implying, 'All this has not been for nothing.'" (p. 11). Certain practices following loss may facilitate re-membering for family members, such as memorial services, continuing annual rituals, and looking through the deceased member's belongings.

In summary, storytelling functions to create meaning surrounding the life the deceased loved one lived, what he/she meant and continues to mean to survivors, and how the deceased will "live on" through survivors' stories, providing them with a sense of validation and purpose. Bereavement serves as just one example of a situation wherein families construct meaning. Just as meaning is a communicative manifestation, one's personal and familial identity is constructed and re-constructed through storytelling.

Communal grief. While the tenant of meaning reconstruction (sense-making, benefit finding, and identity change) are established in research on individual grief, such concepts certainly apply to meaning reconstruction for the family unit as well (e.g., Nadeau, 1998; Nadeau, 2001; Neimeyer et al., 2014). Each family has their own *communal identity,* which "attends to a manner in which larger social discourses (e.g., media depictions, popular culture) and social identities (e.g., ethnicity, age, sexual orientation) shape how we view ourselves in relation to social expectations and depictions" (Soliz & Colaner, 2018, p. 81). According to Buzzanell (2018), in times of loss, change, and transformation, a family's communal identity, communal sense of itself, requires collective coping and adjustment through discursive resources (e.g., narratives) and material resources (e.g., the home). Through the narrative process, individuals weave the biological, psychological, and social dimensions of human life together into a "coherent sense of self that provides continuity across past experience and meaning and purpose for future endeavors" (Baddeley & Singer, 2009, p. 199). Family storytelling is an interactional process that links to individual and relational well-being as related to unit sense-making (i.e., interactional storytelling; Koenig Kellas, 2018).

Loss may be considered one of the most difficult experiences that a family unit will experience (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). The changes involved with death and grief "quite likely generate a strong sense of normlessness, an uncomfortable feeling of uncertainty that can add to distress," what Thompson et al. (2016) terms as an *anomie* (p. 176). A loss may be considered a relational turbulence that sparks uncertainty and disrupts communication processes in the family. In turn, heightened uncertainty can have polarizing effects on family members' cognitive appraisals, emotional reactions, and communication behaviors (Knoblock et al., 2018). In an effort toward uncertainty reduction and adaptation, family members are forced to navigate

the recreation of a communal identity without the now-deceased member (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). A death in the family, then, serves as a self-defining memory (Baddeley & Singer, 2009) that ultimately disrupts a family's anticipated life narrative and, in turn, its self-concept. Following these disruptions, several adaptive processes take place, including crafting normalcy, affirming identity anchors, and maintaining and using communication networks (Buzzanell, 2018).

Despite the significance of loss for a family, researchers have paid considerable attention to "the loss of a significant dyadic relationship for a symptomatic individual, with the rest of the family seen as a backdrop" (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004, p. 6). Meanwhile, the influences of loss affect the family as a network, affecting significant communication processes that impact adaptation to loss, the sharing or isolation of experience, and changing perceptions of the family's identity and purpose. For example, supportive communication among family members has been shown to facilitate family adaptation to loss and, further, strengthen the family as a supportive unit for each member (Walsh, 1998). As another example, Tedeschi et al. (1998) have argued that positive changes, such as "posttraumatic growth," may occur for those who respond to loss adaptively (e.g., mourners have reported becoming more resilient, independent, and confident, embracing new roles, and socially becoming more empathetic to others).

When a family experiences significant loss, the family unit changes in structure, meaning, and identity. For example, bereaved siblings have expressed sadness, frustration, and confusion regarding the shifting of birth order and room-organization of the surviving siblings, especially if they became the oldest or only child (Funk et al., 2018). Individual distress following the loss of a family member is not due exclusively to grief, but also to changes in the family structure (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). Not only does reconceptualization of family roles

cause distress, but loss can also challenge a family's belief system, values, rituals, anticipated narrative, and home. Sense-making of such chaos can be an overwhelming, long, and disrupting anomie. In the sudden disarray of meaning and identity following loss, storytelling can serve as an important function in the grieving experience for families (Baddeley & Singer, 2009; Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Gilbert, 2010; Hedtke, 2014; Walter, 1996).

Family Narratives as Communication

Family storytelling is a routine and pervasive part of daily life as narratives are told, retold, and performed. Participants of families make stories by ordering current, past, or future events and evaluating their meaning in the ongoing family culture and communal identity (Langellier & Peterson, 2018). As a study in family communication, I isolate within this thesis the family as a site of communication and, specifically, narration of meaning and communal identity as they relate to sorting through a deceased loved one's belongings.

Narratives or *stories* entail characters and events that evolve over time in a sequential and dynamic structure. Narratives bring together elements of experiences, thoughts, and feelings into a unified whole central to a theme or purpose (Gilbert, 2010). They capture the "culturally 'coherent and plausible' in a concentrated collection of principles" (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005, p. 2). In other words, narratives contextualize events within structures, values, norms, and representations individuals and communities are already familiar with.

In telling and hearing each other's stories, family members allow for reappraisal (Metts, 2018), co-construct meaning of the disrupting event (Neimeyer et al., 2014; Walter, 1996), communicate and regulate emotion (Lopes et al., 2005), engage in perspective-taking behaviors (Koenig Kellas, 2019), perform family (Langellier & Peterson, 2018), among several other communication-based processes. Family sense-making occurs in the wake of individual

storytelling (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006) and families continue to re-experience an event in each storytelling (Gilbert, 2010).

Narrating is a significant cognitive and social act that describes our lives, brings order to experiences, and establishes meaning from experiences, and helps us to form and reform our identities. In turn, storytelling connects us to ourselves, to each other, and to the world around us. These processes both shape and are shaped by an intersection between discursive and material circumstances (Buzzanell, 2018). Through storytelling, families find structure in seemingly structureless experiences, make order of seemingly disordered experiences, and "establish meaning in what can seem a meaningless situation" (Gilbert, 2010, p. 224).

Communicated Narrative Sense-making

As a study embedded in interpreting family narratives, I utilize communication narrative sense-making theory (Koenig Kellas, 2018) with the goal of shedding light on the *communicated* content, process, and functions of storytelling about grief. Communicated narrative sense-making focuses on the ways in which narratives are communicated, link to health and well-being, and perform certain functions (e.g., creating and constructing identity, socializing one another to cultural values, coping with difficulty, and connecting interpersonally). The theory is guided by three heuristics: retrospective storytelling, interactional storytelling, and translational storytelling.

Retrospective storytelling. The stories that we hear and tell affect and reflect our actions, sense of self, and have significant effects on our beliefs, values, behavior, and health (Koenig Kellas, 2018). This premise underlies the heuristic of retrospective storytelling. Stories are affected by what we know and feel now, but didn't know and feel then (Goldie, 2011).

Through this irony, we make sense of our experiences retrospectively to account for future actions and experiences proactively.

Empirical studies addressing this heuristic tend to focus on story content, rather than process. For example, adult siblings entrenched in conflicts surrounding parental caregiving were able to refashion their relational experiences in a more positive light through narrating, putting issues with siblings in perspective to focus on their parents' needs (Halliwell et al., 2017). (Re)storying their caregiving narratives allowed them to better adapt to the caregiving demands and improve sibling relationships. As another example, in analyzing adolescents' perspectives on parent-child communication about sex, Holman and Koenig Kellas (2018) found discrepancies in memorable conversations (what they remember their parents saying) and preferred conversations (what they wish their parents would say). Adolescents wanted more precise and comprehensive information about sex than their parents offered. As a final example, Willer et al. (2018) used art-based methodology to analyze narrative content, identifying themes in children and adolescents' baby loss remembrance drawings. By analyzing the art-based narrative content (rather than interactional processes), Willer at al. identified themes related to the narration of individual and relational identity, the life and death of the deceased baby, and growing sense-making through artwork.

Features of retrospective storytelling content can include sequence of events, characters, stance-taking, intentionality, time frame, organization, metacommentary, etc. (Gilbert, 2010). Other themes may include emotional valence, the degree to which the story is considered meaningful to the storyteller (Koenig Kellas, 2018), presence of narrative probability and fidelity (Fisher, 1984), and unspoken components of stories (Baddeley & Singer, 2009). In any case, the retrospective storytelling heuristic attempts to explore the themes that emerge in jointly told

family stories. The interactional heuristic, on the other hand, addresses the behaviors through which this content is narrated.

Interactional Storytelling. According to Koenig Kellas (2018), the heuristic of interactional storytelling is at the heart of CNSM because it focuses on the interpersonal communicative processes of narrating. It is not just through the content of a narrative itself, but through the *act* of narrating, which can also be expressive (Goldie, 2011; Langellier & Peterson, 2018). It is not *what* is said but *how* it is said, and further, how these aspects create individual and relational effects. Features of interactional storytelling processes can include sense-making behaviors such as engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2005), as well as emotion talk and interpretation (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006).

For example, perspective-taking in joint family storytelling positively correlates with family functioning (Koenig Kellas, 2005). Further, Koenig Kellas and Trees (2006) found that families engage in three types of sense-making when telling unit stories about difficult experiences: family-unit sense-making, individual sense-making, and incomplete sense-making. Further, when family members told stories about a difficult experience together, perspective-taking and storytelling coherence were related to positive relational qualities (e.g., supportiveness; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009).

The medium used for narrating also plays a role in interactional storytelling. For example, Rolbiecki et al., (2017) demonstrated that, by focusing on making meaning of loss, digital storytelling can help families cope and move forward with grief. Digital storytelling is "a multimedia storytelling process that combines photography, music, and spoken word as a way to capture one's lived experiences and increase understanding of these experiences" (p. 241).

Translational storytelling. Finally, the third heuristic "contends that narrative methods, empirical results, and theorizing can be used to create interventions and that these interventions predict health and well-being among participants across a variety of contexts" (Koenig Kellas, 2018, p. 67). In other words, empirical research on narratives ought to transcend academia and provide implications in the greater public sphere (e.g., community-based programs, policies, etc.).

For example, Koenig Kellas and Trees (2006) suggest that the aforementioned types of narrative sense-making have implications for narrative and family therapists. The interactional storytelling processes may serve as a diagnostic tool in gauging family behavior and functioning, while the combined focus on narrative and interaction may provide a base for narrative therapy. As another example, Rolbiecki et al. (2017) suggest that digital storytelling as a narrative process can offer social workers and practitioners with an approach to help bereaved families. Finally, Holman and Kellas (2018) suggest collaborating with adolescents, educators, and/or healthcare specialists to develop intervention strategies for parent-child conversations surrounding sex. Specifically, they suggest that "intervention techniques could include the findings that acknowledge the complexities of the 'sex talk' yet highlight the importance of comprehensive talk and safety conversations, over vague, threat, or wait messages" (p. 376). In all these examples, scholars move from research on retrospective and interactional storytelling to make translational implications and applications clear and accessible.

Retrospective storytelling, interactional storytelling, and translational storytelling make up the three heuristics of CNSM theory. Given the importance and prominence of narrative formation and processes amidst grief, that the three heuristics have not been extensively applied to family bereavement narratives before is surprising.

Rationale

Researchers have demonstrated that telling the story of the experience and response to loss is an important part of the communal healing process for families and communities: "such sharing helps families integrate the loss experience into their lives by promoting their sense of familial, culture, and human continuity and connectedness" (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004, p. 314). Sharing memories about deceased loved ones can help family members develop less traumatic perspectives of grief in their lives which may help families tolerate each other's differing reactions, patterns of mourning, and routes for coping (Hedtke, 2014). Thus, in this study, I explore a site where such family communication may take place: "cleaning out the closet" and changing the home following loss.

Significant of the home. Bereavement and geographic space are intricately intertwined as grief and mourning are triggered within places wrought with meaningful experiences (Bondi et al., 2005). According to Maddrell (2016), "places that have or take on meaning in relation to the dead can therefore act as a catalyst, evoking grief, memories, sadness, and comfort" (p. 170). Further, Maddrell asserts that specific locations associated with the deceased can also be sites of actions, practices, and performances of expression and connection. The home, naturally, serves as an example of *space* that attains meaning because of the memories associated with the location, thus becoming a meaningful *place* for family members (Donofrio, 2010). The home, then, is not merely a backdrop where grief takes place, but a dynamic and polysemic place imbedded in moments of memory, metaphors, performance, and experiences of grief and, thus, a site of profound family communication, emotion, and storytelling. The home, in essence, is a story being told.

Given the contention that a grief narrative is continuously written by its narrator (Goldie, 2011), I suggest that such a story is made up of many chapters. One chapter includes the process of changing the home following loss, such as, sorting through the deceased loved one's possessions, deciding what to keep and get rid of, negotiating the distribution of these tasks amongst surviving family members, etc. Families may change the internal and external organization, design, and landscape of their home following loss: they will keep certain items, while forfeiting others, displaying some artifacts, and tucking others away. I use the phrase "cleaning out the closet" to refer to these sub-narratives in each family's story with bereavement.

Relatively little research has explored "cleaning out the closet" narratives directly. However, research has suggested that families may continue bonds with the deceased through keeping artifacts. For example, Foster et al. (2011) found that keeping the deceased child's belongings, such as toys, clothing, or bedding, was the most common purposeful reminder reported by surviving siblings. However, Field et al. (1999), who examined the impact of different forms of continuing bonds and attachment, found that bereaved individuals who reported keeping artifacts of the deceased for comfort were more likely to express distress in monologue role-playing than those who made less of an attempt to sort through the deceased's possessions. These studies suggest that "cleaning out the closet" is an intentional, active, and interactive process for grieving families. The communication that occurs during this process may be deeply powerful for reconstructing meaning, evolving communal and individual identity, and adapting to loss. This site of communication may be so powerful due to its embeddedness with the home as a meaningful, symbolic, and emotion-laden place that will, inevitably, evolve with or without the deceased family member.

The stories told about and within the process of "cleaning out the closet" elicit insight on each family's experience with bereavement, loss, and life with each other. For these reasons, this study addresses "cleaning out the closet" as the site of family communication and storytelling. "Cleaning out the closet" narratives shed light on the complex and nuanced interactions that occur between family members experiencing grief across a timeline, providing insight on grief communication, sense-making, and communal identity performance. Further, "cleaning out the closet" narratives provide rich insight on the discursive and material influences upon grief experiences and storytelling processes. For example, families may report a sense of conflicting expectations and needs (whether from each other or outside of the family) on appropriate ways, timelines, and rates through which the closet is cleaned. Finally, analyzing storytelling content and processes of "cleaning out the closet" yield awareness of broader themes within the family and grief communication, providing translational implications for scholars, practitioners, and grieving families alike. As such, I pose the following research questions:

RQ1: What themes emerge in the content of jointly told family stories about "cleaning out the closet?"

RQ2: What interactional sense-making behaviors emerge in jointly told family stories about "cleaning out the closet?"

Methods

Situating this study within an interpretive approach, I conducted group interviews with families who have lost a family member. Through qualitative methodology, this research is oriented to correspond with the benefits of qualitative methods for studying families, as identified by Ganong and Coleman (2014): (1) exploring family members' understandings and meaning about family interactions and relationships (i.e., retrospective storytelling), (2)

capturing relational processes (i.e., interactive storytelling), (3) examining families within contexts (i.e., bereavement and "cleaning out the closet"), and (4) giving voice to marginalized families (i.e., translational storytelling).

Participants

Following IRB approval, participants were recruited first in Missoula and Seattle through volunteer and snowball sampling via Facebook and Craigslist. Further, two regional grief resource centers assisted in recruitment by announcing the study to their clientele. Through snowball sampling, the geographic regions of participants expanded to include families from Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Minnesota, and one participant in Greece.

Each interview included two to four members of the same family to speak to their experience(s) with familial loss. Recruitment began with the intention of interviewing exclusively immediate family members of the deceased. However, given the family dynamics of some of the families, and given the extensive involvement of some extended family members in the process of "cleaning out the closet," a few of the interviews included participants who were not part of the nuclear family of the deceased individual. Nonetheless, each interview included at least one person who was immediately related to the deceased (e.g., parent, child, sibling, or spouse). I excluded the losses of voluntary kin (Braithwaite et al., 2010), friends, and distant family members. This was not to delegitimize the significance of non-familial losses, but in an effort to isolate the study within the family communication discipline. In an effort to minimize risk and discomfort, recruits who (a) experienced their loss less than one year ago, and (b) felt they had experienced grief-relate trauma that could be triggered by participating were excluded from recruitment.

With IRB approval, minors over the age of five were invited to participate in interviews so long as their parent or guardian participated as well. I aimed to include minors in the study, as children perpetually have their grief disenfranchised (Doka, 2009) despite their capability of grieving. My intention was to allow children the opportunity to share their stories with grief and, further, fill a gap in knowledge regarding grief-related storytelling in this population. However, only one minor was recruited to participate (male, age 16).

Interviews were conducted until no additional themes were being added through additional data, indicating saturation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). 14 families with 32 total participants were interviewed. Participant ages ranged from 16 to 79 with an average age of 45.25. Twenty-three participants identified as female, with nine identifying as male. None of the participants identified as non-gender conforming. The families' experiences with loss ranged from one to 10.5 years of bereavement, with an average of 4.06 years. Sixteen participants identified as Christian, while two identified as Jewish, three identified as Agnostic-Jewish, and eleven were unaffiliated with a specific religion. Thirty participants identified as Caucasian, of which six specified Jewish ethnic identification. One participant identified as mixed Caucasian-Filipino. One participant, who currently lives in Athens, Greece, identified as Middle Eastern. Ten families demonstrated intra-familial homogeneity in their religious affiliation while four families included a mix of religious identification amongst family members.

Procedures

This study is situated within interpretive methodology and the framework of CNSM theory (Koenig Kellas, 2018) to analyze family storytelling about loss. Five interviews took place in person at a private location (e.g., a rented room in Mansfield Library at University of Montana) and nine interviews were conducted via Zoom. Participants were not offered any

compensation or guaranteed any benefits, aside from the possibility that storytelling about loss can provide a sense of catharsis (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Gilbert, 2010; Hedtke, 2014). Interviews lasted from 16 to 77 minutes, with an average interview length of 43.71 minutes. The length of each interview largely depended on the stories participants had to tell, participants' storytelling styles and detail, etc. Interviews were video-recorded, whether in person or over video chat, and promptly transcribed for analysis. Upon transcription, all participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Prior to each interview, the family members to signed individual IRB-approved consent forms and completed individual demographic questionnaires. In order to take an open insider approach, each interviewee received an explanation of my own experience with grief and how it pertains to my research interest. I accounted for this role by honestly responding to participants' questions when asked about my own experience with grief and loss. Taking this role as the qualitative researcher risked presenting potential biases, but also enhanced openness, comfort, and ease in conversation while establishing rapport. By making a point to be alert and critical of potential biases, the advantages of taking the open insider position as the researcher appeared to outweigh the disadvantages.

To begin each interview, the family members were asked to explain how they perceive their communication style. Their responses provided me with useful context moving forward with the storytelling prompts. Participants told stories along a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix A), while simultaneously allowing each conversation to develop through the influence of the participants. One month following their interview, each participant received a follow-up questionnaire that posed open-ended questions regarding the participant's reflections following the interview. Unfortunately, a recording malfunction occurred during one of the

interviews that muted the audio within the recording. I followed up with the two participants via e-mail with two of the key interview questions, and one of them re-answered them in writing. This participant's responses were coded for retrospective storytelling, though not interactive storytelling, given the nature of that heuristic.

Data Analysis

According to steps outlined by Lindlof and Taylor (2019), I conducted a triangulated analysis by coding transcriptions and notes for each of the research questions. Each family's story was viewed as the unit of analysis and coded for themes and interactions according to Owen's (1984) criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. I considered the interviews as storytelling events that are, (a) reflections of "cleaning out the closet," (b) continuations of the "cleaning out the closet" experience, and (c) as grief-related events in and of themselves. I made these considerations in an effort to acknowledge narrating as a continuation of the event being narrated, conceptualize narrating as a site of reflection, and to consider the event as a part of each family's narrative whole.

The analysis was categorized along the communicated narrative sense-making framework (retrospective storytelling and interactional storytelling). Instances of retrospective storytelling were data driven, emerging from the storytelling content. The interview schedule consisted of ten storytelling prompts that shed light on the overall "cleaning out the closet" narrative. Family stories tended to include details regarding (a) the family's transformation of space in their home and (b) the family's organization of artifacts that belonged to the deceased. The family stories were organized into clusters by stage of transformation: *full transformation* (i.e., completed "cleaning out the closet"), *no transformation* (i.e., had not yet "cleaned out the closet"), and *transformation in progress* (i.e., in the process of "cleaning out the closet"). From there, three

themes were identified that emerged consistently within "cleaning out the closet" narratives, despite other variances within each family, that were consistent in each story told. These themes were (a) *motivations,* (b), *communication*, and (c) *impacts* (see Appendix B).

A coding assistant (a newly admitted graduate student and aspiring grief scholar) was recruited to assess inter-coder reliability. In her training session, we went over the inclusion and exclusion criteria in a codebook and coded four stories together. Following the training session, the assistant received 20% of the data, randomly selected from each transcript and distributed on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I calculated inter-coder reliability between myself and the coder as Cohen's Kappa, resulting in $a = .93$ ($p < .0005$). We talked through discrepancies in a follow-up meeting.

To measure the degree to which the families engaged in interactional storytelling behaviors, we coded the recorded storytelling interactions along four categories of storytelling behaviors identified by Koenig Kellas and Trees' (2005) framework: *engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking,* and *coherence.* We coded these behaviors along a joint process narrative rating scheme (see Appendix C), containing ten 5-point Likert-type scales with low scores representing low demonstrations of the behavior. As a training, we watched a randomly selected interview once together, then re-watched the same interview to code the behaviors together. The assistant was then presented with 20% of the video data (three recordings) to code on her own. To assess engagement, both the coding assistant and I independently rated the degree to which families demonstrated involvement and warmth. To evaluate turn-taking, we rated the degrees to which families equally distributed talk-time and took turns in dynamic ways (as opposed to structured turn-taking). To gauge perspective-taking, we rated attentiveness to other family

members' perspectives and confirmation of those perspectives. Finally, to assess coherence, we rated families' organization and integration.

After coding the first 20% of the data, Cohen's Kappa was calculated at $a = .60$. The coding assistant and I regrouped for a second training to (a) discuss discrepancies and (b) re-operationalize the codes at hand by coding another randomly selected interview together. From there, the assistant rated another three recordings, which resulted in a reliability coefficient of $a = .86$ ($p < .0005$). In a follow-up meeting, we discussed remaining discrepancies. Based on the framework identified by Koenig Kellas and Trees (2006), the ratings for each family's storytelling behaviors were used to conclude each family's type of sense-making: (a) *family-unit sense-making,* (b) *individual sense-making*, and (c) *incomplete sense-making*.

The findings present multiple translational implications regarding communicated narrative sense-making about "cleaning out the closet." Only seven participants returned the follow-up questionnaire via e-mail. Nonetheless, their feedback, along with the findings at hand, are significant for the translational storytelling heuristic. Offered from this data, some of which I present in the discussion, are accessible implications and solutions for grief-related contexts outside of academia. Further, I make connections between participants' storytelling and potential health-related outcomes.

Findings

The research questions of this study focus on retrospective storytelling content (RQ1) and interactional sense-making behaviors through joint storytelling (RQ2) about "cleaning out the closet." Specific themes emerged within family stories that shed light on nuanced commonalities and differences both between and within families. Given the broad range of bereavement timelines (recall that families ranged from one to 10.5 years post-loss), one family had not yet

begun "cleaning out the closet," while six families had completed the task (with varying urgency), and seven families were still in the process of "cleaning out the closet." There were not any correlations between length of time since the loss and stage of transformation.

Retrospective Storytelling

Within the content of each family's stories were three major themes regarding "cleaning out the closet": (a) *motivations,* (b) *communication,* and (c) *impacts.*[1] These codes were consistent across stories of no transformation, transformation in progress, and full transformation. For example, whether a family chose to box up and donate the deceased's belongings immediately or to preserve the deceased's space, each story shed light on the motivations of the family members and family unit. Further, each story presented an example of how the family communicated those motivations to each other or outsiders. Finally, each story highlighted the impacts of those changes (or lack thereof) on the family, with these conclusions lending insight into family sense-making.

Motivations. In each family story, families discussed their *motivations* for the actions taken in "cleaning out the closet," ultimately answering the question: "Why?" Why make changes or why not? Why now? Why later? Why never? Some families packed up the deceased's belongings immediately, either donating them or putting them into storage. Some families moved houses, or plan to move houses in the future. Others intentionally preserved the deceased's space and belongings. For some, it was a mixture of both, or the decisions were still in process. Regardless of each family's narrative, specific motivations prompted these choices and, in turn, reflected each family's sense-making about "cleaning out the closet" and the loss itself.

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[1] See Appendix B

Space. Family narratives presented motivations to either change or maintain the deceased's space. Each family's intentions for the space largely depended on the family's conceptualization of the space, need for the space, and "feel" of the space.

What each family considered as the "deceased's space" was subjective. For some families, the deceased's space was distinct and separate from communal areas (e.g., the teenage son's bedroom), while for others, the deceased's space was inevitably communal (e.g., the deceased husband co-owned the house with the surviving wife). This tension (*theirs-ours*) tended to play a role in the family's motivations to either preserve it or change it. For example, one family indicated they preserved the space in case it had "answers" addressing the shock of their son, Sam's, suicide:

> Mary: Yeah because I started, so, he committed suicide and we didn't know it was coming. So, we were completely surprised. So, I went through his room as carefully as I could, looking for clues. And I think we each have done—
>
> Paul: Yes, I have.
>
> Mary: —some form of that over the course of the time. We've never really found any clear answers. But when I was going through it, especially that first time when I was really looking for anything, an explanation, I would put things right back where I had found them so that it's still, like everything is still pretty much where he put it. But everything's been gone over because we were looking for an answer, looking for help to understand. Yeah, and I think, I think we haven't ever systematically emptied it of anything. There are a couple things I have borrowed, there's a couple things you've [Jamie and Paul] borrowed and every now and then we do that.

In part because the son's/brother's space was his own (as opposed to the family's communal space), the family felt as though the space contained potential answers to questions they had about their son/brother. For this reason, the family chose to preserve it. Another family, who lost their adult brother indicated a similar observation, though leasing needs required they fully transform their brother's apartment as opposed to preserve it:

> Claire: And so that's how I remember the day, starting with, you know, we, the immediate family coming into that room. And just, since we haven't really received very many invitations to come into that space in general it was a, an experience of coming into what was kind of a sacred territory. And then we saw how he had left the room at that stage, since, as you know, he died by suicide. And so, there was a little bit of a discovery process.
>
> Henry: We saw how he had prepared it for us.

As another example of the theirs-ours tension, one widow, Jennifer, indicated that she changed certain spaces because she could:

> Just change because I could do it, right? And I was kind of pissed. I remember saying like, "Well damnit, if he's not here, I'm gonna, I'm going to put in things that I like, and it doesn't matter." And, um, so I painted one of the walls that he was always like, "Oh, I don't want to paint," and I was like, "Well, I like it blue!" And so, I painted it blue. I made a lot of choices that, I think…I didn't care that we hadn't done them previously, but then I was like, well, I'll be damned, I'm going to do this now because I can.

In this example, the space Jennifer changed was both hers and her deceased husband's, which perhaps could have led to her sense of agency in changing it.

For several families, the theirs-ours tension begged the question of what the deceased would have done with the space if they were still alive. For example, a bereaved mother, Betsy, remarked on one of her surviving daughters, Rose, moving into their deceased daughter's bedroom:

> And Rose was living in there and she asked if she could paint it. And we're like, well, yeah. Because we, I guess the thinking too is that Kimberly would have changed it. And I was like, I just think like, you know they're sisters, they would just change things. They would move forward, just because they're getting older.

For this family, they felt the changing of Kimberly's space was a result of what naturally would have happened otherwise. As another example, one widow, Helen, discussed following through on plans that she and her husband discussed before he died:

> But I've changed the fireplace…We were supposed to get the floors refinished. There was a leak in the dishwasher before Dad died. And we never got the floors redone because the deductible was so high that we just never felt like it was affordable. But then I ended up checking and it was still not too late to do it. And then, we never liked the old fireplace. So, when it was time to get the floors done, I didn't want them refinishing the floors around all those big rocks [around the fireplace] so [a friend] and I ended up taking a sledgehammer to it without having any other plan in place, what to do after that was demolished.

As both these stories suggest, surviving family members often consider the deceased's plans and wishes as they move forward with changes to both their personal and communal spaces.

In additional to the theirs-ours tension, each family's degree of need for the space played a role in motivations to change or preserve the space. For example, Jennifer indicated that, while

she painted the wall and changed some spaces, she still hadn't changed several other spaces in her home:

> Jennifer: A lot of things are still exactly the same. And like his desk, actually I've cleaned it off somewhat, but it still has a lot of his crap just sitting there and I just kind of put a piece of cloth over it and can't be bothered to deal with it. And it's been four years, which is just sad."
>
> Anita: When it's time you'll, it's okay, you know? If you needed the space, you would use it.

In this example, the deceased's mother, Anita, attempted to reassure her daughter-in-law by highlighting her current lack of need for the desk.

Similarly, Mary and Paul had not yet changed their son's bedroom because they didn't have need for the space itself. One of only a couple minor changes they had made were "on top of the room as it was," for example, placing sympathy cards in the room because they needed a place for them. As a final example of need as a motivator, a bereaved mother, Cath, explained her motivations to move houses due to lack of need for the specific house, and overall town, she and her family lived in:

> And [my friends are] like, "you should move back up here." And I'm like, "I'm not moving up here." I don't have any [need to], you know. And they were like, "Just come on, let's drive by our neighborhood." And so, I drove through the neighborhood and I was like, "No." And then I got home. And so, this was, and this was in January. So, it had just been a year after Chandler died…I got home. I'm like, well that's weird. Why, why wouldn't I [move]? I mean, why wouldn't I move when I didn't, we didn't have a strong support system in Bellevue… we're

just doing the, you know, daily grind of driving kids everywhere and lots of

traffic. And, um, yeah. So anyways, I just like, I started looking at houses.

For this family, Cath (and her son, Ben, confirmed) that their needs would be better suited in

another house in a different community.

A final example of families' motivations to change or maintain space had to do with the

"feel" of the space. Several families referred to the space as being "frozen in time," "creepy," or

"unlivable." These feelings of being in the space often prompted the family to make changes,

though in their own time. One family, whose son/brother died of cancer, closed the door to his

bedroom for a year before the bereaved mother, Vicky, felt a deep need to alter the space:

Vicky: Well, it's, um, we had the door closed, probably the first year?

Joseph: At least a year.

Vicky: For at least a year.

Melissa: I couldn't go in…

Vicky: Well I didn't go in quite a bit. I mean, I had the door shut. I didn't go in.

And I think what we did in the past year. Because we're only, we're only two and

a half years into this, um, I think what changed was that we started changing the

house. And what bothered me is his room was getting dusty. It was just because

nobody went in there, like it just like frozen in time…Somebody said this to me,

and it totally makes sense. They said, "Why don't you change the room to

celebrate what he loved about that room instead of having the room be the sick

room?" And it was. When I opened up the door, I saw Stephen sitting in his bed,

bald headed, feeling crappy… It's, it was set up exactly the day we came home

from the hospital. The bag was left where we had just dropped stuff when we

came home after he passed. And we just dropped everything on the floor and we

just shut the door. I mean it was just really just horribly raw. Because, his

medicines were still in there. Everything was raw. Associated with sickness. So,

we, my beautiful book club, people were there, there were like four or five of

them…We packed things up. They dusted. They cleaned it. It just needed to be

cleaned.

For this family, the space's association with sickness prompted the family to begin changing it,

starting with cleaning and with a goal of making the room about what their deceased son loved.

As another example of the way the space feels, Jennifer stated:

I was wanting to change things in the living room and just kind of create a newer

space, like a different feel in the space…Cause, the first couple of months it just

felt so creepy that everything was the same and he wasn't there.

Immediately following both her husband's death and her father's death, Cath also told a story

about the "feel" of space that didn't necessarily motivate her changing of it, but motivated her to

be in it:

I slept in that bed and I slept in the room where he died because I wanted to make

sure, this is weird, but that room wasn't tainted, or the bed wasn't tainted. Like if

that's, I didn't want to let myself be like, "This is a bad room to be in," or "This is

a bad bed to lay in…" I wanted to push myself through that and then the same

thing happened when my dad died. Because I'm an only child, and I was left to

deal with all his stuff too. My parents were divorced and I, the same thing after he

died, that first night, I slept in his bed…I was like…I don't want that to be the bad

memory in this place.

While several families noted needing to overcome negative feelings about the deceased's space, other families referred to such spaces as sacred. For example, Betsy and her family told the following narrative:

Betsy: Well, we have, there are a set of lockers at the end of the hallway by their rooms. And her locker is exactly, it hasn't changed. So, it has her school things, it has her ski helmet that she was wearing that day…I don't want to touch that.

Mark: Yeah.

Betsy: So that's kind of a sacred spot, I guess.

Mark: It's gonna be difficult [to change]…

Betsy: I like the idea that her little backpack has exactly what she packed in it. And her locker is what she put in it because, you know, you can't keep a room. I mean, we've known friends who, one friend did not touch the bedroom… It just felt wrong to keep everything sacred. But that locker. I just like the fact that is exactly how she left it. And that'll be kind of hard to, I don't know if we'll ever change it actually. I don't know.

Rylie: We don't really open it.

Mark: Yeah. I'll open that maybe twice a year. And just like, "Oh yeah, that's what's in here and that's, that's right." And it's just how she left it. So, it's not like we're going to get mad if people open it. It's not like sacred in that sense, it's not like, "Do not disturb!" No, it's not like that at all.

Betsy: Just kind of cool to think that 14-year old Kimberly. That was her locker.

Mark: That was how she left it. That's the way it was when she was using it.

In summary, family stories contained details about motivations to change or maintain the deceased's space itself. Such content included details about the conceptualization of the space (i.e., theirs-ours), the family's need for the space, and the "feel" of the space. Meanwhile, the deceased's belongings, artifacts within the space, had their own influence on each family's motivations about "cleaning out the closet."

Artifacts. Family stories presented motivations to maintain or discard of artifacts tied to the deceased (e.g., the deceased family member's clothing, gifts from the deceased, etc.). Note that any gifts, sympathy cards, or photographs received from others to memorialize the deceased following their death were excluded from analysis. Despite each family's transformation of their home, every family noted at least one item from the deceased that they continued to keep, and multiple families noted intentions to keep certain items forever. While forever preserving space was unrealistic for many families, maintaining artifacts appeared to be more common. Families preserved artifacts for any combination of three primary reasons: function, personal taste, and memorialization.

In terms of function, families kept some artifacts because they were still quality, functional items for everyday life. A bereaved sister, Melissa, took her brother's desk from her parent's home to her own. As another example, Jennifer shared the following story about her sentiments toward her deceased husband's cast iron pan:

> Our cast iron skillet, which is a Henderson tradition of making pancakes and Liam
> was very protective of the cast iron skillet and that sits on the stove. And I had a
> roommate who did not understand how to use a cast iron skillet. And I got a little
> bit psycho on her and I know she was like, "Girlfriend, it's just a pan. Like what's
> your issue?" But that was an issue. It was back to that point of like, Liam cared

about the way we took care of things in the kitchen because if you take care of

things, like if you invest in good things and take care of them, they'll last a long

time. And so I think we're at a point now where everyone in the house knows how

to treat the cast iron skillet and I don't have to go all silly, but it's like, it's

something totally like I can, I can step back and acknowledge that it's ridiculous.

Jennifer, it's just a pan. But there's, there's something wrapped up in that. That

because, it was the one that he bought. I don't want a new one. I want that one.

And I want people to take care of it.

In terms of personal taste, families kept some artifacts because they liked the way they

looked (e.g., jewelry, model cars, etc.). For example, a bereaved son, Ethan, shared the following

about wearing his father's accessories:

> Ethan: I do find that a lot of [the clothes] are very devilishly stylish… Like when
>
> Dad was around, I was younger and I pulled out his aviators and thought they
>
> were ridiculous. Then soon after he passed, I started to think they were super cool.
>
> Kendyl: Do you still have them?
>
> Ethan: Yeah, yeah, here in my drawer.
>
> Helen: Or old watches.
>
> Ethan: Yeah, yeah. And that's when it went from being like a joke to being a
>
> deliberate choice.

As another example, a bereaved niece, Amy, explained that, despite not wanting any of her

aunt's belongings, she did keep her aunt's cardigan because she liked it: "I have a cardigan. A

like really nice cardigan that she had given me when—I liked it. I was like, I really liked that

cardigan, it's cute. She took it off and gave it to me. So, I still have that."

In a similar vein, some families kept artifacts for sentimentality, but chose not to display or wear them because they did not fit with their personal taste:

Anita: There are some things he, he did a painting of our house, um, that's in our,

you know, the freezer room, Jennifer you know that.

Jennifer: Yeah.

Anita: It's a really dark painting. I don't really like it that much. So, it's not front-

and-center.

Finally, in terms of memorialization, families kept certain belongings that reminded them of their relationship with the deceased loved one. Betsy described maintaining artifacts associated with her daughter's life, rather than her death. Similarly, Mary and Paul articulated their intentions to keep items associated with what their son loved:

Mary: So, he was a dancer. And this will make me cry to say, but I don't mind,

I'm happy to tell this story as many times, if anybody wants to hear it. You know,

he was a dancer, and tap was his most important [dance] and his tap shoes live in

a special bag. And he did have all of his dance shoes in there, but we put him in

his jazz shoes, so they went with him into the box of ashes. But… It's still like of

all the objects…those ones are seriously loaded for me. That's probably the object

of his that is the most… Even though his computer and his phone have so many

more stories to tell and have so much more information, it's like the thing that he

loved the most.

Paul: As of most dancers, what means the most is those shoes.

As another example, Ethan expanded on the significance of his father's accessories through means of identification with his father:

I mean, this sounds poetic, but I think it's a good way to say it. The glasses sort of

helped me believe that Dad could still see. And wearing his watches helped me

believe that he was watching over me. And…to think that Dad was such a

behemoth of a man, and so wearing these clothes helped me feel like a big man as

well… I wear Dad's clothes to like try to fill his shoes so to speak and be that like

big inspiring man that I saw in Dad.

As a final example, one widow, Kate, shared a story about preserving her deceased husband's

weighted blanket:

Every morning I would get up and, we would get up, and Craig would sit in his

chair and I would put that big weighted comforter in the microwave and I just

have the fondest memory of wrapping my arms, standing behind him putting it

over his shoulders and wrapping my arms around him and telling him I loved him.

So those things are never leaving.

As these examples suggest, families held onto items tied to the deceased for function, personal

taste, or memorialization. As an indicator of sense-making, the family members told stories that

suggested very clear reasons as to why they kept the items they did: what the items meant, the

purpose the served, and how they fostered re-membering. Notably, however, while each family

preserved at least one artifact, most families disposed of several.

Families who had fully transformed their space often donated the deceased's belongings

to a local nonprofit organization or gifted them to friends and family. As one widow, Vanessa,

shared:

My grandpa died 20 days before Willie. So, my grandma came to Missoula and

bought me a bunch of totes and we just [went through his belongings]. I asked his

friends if they wanted any clothing or anything and no one really did. I gave his

best friend his knife. Through the years I have mailed other friends CDs.

Disposed artifacts largely outnumbered the few preserved artifacts for families who had

fully "cleaned out the closet." Some family members suggested regret in not keeping some of

their loved one's belongings, such as socks or candles. However, other families also made

comments such as, "Keeping the *things* is not keeping *them*," and "It's not so much like a *thing*

that was Dad. It was like the *feeling* that was Dad."

For families in the process of transformation, deciding which artifacts to keep and discard

was still up for discussion. Family stories about being in the process of transformation ranged

from one to 10.5 years. Across periods of transformation, some families disposed of the artifacts

immediately, while others took their time by putting items in storage or "cleaning out the closet"

in steps. When families told stories about disposing of items, they often told them with positive

valence through language such as, "[Donating his clothes] made perfect sense to me," or "Let

[the suit] go for a new life!"

In summary, families told stories that included motivations to both maintain certain items

and discard others. Maintained items were often preserved for function, personal taste, and

memorialization while families discarded items over varying timelines and methods. Through

each story, families indicated their motivations for the actions taken in "cleaning out the closet."

While the specific motivations may differ between families, each family devoted time to the

motivations as part of their story, suggesting that the *why* of the story plays a role in family

sense-making about "cleaning out the closet." Taking their narratives a step further, however,

families devoted time to explain how their individual motivations were *communicated* to others

in the family.

Communication. While family members held their own motivations for changing or preserving the deceased's space and artifacts, actions upon those motivations typically required a degree of communication between the family members. Whereas *motivations* addressed the question, "Why?" stories of *communication* asked, "How?" How do we make changes that will work for all of us? How do we make the changes together? Communication was particularly salient for families with multiple surviving children, surviving spouses, and large extended families outside the home. Family stories about communication between family members included stories about prior decision-making, emotional support, future plans, storytelling, and anticipatory changes involving the now-deceased loved one.

Decision-making. Deciding what to do with the deceased's space and belongings (and when) required a collective decision-making process. For some families, the decision-making process was harmonious, or perhaps even went without saying (e.g., "[Changes] just kindof happened. Maybe a little more unspoken. We knew we were all feeling the same thing."). For many families, the decision-making process included due time to ask family members and friends if they wanted anything. For example, a pair of bereaved siblings, Margaret and George, told the following story about sorting through their mother's belongings:

> Margaret: I remember going through the jewelry and taking a couple of earrings I
> remembered she [the deceased] would wear often. And then I saw something
> really, I can't remember what it was, like a bracelet or something? A ring? I'm not
> sure exactly, but I immediately thought…it would be really cute to put it on Carol
> [another family member]. You know? We have to tell Carol about this. Tell her
> there's stuff. I was thinking what I like, I was thinking what [other family] might

like. Then you [George] would come over and we'd talk about it. And then Carol

[would say], with everything, "You sure you don't want it? You sure?"

George: Nobody was trying to get anything in particular. No concern about who

got what or anything.

Some families communicated leaving the decision-making process to other family

members. This was especially so for interviewees who did not live with the deceased at the time

of death. For example, as Amy and her aunt, Rachel, shared:

Amy: It's like, it was his [the deceased's husband's] house and he's going through

stuff and he's cleaning and getting rid of stuff and donating all the clothes and, he

said multiple times like, "You take whatever you want." But it felt really icky to

like go through her jewelry and like go through stuff to take…I would have liked

more too, but it was, it felt weird. It was like, "Let me go take your stuff you're

dead now…"

Rachel: It's vulture-ish.

Finally, for some families, decision-making during "cleaning out the closet"

presented disagreements or conflict. For example, Vicky, Joseph, and Melissa reflected on how

the decision about whether or not to remodel their living room stirred conflict:

Joseph: For the house stuff, I wasn't on board right away.

Melissa: So, to preface, Dad is very similar to Stephen and doesn't want to get rid

of things, either.

Joseph: That's what I was going to say.

Melissa: He doesn't like change…

Joseph: Even though there are some bad memories tied to [the living room], it seems like there's more good memories…

Vicky: Yeah. But I remember having a conversation with you. And I remember talking to you, and he [Joseph] truly didn't get it until I was like hysterically crying, telling you I can't live here any longer. I just, it was, I was just, I couldn't do it. It just really, really made me sad all the time and I needed to change, and I wasn't ready. I mean, the first, I think it was probably the first year. It just felt like, it just felt very like I was living with a ghost. My house should be a place where I'm happy and fun and have good memories and…I couldn't think of any good memory. All I could think of was Stephen being sick. There he was being sick over there, there he was throwing up over here. There he was, you know.

Joseph: Well, you're in the house more than I am. Especially since I started my new job.

Vicky: Right. And that's what I said too. Right, exactly. I was in the house, a lot more. She [Melissa] had left. So, I was kind of left by myself with this house and it was just too many ghosts. So, and he [Joseph] finally got on board when you really understood how difficult it was for me.

As another example, reflecting on her father's loss, Jennifer shared the following anecdote:

When my father was found dead, which that's a whole long gross story. Um, when the police found him there was a gun in his house. Apparently, he carried that gun on him daily because in Florida you can do things like that. I don't know. Um, I'm not a gun person. I'm really against them. And so the, the detective had asked, you know, "What should we do with this gun that we've, you know, kept it." And I

was like, "Oh, you can just get rid of it." Like, I'm not going to do anything with a

gun. Like whatever would I do with that? So, I thought the police would just

safely take care of it. My brother has a felon record and so he's not eligible to own

a gun. And so that, like, that wasn't an issue then either because the detective was

like, "Well I can't give it to your brother cause that's illegal." So, I just made that

decision, but apparently that pissed my brother off to a degree. Um, and his wife

got involved and I don't know why his wife was involved in anything because she

never knew my dad. But, um, they've gotten like, they got all stirred up about

things. Like, my dad had very few possessions. He was like, kind of like a hermit

and well my brother and his wife did not do anything to handle the logistics of my

dad's death, like paying utilities and paying, you know, bills and like closing all

those accounts and things like that. They had apparently strong opinions that

they're not even willing to put into words still. And so, 18 months later, they're

still not speaking to me over the fact of the way that I handled the gun.

As a final example, Cath recalled a story about conflict with her in-laws following the death of

her husband:

Cath: Chander had, you know, he was sleeping like—

Ben: 20 hours.

Cath: —20 hours a day, you know at this point. And anyways his watch was on

the counter and his sister was in there. And I said, "Okay, well, I think I'm going

to just put this away and keep it for Ben." And she got super mad at me…that I

was already giving away his stuff, even to his son, before he died…She just

started up, told me she's angry. She'd yell at me…And then there was like,

another example would be his mother, who said that he had always carried this

little angel…She told me that he always carried this like angel around with him

wherever he went…and I have never seen the thing, you know, and I was treated

like I was withholding the thing that she really wanted that I wasn't giving her this

you know angel ceramic. I don't know. I've still never seen it. I have no idea what

she's talking about.

In summary, decision-making through "cleaning out the closet" entailed intrafamilial

discussion (or expectations for discussion from some members and avoidance of that discussion

by other family members) about what each member would like to do with the deceased's space

and belongings. For some families, this communication felt unspoken, while for others,

communication was quite deliberate by inviting others to take things. Finally, the decision-

making process potentially presented points of conflict. It with worth noting, however, that for

families still in the process of transformation, some of this communication was still in process.

Emotional support. Families who reflected on their family's communication in "cleaning

out the closet" stories often included content about emotional support. For example, a bereaved

daughter, Jackie, who felt a great deal of frustration with her mother through "cleaning out the

closet," relied heavily on her father, John, for support:

Jackie: It was me bitching and moaning and complaining just constantly to him

that we were in this position. I was pissed. We had asked her for years to go

through her shit and she kept promising that she would and promising that she

would. And she didn't. And then she got sick and she couldn't. And I actually

think for me I have learned over the years that it's very uncomfortable for me to

be sad, so I get angry and stuff instead. And I think I channeled a lot of my

feelings into being angry about her things. Very, very angry.

John: And my role was, really, I was the recipient.

Jackie: Yes, he was…My father has been the person I could go to, to process what

was going on with my mom. We had an overall good relationship, but

complicated, and there were some hard things in there. And this was no different.

He was the person I could complain to who would validate that and tell me that I

was right to feel that way and it made perfect sense. And he was frustrated, too,

and I knew that.

For several families, different family members were on different timelines when it came

to "cleaning out the closet." Some family members felt a degree of urgency, while others wanted

to take their time. Recall Vicky and Joseph's conflict as an example. In that same story, their

daughter, Melissa, supported her mother's distress and need to change their living room: "And

for me, it was just like, you're [Vicky] not happy, like you need to do this." In a similar example,

Helen and Ethan reflected on their family's degree of patience before beginning the "cleaning

out the closet" progress:

Helen: You had expressed just really not even wanting to get rid of or move any

of the things. And I kind of just went with that initially, for a long time. Yeah, so

for that reason, I waited…

Ethan: For how our family communicates, that influenced all this patience with

getting rid of things was like, I think we all, very much so, recognized the weight

of the turn of events…losing Dad. And so, I think, in my opinion, I imagined that

all three of us kind of respected that weight and kind of wanted to give us some

time to gain some clarity on what to do with those things while we were still in

shock.

Family stories about communication between family members tended to include content

about support between family members. However, several families also accounted for support

from outsiders. For example, recall Vicky's story about her book club helping her to take the first

steps in cleaning her son's room:

> So, my book club, my wonderful book club. I talked to them about it… They said,
>
> and this gal that lost her husband…She's like, "You know, I know how hard this
>
> is." She says, "Why don't we come over? Because we don't want to throw
>
> anything away…" And they went in there and they said "Do you want to sit down
>
> here, or do you want to come up with us? Whatever you want to do, but we won't
>
> throw anything away unless you tell us to." And they said, "We'll just pack it up
>
> in bins."

Vicky and her family found this support from the book club to be incredibly monumental in their

"cleaning out the closet" narrative. Other families also recalled how friends and community

members helped them through their transformations.

In summary, family stories about communication through "cleaning out the closet"

tended to include details about the emotional support they received, whether from each other or

from outsiders.

Future plans. Primarily for families in the process of "cleaning out the closet," or who

had not yet begun transformations, jointly told stories tended to include details about future plans

for the home. While stories about communicating future plans were similar to stories about

motivations, I code them as distinct. Stories were coded as motivations when the family reflected

on changes that have *already happened*, whereas stories about the family's future plans

discussed potential motivations for changes that have not yet happened. The planned

transformation(s) had not yet occurred but were in the phase of being communicated between the

family members. It could be that the plans only ever exist in communication, but never actually

come to fruition.

One family discussed the likelihood of their moving and that this transition would require

them to go through their deceased daughter's items more thoroughly. Melissa and her family

agreed that she should bring her deceased brother's stuffed elephant, Ellie, to the classroom she

teaches in. For this same family, Vicky explained other changes they plan to make:

> We're definitely going to get rid of his bed. His bed is still there. We're going to
>
> get rid of it and I'm thinking of maybe painting his dresser drawers, but I have not
>
> gone through his clothes yet… I don't know if you guys [Melissa and Joseph]
>
> know this. I did go through his t-shirts…But he only wore eight t-shirts out of his
>
> 25 t-shirts that he had. So, I have a bag in there that I went through. And I'm
>
> going to give it to friends.

Thinking about their deceased son's bedroom, which they had preserved through

the date of their interview, Mary, Paul, and their daughter, Jamie, mentioned the following:

> Mary: Well, I've always said that, if we do ever really change it away from being
>
> Sam's room, the only thing I can imagine changing it to is like a cat palace.
>
> Paul: Yeah, yeah. Yes, it needs to always be cats.
>
> Mary: I guess it could always be a dance studio, too. It could be a dance studio…
>
> Jamie: Why not both?
>
> Mary and Paul: *Laughs*

In summary, for families who had not yet fully transformed their home, their storytelling tended to include remarks about future plans for the deceased's space that had not yet taken place.

Re-membering through storytelling. A few families indicated that "cleaning out the closet" prompted storytelling amongst the family members, though this retrospective storytelling content was not consistent. For some families, coming across a certain artifact prompted storytelling between the members or with outsiders as a form of re-membering. This was particularly so if two or more family members encountered the artifact together. A few families had specific stories about this communication. Several families confirmed that storytelling events had happened, but they couldn't recall a specific example. As one example, Mary and Paul reflected on the storytelling that occurred after unlocking their son's phone:

> Mary: His phone was probably the most central of his belongings that we have
>
> experienced after his death, because none of us were on it before he unlocked it.
>
> And so, we've been able to look at what was on there. And I ended up, um, I
>
> printed all the photos because he didn't keep a journal, but I printed all the photos
>
> that were on his phone…And so that I would say has prompted more stories.
>
> Paul: Yeah, I do remember just sitting on this couch with you right after that we
>
> got that book and just flipping through it and telling stories.
>
> Mary: And Carly, the director of the dance studio where he danced, she came and
>
> looked through it and was able to connect a couple of dots by seeing what was in
>
> there. "Oh, you know, this, this, this would have been from that day, this, this is,"
>
> you know, so elicited some story.

For other families, storytelling was not a part of the narrative they shared because the family either hadn't spent a lot of time in the space together or "cleaned out the closet" quite quickly.

Nonetheless, while not every family confirmed or recalled an instance of storytelling communication, each family could recall stories related to items they kept and told them in real time during the interview. Some families looked around their living space to job their memory (if they completed their interview at home). Some of these stories were tied to "cleaning out the closet" alongside the now-deceased family member.

Communication in anticipated loss. Four of the 14 families told stories about the deceased's involvement in "cleaning out the closet," or at least the beginning stages of transformation. Understandably, these stories were specific to prolonged, anticipated losses (e.g., illness, assisted suicide, etc.). Recall Jackie's grievances with her mother's hoarding tendencies. Jackie told the following story about when her mother was still alive, but too weak to be very involved in sorting through her own belongings:

> My most vivid memory from this is, I found, I brought up a box that was going to go to Goodwill or something and I plunked it down because I was going to go get some water…and so she like toddles over to this box and peaks in it, and she's like "Jackie, you can't throw this, you can't give this to Goodwill. There's perfectly good things in here," and she pulls out this little travel necklace thing. You know that, like, would hold your passport. And she's like "Jackie, this is a passport holder. You can put your, your passport in here. And then on the back." And she's like, explaining this item to me like I've never seen one before. And she's like, "Don't you want it?" Like, "No, I'm really, I'm good, Mom. I'm okay. I don't, I don't need that, you know, it's okay." John, and she goes over to my dad, "John, this is a passport holder." And she does the whole spiel again for him, and he's like, "No, I don't want it" and I'm like, "Okay, can we please put this in the

Goodwill?" And she went through the whole box like that. So, we stopped. She

wasn't allowed to then come down. I was like, "You have to just let us do this,"

you know, which must have been impossibly hard for her, and it was hard for me.

It was this horrible feeling of, you're going through someone's stuff because you

know they're going to die. But you have to do it. You don't have a choice.

For Jackie and John, having their mother/ex-wife involved in "cleaning out the closet" was a

point of distress. However, for other families, the process was a cause for celebration:

Kristin: He gave some things that he knew had sentimental value or just kind of

that people enjoyed. He gave some of that stuff away, actually, before he died.

Megan: Yeah, he had like I don't know 30 ties?

Kristin: Yeah.

Megan: We gave those away one day at an event. And he had a lot of baseball

caps. So, he wore a baseball cap a lot. We gave most of those way before he died.

So yeah, I mean, he had a year, a year to go. And that was very open conversation

with a lot of open stuff. So, he was giving stuff away before he died even...

Kristin: I was going to say, I feel like since he, you know, I don't know, one of the

silver linings in this is that he knew that the end, it was closer than some people

know, and it wasn't a very sudden thing. So, I think he was able to do that and to

see people's reaction to get them. And to Megan's point, like the tie thing was so

funny to see who wanted what and who picked which tie. And I think for Dad,

that was kind of nice for him to see who took what and everyone's reactions. And

some of the ties were just so ugly, but some people said like, "I've got to have this

one because it's just reminds me of you" or whatever. So, I think he, I think he

enjoyed seeing people's reactions.

Megan and Kristin positively reflect on their husband's/father's involvement in distributing his belongings to friends. Margaret and George had positive feelings associated with this communication as well. Their mother, who died at 101, distributed a lot of her belongings to friends and family for years before her death. This detail made the overall "cleaning out the closet" narrative quite positive for the family. They indicated that their mother's prior contributions made the process significantly easier than it otherwise could have been.

In summary, families communicated with the now-deceased family member while they were still alive through the process of "cleaning out the closet." For some families, this communication was an added complication, whereas for others, it was quite helpful. This varying emotional valence was consistent across stories of communication between all family members, deceased or otherwise, as families recalled details of decision-making, emotional support, future planning, storytelling, and anticipation in their "cleaning out the closet" narratives. Despite stage of transformation, each story consisted details about the family's motivations and how those motivations were communicated. However, equally consistent in family stories were accounts of the impact these details had on the family.

Impacts. Whether families had fully transformed their space, not begun transformation, or were in the process of transforming, certain decisions and degrees of change had particular effects on the family. While stories of *motivations* asked, "Why?" and stories of *communication* asked, "How?" stories of *impacts* asked "What?" What changes have actually happened? What have been the effects of those changes on our family? Family stories accounted for effects on family members' grief, ability to be in the deceased's space, ability to be in their own home, etc.

Interestingly, families tended to conclude their stories by discussing the impacts of "cleaning out the closet."

Take the conclusion to Vicky's story, for example, following the changes her book club helped her to make:

> It was almost like this huge weight lifted off my shoulders, because [the room] just felt like it was stopped in time. But once we kind of changed things, like packed things away. His blanket was just sitting there, that he passed in. It was put away, but it was still there, you know, and it was just, it made it, it freed [the space]. And so, I was able to keep the door open now. And so, I do, and I go in definitely much more than I ever did, going in and talking to him and stuff like that.

For Vicky, changing her son's space so that it was not associated with sickness had a positive effect on her sense-making and well-being. Melissa and Joseph, however, communicated a lack of impact in their contributions to the story. For Melissa, she no longer lived at home, so she was not as affected by changes to the presentation of the space. Nonetheless, she still did not feel she could enter her brother's room, even if the family got rid of his bed:

> Melissa: I never spent time with him in his room because he was always in there just kind of by himself, like growing up. But when he got sick, we put a TV in there. And we'd go and like watch TV at night and just like snuggle up and be together. So, I think that may be a big reason as to why I couldn't go in. For a long time. Mom would tell me like, like, "Maybe something's in there," and I'd be like, "Well, you can go get it." Like I wouldn't set foot.

Vicky: But, do you think it'll be easier once the bed is gone? I mean, I never really

asked you that.

Melissa: I don't think it'll change anything.

Regarding the remodel of their living room, Joseph indicated that he felt rather impartial about

those changes because the space didn't bring him as much pain as it did Vicky.

As another example, Rachel shared a story about negative impacts of being in her

deceased mother's space:

Amy: You were like, so we didn't want to, like, step foot anywhere you were like,

"I don't want to touch anything."

Rachel: It took like a year. We had to go clean out like this, my sister Marie, she

and I went and cleaned out my parents' condo. And it took over a year to go and

do that, and we didn't stay there that night we stayed in a hotel room, and it was

horrible. That was kind of horrible. And my mom was not a pack rat at all you

know.

Amy: Oh, they didn't have a lot of stuff

Rachel: But it's amazing how much stuff somebody does have when you start like

having to pack it up. It's like, huge.

Amy: I mean, the clothes smell like them and you have memories there. And you

remember being there with them and then they're not there and you're, there's so

much like, you can feel their energy when they're gone.

Rachel: It made me miss my mom a lot.

Rachel felt negative effects during the process of "cleaning out the closet" following her mother's death; a sentiment Amy also shared through storytelling about "cleaning out the closet" following her aunt's, and Rachel's sister's, death.

In another story, Paul recalled how adding their kitty litterbox to Sam's bedroom gave the space purpose besides mourning:

> Paul: To sit and clean the cat litter you sort of sit right where he died. And that's, you know, that just comes into my mind every time, every time I'm there. Having the cat litterbox means we go in the room. Before we had the cat litterbox [elsewhere]. Sometimes I'd go in, now and again, and I'd only go in, specifically for, you know, some aspect of mourning. See, and now having the litterbox there, sort of, in some ways, makes the room more friendly and in many ways sort of helps me just sort of connect with, with that in a more visceral way. Makes it more of a living space. Yeah, it's not just a memorial space.
>
> Jamie: Also, the fact that Mona, our new cat, will go in there and just like sleep on the bed or be under the bed, um, makes it more of a living space.
>
> Paul: Yeah exactly.

For this family, adding something as small as a kitty litterbox gave them purpose to enter the deceased's bedroom more regularly. Note that this connects to the "feel" of the space, as previously described. Adding the kitty litterbox changed the "feel" of the space, which had significant effects for the family.

As a final example, Cath and Ben reflected on the impact moving houses had on their family.

Cath: I think that I was a little—Sorry if I get emotional—A little resistant about

making it, the house a home. Right, because it felt like something was missing.

But I feel at the same time that it feels, it feels better than um, I feel better. It's

probably because there's been more time, but I also feel healthier in the fact that

we have made this a home. I have put pictures on the wall. I can do stuff by

myself, like I felt really dependent like or like, I can't, I can't do anything. And

then when you move and you make it your own and you basically give yourself

successes, I think is, is some of that. I feel like moving was probably the

healthiest thing for us. I don't know how I would be. How do you [Ben] feel? Do

you feel different about being in that house versus this house?

Ben: I mean, I don't know. I don't know really know. This house is bigger.

Cath: Yeah. Well that's what happens sometimes when people die.

Ben: Um I don't. I was kind of removed from it. Um, so it definitely took

probably a month for this to be my *home* home, but yeah.

As a precursor to the narrative about moving, Ben and Cath shared that Ben was at boarding

school during the move and largely uninvolved in the process. This detail led Ben to share that

he didn't feel incredibly effected by the change. For Cath, however, the move was significant

and empowering.

In some circumstances, the impacts of changes the family made were a motivator for

further changes to be made. As such, the codes at hand sometimes occurred as a cycle: families

would feel motivations to make changes, communicate those changes, experience the impacts (or

lack thereof), then potentially experience new or additional motivations to make further changes.

Mark: We had her helmet and goggles on display for a while.

Betsy: That was a little bit weird.

Mark: That was just a little bit weird…

Rose: Probably just because she was wearing them when [the death] happened. It

felt just too personal to have just on public display.

Betsy: Yeah, it was more of a signal of her death, rather than her life.

Mark: Of who she was, yeah.

This family's story explained how, at one point, they displayed their daughter's ski helmet in their living space. However, displaying the helmet caused discomfort for some of the family members, so they changed the space again by taking the helmet down. In this way, the effects of displaying the helmet were a motivating factor in taking the helmet off display.

In summary, whether for families in the process of transforming (e.g., Vicky, Joseph, and Melissa), families who had not begun transforming (e.g., Mary, Paul, and Jamie), or for families who had fully transformed spaces (e.g., Amy and Rachel; Cath and Ben), changes to the space affected family members differently. Nonetheless, noting these effects appeared to be significant in each family's "cleaning out the closet" narrative and, in turn, the family's sense-making around the event.

Summary. Regardless of the stage of transformation, families made space to discuss motivations (why), communication (how), and impacts as part of their narrative (what). When families discussed their motivations within "cleaning out the closet" narratives, they typically involved motivations to change or maintain space and artifacts tied to the deceased. Additionally, when families discussed communication between each other and outsiders within "cleaning out the closet" narratives, they told stories of decision-making, emotional support, future planning, storytelling, and anticipatory changes. Finally, when families discussed the impacts of "cleaning

out the closet," they mentioned how changes (or lack thereof) affected (or didn't affect) meaning, identity, grief, and overall well-being for the family unit and each individual member. The combination of these three elements shed light on the family's modes of sense-making. These three themes were consistently present in retrospective storytelling content in jointly told family stories about "cleaning out the closet" (RQ1). Equally as significant to CNSM, however, is the behaviors through which the families tell their stories about "cleaning out the closet."

Interactional Storytelling

In utilizing the ratings of Koenig Kellas and Trees (2005) within the context of "cleaning out the closet," family units demonstrated any one of three primary patterns of sense-making. Families that demonstrated *family-unit sense-making* engaged in joint storytelling episodes in which all members contributed to the telling and created a joint understanding of what the experience meant to them. Families that demonstrated *independent sense-making* told stories that "contained separate story threads and offered individual or dyadic insights rather than familial insights" (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006, p. 59). Finally, families that demonstrated *incomplete sense-making* told stories that did not contain any perceived conclusions at either the unit or individual level, suggesting a limited degree of sense-making.

I operationalized each family's sense-making behavior by analyzing four storytelling behaviors: engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence.[2] *Engagement* refers to "family members' verbal and nonverbal responsiveness and liveliness while listening and speaking in the storytelling and the overall warmth of interaction among family members" (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006, p. 59). Behavioral indicators of engagement suggested that the families were interested in and mindfully present for the story being told. *Turn-taking* "considers

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[2] See Appendix C

whether the family story was told in a segmented, compartmentalized manner or in a more free-flowing and dynamic way with interruptions, additions, reminders" (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006, p. 60). Behavioral indicators of *perspective-taking* included confirmations of others' perspectives, explicitly asking others to share their perspectives, and paraphrasing others' perspectives in one's own contributions to the story (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006). *Coherence* refers to the "degree to which family members developed a coherent, integrated, and organized storyline that hung together" (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006, p. 60). Given the significance of meaning making and identity following the loss of a family member, sense-making behaviors in families yield noteworthy insights into health and well-being post-loss.

Family-unit sense-making. Families that demonstrated strong family-unit sense-making collaboratively told a coherent story that largely hung together. Stories consisted of statements from multiple family members, rather than just one, and demonstrated a shared understanding of meaning and identity through "cleaning out the closet." Nine of the 14 family stories demonstrated family-unit sense-making.

In terms of engagement, families received higher scores in involvement and warmth when engaged in family-unit sense-making than other forms of sense-making. All family members in this family storytelling type were involved in the storytelling and actively paid attention to other family members' contributions. Verbal indicators of engagement included contributions to the story (e.g., "I would add that…"), positive tone, and humor or laughter (to exhibit a point Mary made in a story: "grief doesn't not include laughter."). Nonverbal indicators of engagement included forward leaning, head nodding or shaking, touch, eye contact, animation, and expressiveness, among others. Families that scored high on engagement showed little to no episodes of dissociating during the storytelling.

In terms of turn-taking, families that demonstrated strong family-unit sense-making told their stories in a largely collaborative fashion. Each family had equal talk time, and turn-taking was largely dynamic (i.e., interrupting and interjecting). However, some families also engaged in more structured turn-taking behaviors (i.e., while one family member speaks, the others listen attentively until it is their turn) and invited each other to participate (e.g., "You go first, I'll think."). During the storytelling episodes at hand, it was common that one or two family members played more of a direct role in "cleaning out the closet." For example, while Kristin had lost her father and Megan her husband, Megan was more directly involved in sorting through her husband's belongings because Kristin did not live in the home. For seven of the 14 families, one family member did not live with the loved one upon their death while other participating family members did. Thus, the family member who was less involved in "cleaning out the closet" donated some of their turns to the family member with more of the story to tell. Nonetheless, the less-involved family members did not shy away from interjecting and adding their contributions to the story at hand when appropriate. It was clear that each participant did play a role in the "cleaning out the closet" narrative and had their own interpretations of the story that, collectively, hung together. This is an important distinction from turn-taking in individual and incomplete sense-making, as I will discuss in subsequent sections.

In terms of perspective-taking, families that demonstrated strong unit sense-making both attended to and confirmed each other's varying perspectives of "cleaning out the closet." Families scored relatively high on the attentiveness and confirmation scales. Verbal indicators of perspective-taking included acknowledging other family members' perspectives in one's own contribution to the story, asking others about their viewpoints, using "we" statements, etc. For example, when Melissa interjected about her parents' conflict regarding the decision to remodel

the living room, she stated, "He [Joseph] doesn't like change." As another example, when Cath asked Ben his viewpoint on moving, she explicitly asked, "How do you feel?" Other verbal indicators included validating family members' statements (e.g., Kristin: "To Megan's point…"), saying one-word confirmations like "yeah," or "exactly," and agreement about the description of the experience (e.g., Kristin provided examples of items her father distributed to friends in order confirm Megan's statement that he distributed belongings while he was sick). Nonverbal indicators of perspective-taking included nodding or headshaking, approving or disapproving facial or vocal expressions, and eye contact, among others.

Finally, in terms of coherence, families told stories that were relatively chronological, with a clear beginning, middle, and end, that hung together. With few exceptions, family member contributions did not contradict or complete with each other. Each addition to the stories told contributed to an overall "cleaning out the closet" narrative that fit together and suggested a high degree of jointness.

In summary, families that demonstrated family-unit sense-making exhibited interactional storytelling behaviors that suggested high engagement, dynamic and thoughtfully distributed turn-taking, notable perspective-taking, and high coherence. Families came to mutual conclusions and meanings through "cleaning out the closet" and reflected on communal identity. The following excerpt from a transcript provides an example of family-unit sense-making:

Cath: But that my husband did since the first day

Ben: Of kindergarten.[3]

Cath: He would draw—Do you want to say this?[4]

Ben: Yeah. So, he called them gourmet napkins.

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[3] Noted beginning of the story
[4] Structured turn-taking

Cath: Gourmet napkins.[5]

Ben: Um, paper towels.

Cath: *Laughs*[6]

Ben: He, you wouldn't, like, think that he would be the kind of person who could draw or be artsy, but like with his pop cards and all that. But, so every day from kindergarten until probably like a month before he died when I was in eighth grade.

Catherine: There was a lot of days.[7]

Ben: A lot. We have bins full of paper towels. He would draw anything. So, like, when I was, you know, in elementary and middle school, really into Pokémon. He would draw the these Pokémon with a note says, "Such and such Pokémon says you should have a great day at school."

Cath: I mean, and they're elaborate.

Ben: They're impressive.

Cath: Like pieces of art.[8]

Ben: He, there was one that I remember distinctly he drew Bob Ross painting happy little trees. Yeah, they're impressive.

Cath: That is something we definitely kept. I kept all of those.

Ben: We had some framed.

Cath: Yeah, we framed some of them. Um, and I actually kept those up. I actually did that after he died.

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[5] Perspective-taking (confirmation)
[6] Engagement (warmth)
[7] Dynamic turn-taking
[8] Perspective-taking (confirmation)

Ben: Yeah

Cath: And put those up.[9] Because I was trying, because I knew…I assumed that Ben would be sad that now obviously he lost his dad. But then he doesn't get these awesome— [10]

Ben: It was the highlight of most days.

Cath: —paper towels, because there was no way I was going to be able to pull that off *laughs* the artistic ability.

As can be noted in the transcript, while Cath did invite Ben to tell the story, their turn-taking was largely dynamic as they told the story together. Further, their storytelling reflected a high degree of engagement and perspective-taking throughout their contributions. Finally, the story was coherent with a clear beginning, middle, and end. As such, sense-making occurred at the unit level.

Individual sense-making. Families that demonstrated individual sense-making told stories that contained individual interpretations of "cleaning out the closet," rather than jointly held conclusions. Individual family members constructed their own meaning and sense of identity through "cleaning out the closet," though the family did largely agree on the narrative whole. Unlike family-unit sense-making, conclusions were that of the individual, rather than the family unit. Three of the 14 families demonstrated individual sense-making.

In terms of engagement, all family members received moderate to high ratings of involvement and warmth. Each family member contributed to the story, exhibiting verbal indicators of expressiveness and animation with nonverbal behaviors of eye contact and gesturing in the process. However, it was not uncommon for one of the two or three family

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[9] Noted conclusion to the story
[10] Perspective-taking (attentiveness)

members to mildly disengage while another family member was contributing to the story. Drifting eye contact and lack of nonverbal acknowledgements (e.g., lack of back channeling) were indicative of dwindling engagement. Some participants would temporarily disengage by checking their phone, petting their dog, etc. These family members participated enough to communicate their engagement, but otherwise were not always active listeners.

In terms of turn-taking, it was not uncommon for the less-engaged family member to be the lesser-involved party in "cleaning out the closet." Turn-taking tended to be balanced between structured and dynamic means. In other words, while each family member would, occasionally, interject in others' stories and make follow-up comments, it was not uncommon for the more engaged family member(s) to explicitly invite the other to participate (e.g., "What else would you say?"). Often, one family member would tell a story, and following, another would re-tell the same or a similar story from their own perspective. For example, in John and Jackie's story, John told his story about going through his deceased ex-wife's belongings and being quite "ruthless" about discarding items: "There's probably one or two things, but I didn't keep much at all." Following, Jackie told her version of the story, beginning with, "I am more sentimental [than him]," as she described her challenges of parting with artifacts tied to her mother.

Regarding perspective-taking, the multiple individual perspectives included in the stories were not integrated as much as in the family-unit sense-making category. Family members would acknowledge each other's differing perspectives but would not necessarily integrate them into their own telling of the story. Thus, ratings of acknowledgement tended to be higher than ratings of confirmation. Tying into coherence, then, the overall family story tended to be less organized in structure than in the family-unit sense-making category. Rather, stories tended to jump around in time as family members took turns sharing their own individual stories, rather

than telling one cohesive story together. Stories tended to parallel each other rather than intersect.

In summary, families that demonstrated individual sense-making exhibited mixed engagement and disengagement, more structured turn-taking, limited integration of perspectives, and less coherence. While the family's overall story fit together, individual family members told paralleled stories that shed light on their own personal conclusions and interpretations of "cleaning out the closet." The following excerpt from John and Jackie's story (expanded from the example discussed above) provides insight individual sense-making:

> John: It's not an intellectual process. It's not a thinking process. It's a feeling process for me[11]. So that [Buddha statue], for example, before she died, she told me she wanted me to have it. And we've had a spiritual connection and have been involved in spirituality, she much more than me, but over the years. So, there was a connection to that aspect of both our lives. So, it goes without saying, but I tend to be ruthless about the stuff, since she died, my father has died, my mother has died, and I've done the same with all of them. I keep mostly photographs. My fondest remembrances are in [the photos]. And I don't need a lot of stuff…[12][13]
>
> Jackie: I'm more sentimental.[14] I had a much harder time. I had, funnily enough, I had the hardest time with getting rid of the things that she gave my children because they grew out of them. And it took me, I think I did a really good job of giving myself some grace to just like to hold on. I still have a book that we will never read, but I'm keeping it. And when it was time, I knew I'd be ready at

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[11] Noted beginning of John's story
[12] Turn-taking (structured)
[13] Noted conclusion to John's story
[14] Noted beginning of Jackie's story

certain points to say goodbye to certain things and when it was time it was time

and it was okay. But those, those things were virtually impossible. The stuff she

gave the kids. I couldn't [get rid of it], I just couldn't. Somehow that was more

important for me than anything. I kept her voicemails…And then I kept anything

that I thought I would actually use like she had a ton of office supplies and I was

like, "Oh, this is, you know, post it notes. Great. We all need those envelopes,"

you know, those kinds of things. And then for her clothes I kept, I kept things that

really made me think of her that I like truly associated with her. And I kept her

bedspread. But yeah. I mean, like I said it's a regret. We[15] were ruthless when we

went through that stuff because we knew it was all, he [John] was moving into our

house, she was going to hospice. It was like there was no place for things to go.

So, we had to be really, really, really conscious of everything that we chose to

keep.[16]

    As this transcript demonstrates, John and Jackie's turn-taking was structured as each

family member waited their turn to tell their own versions of the story. Each story had its own

beginning, middle, and end rather than a collectively told chronology. Jackie did integrate John's

perspectives into her story, but with a different conclusion: John suggested that "cleaning out the

closet" was a "feeling" process rather than a "thought process" and did not keep many artifacts

because they weren't as meaningful to him as photographs and memories Whereas, Jackie

suggested that "cleaning out the closet" was conscious and regretted being so ruthless due to her

sentimentality toward some of her mother's belongings.

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[15] Perspective-taking (attentiveness through "we" language)
[16] Noted conclusion to Jackie's story

The differing perspectives in this example could be due to their roles in the story, as well as the different type of relationship they had to their dying/deceased loved one. While John and Linda [the deceased] were divorced, they still had a very close friendship and cohabitated on and off for a number of years. Nonetheless, Jackie was understandably more involved in the "cleaning out the closet" process and treated her mother's belongings with a different degree of meaning. While John and Jackie's narrative represents individual sense-making, the two did exhibit a high degree of engagement throughout the interview. For other families that demonstrated individual sense-making, such engagement was not always consistent amongst all the participants.

Incomplete sense-making. Families that showed incomplete sense-making lacked overarching meanings within the family. Neither jointly held nor individual conclusions were readily identified. Two of the families demonstrated incomplete sense-making.

Families representing incomplete sense-making tended to score relatively low on engagement for a variety of reasons: (a) one or more family members was/were disengaged or distanced, if not blatantly uninterested in the story being told, (b) one family member dominated the telling of the story, with little room for other family members to participate, or (c) one or more family members were quite cold or lacked affection through the telling of the story. Verbal signs of disengagement included stunted contribution, negative tone, or unwillingness to contribute even after being invited by another family member. Nonverbal indicators included lack of eye contact or lack of bodily orientation toward other family members, or not regularly engaging with other distractions (people, phones, etc.).

In terms of turn-taking, storytelling was typically dominated by one family member, with the remaining one or two members only participating verbally when invited or hardly participating at all. When the disengaged family member was listening attentively, they would nod or make eye contact, but interjection was quite rare. In one case, a family member avoided his sister's invitation to contribute to the story, "I don't want to be the only one who's talking," by saying, "We're getting there." Thus, turn-taking was almost exclusively structured.

While the active participants of the storytelling did tend to seek out others' perspectives, this was not always the case. In some cases, the family member dominating the telling of the story very rarely invited other participants to contribute. One mother, who dominated the storytelling, would regularly turn toward her son for nonverbal confirmations of her perspectives (e.g., nodding). However, when she did invite her son to verbally share his perspective, she swiftly took the telling of the story back. The mother asked her son what items of his deceased father's he kept, to which he responded with one example before the mother interjected to provide a long background story about the artifact.

In most other cases, the active participants of the storytelling would ask the other family members for their perspective, but the other participants had either little content to contribute or little desire to participate. Some participants deferred participation because they felt the story was not theirs to tell. For example, Anita responded "Jennifer is the boss of her own house," when prompted to contribute to the "cleaning out the closet" narrative. In this case, the response made sense given that Anita did not live with her son and daughter-in-law when the death occurred.

In terms of coherence, stories actually tended to be relatively chronological with typically one member telling the story. However, these families scored rather low in integration. With only one family member's perspective being highlighted in the story, integration of narratives was largely impossible.

In summary, families that demonstrated incomplete sense-making exhibited low engagement, structured turn-taking, limited perspective-taking, and relatively low coherence. Conclusions about meaning and identity, especially for the family as a whole unit, were not discernable. The following transcript provides an example of incomplete sense-making between two siblings following my prompt to tell a story of sorting through their deceased brother's apartment:

Claire: Henry, do you want to say something, or?[17]

Henry: Very difficult experience.[18]

Claire: I kind of took the lead on that. And, so it ended up being a very busy, busy day.[19] I had flown in from Maryland where I lived at the time and I knew that my parents would not necessarily be able to get back to Chris's place very frequently to clean out his things, and Henry might not either. And we didn't really know, since he was renting in another person's space, exactly what would happen if we left things unattended for a little while.[20] So, I went there and invited family and friends to come so that if there were items that had particular sentiment to us. We could distribute them accordingly. And so that's how I remember the day, starting with, you know, we, the immediate family coming into that room. And just, since

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[17] Turn-taking (structured)
[18] Lack of engagement
[19] Noted beginning of Claire's story
[20] Perspective-taking

we haven't really received for many invitations to come into that space in general

it was a, an experience of coming into what was kind of a sacred territory and

then we saw how he had left the room at that stage, since, as you know, he died

by suicide. And so, there was a little bit of a discovery process.[21]

Henry:[22] We saw how he had prepared it for us.

As this example demonstrates, Henry was reluctant to contribute to the story, so Claire took the lead. However, at the end of the story, Henry did make a significant contribution that was one of only a few interjections he made throughout the interview. The story was coherent, and Henry's contribution indicated some degree of sense-making. However, the story was not told any further, leaving few conclusions to be taken from the overall "cleaning out the closet" narrative.

Summary. By utilizing the framework developed by Koenig Kellas and Trees (2005), the findings shed light on interactional sense-making behaviors in jointly told family stories about "cleaning out the closet" (RQ2). Families exhibited either family-unit sense-making, individual sense-making, or incomplete sense-making through varying degrees engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence during family stories. In the discussion that follows, I use these findings to draw translational implications regarding communicated narrative sense-making about "cleaning out the closet." I offer accessible implications and solutions for grief-related contexts outside of academia and make connections between participants' storytelling and perceived health-related outcomes.

Discussion

The analyzed jointly told family stories about "cleaning out the closet" demonstrate the nuanced and multi-faceted nature of family grief, meaning and identity, storytelling, and the

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[21] Noted end of Claire's story
[22] Turn-taking (dynamic)

home as a site of sense-making. Families generate shared understandings of what it means to be a grieving family through "cleaning out the closet." The findings are consistent with previous literature on families, grief, and communication, and yields translational implications.

The content of family stories is consistent with previous research on grief. For example, family members told stories about entering their loved one's bedroom as a private place to talk with them (i.e., continuing bonds; Klass et al., 1996). Further, families discussed varying degrees of policing from others to manage their home in a certain way following the loss (i.e., Neimeyer, et al., 2014) and told stories of having their grief disenfranchised by outsiders or each other (Barney & Yoshimura, 2020; Doka, 2009). Finally, families told stories about social support and interpersonal coping (Jakoby, 2014; Stroebe & Schut, 1999; Stroebe et al., 2005). While the storytelling content was consistent with literature on grief, it was also consistent with literature on meaning, identity, and narrating.

Recall that meaning does not lie in events in and of themselves: humans create meaning through the stories they tell about the experience (Hedtke, 2014). For the families interviewed, interactively telling the story of "cleaning out the closet" lent opportunities for meaning reconstruction in real time, including sense-making, identity change, and benefit finding (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). In terms of sense-making, families attempted to find reasons why changes to the home needed to occur, or need not (i.e., motivations). In terms of identity change, families noted examples of how the family continues to grapple with its own communal identity changes. Families reflected on narratives of support, conflict, etc. through making transformations to spaces within in which the deceased once lived (i.e., communication). Finally, in terms of benefit finding, families developed stories around the meaning structures, lessons, and materials offered by the "cleaning out the closet" process (i.e., impacts).

The study at hand expands on literature related to grief and the home by analyzing communicative processes through "cleaning out the closet," namely storytelling. For each family, the process of changing (or not changing) the home and sorting (or not sorting) through their deceased loved one's belongings was significant to their meaning reconstruction both individually and as a unit: this is what our bereaved home looks like. Families utilized their "cleaning out the closet" narratives as opportunities to re-member through storytelling (Myerhoff, 1982), and in turn, address how the deceased will "live on" in memory via the home.

Narrative do not make bygones of experience (Hedtke, 2014). For several families, the telling of the "cleaning out the closet" story was just as significant as the process itself. The storytelling could be as emotionally stirring, confusing, and meaningful as though the family were still *in* the story (and some were). The home, as a place catalyzing grief, emotion, and memory (Maddrell, 2016), clearly yields discursive and material resources that foster transformation, coping, and communal adjustment in times of loss (Buzzanell, 2018). However, the *process* of changing the home and its artifacts to a space within which the deceased never will be is a process wrought with tough decisions and difficult emotions; a process that, for some families, span more than a decade. The narrative is always being written (Goldie, 2011).

Consistent with previous literature on CNSM (Horstman et al., 2016; Koenig Kellas, 2005; Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009) and literature on narrating grief (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Gilbert, 2010; Hedtke, 2014), families negotiated meaning and identity through storytelling in several ways. Families exhibited interactional storytelling behaviors that suggested sense-making at the family-unit level, individual level, and incomplete level. In families that demonstrated family-unit sense-making, all members were actively engaged, distributed talk-time dynamically and equally, integrated each other's perspectives into

the storytelling, and told a relatively chronological narrative. In families that demonstrated individual sense-making, meanings were drawn at the individual level as family members exhibited moderate engagement, varying degrees of dynamic and structured turn-taking, limited integration of other's perspectives, and less chronological narrating. In families that demonstrated incomplete sense-making, an overall conclusion was not discernable. At least one family member was rather disengaged, did not contribute much, did not integrate others' perspectives

The findings at hand yield several translational implications regarding family grief and "cleaning out the closet," specifically. First, storytelling is a worthy tool for individuals and families to make sense of the chaos that is grief and loss. Communication is an important part of coping with death in family relationships (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005) and storytelling may be a highly accessible form of communicating for family members. Note that, even families that demonstrated incomplete sense-making were present for the telling. Hearing the perspectives of others, even if not integrating with them, may play a significant role in the sense-making process.

Data from the follow-up questionnaires support the claim that storytelling may be a worthy tool for grieving families. While only seven participants returned the follow-up questionnaire to me, several of the interviewed family members (particularly those in earlier stages of "cleaning out the closet") indicated that the experience of interviewing and storytelling was transformative. For example, Vicky shared the following reflection one month following her family's interview:

> [Storytelling] motivated us to go through Stephen's things. We were able to take
> his bed down, go through most of his personal items, and now [we] have his room
> set up as a place for us to talk to him and heal! We still have things in boxes that

we will eventually go through, but we feel better about his room and can go in

with good happy memories.

As another example, Mary shared the following reflections:

I think the main [effect of storytelling] was becoming more aware of which

symbols of my grief (like the objects on the shrine with his ashes, his tap shoes

that are in the place where he left them and the letters people have written to us in

memory) are special and kind of held in a place of almost sacred reserve. Most of

the rest of the objects and experiences are more integrated into my everyday

experience. These are both powerful presences in my life, they just have

somewhat different feelings for me.

As both these examples illustrate, storytelling had lasting impacts on family sense-making, at

least on the individual level that can be identified in the questionnaires. This data suggests that,

whether in casual or professional support settings, storytelling may be a cathartic sense-making

practice.

Second, storytelling is a worthy tool for practitioners to offer support for grieving

individuals and families. Ample research suggests that storytelling can aid in coping and

adjustment in grief therapy practice (Gilbert, 2010; Hedtke, 2014). The findings at hand add to

this body of research for a number of reasons. Through storytelling prompts, practitioners may

be able to identify gaps in sense-making and use those gaps as opportunities to support families

who have experienced the loss of a loved one. This translational implication is consistent with

findings from Koenig Kellas and Trees (2006) about finding meaning in difficult family

experiences. As the authors discuss, much narrative therapy focuses on individual sense-making

of his or her own experiences and moves away from focus on the family. By exploring

storytelling interactions, counselors can shift focus toward families, encouraging them to collaboratively narrate *family* experiences of grief. Thus, "the focus on interaction in the three types of sense-making may offer a useful bridge for the gap between content (individual stories) and process (family storytelling) in narrative therapy" (p. 70). Family grief ought to be understood as a communal sense-making experience, not just an individual experience within the context of family (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004).

Finally, in terms of "cleaning out the closet," the findings at hand have translational implications for community members and allies for grieving families. In several of the stories told, not only was the family involved in changing the home, but friends and community members outside the family played a role. For these families, this outside support was helpful to (a) lift the burden of other grieving family members, (b) elicit outside decision making, and (c) invest in relationships amidst the isolation of grief. As Jackie shared during her interview:

> Something that I try and avoid now with other people [affected by grief] is
>
> [saying] 'Call me when you need me.' [Now] it's, 'I'm going to send a pizza,
>
> what do you want on it?' You know, getting really specific and showing up.

Tangible means of support can play a significant role in helping families move forward with grief. Helping to sort through a family member's belongings may be just one form of tangible support grieving families could benefit from.

While several translational implications can be drawn from the data, certain limitations and opportunities for future directions exist. Notably, while the data set did come from families across three religious identifications and included perspectives from both men and women, the families recruited were almost entirely white. Future research ought to explore "cleaning out the closet" with a more diverse dataset for a multitude of reasons. First, quite broadly, orientations

toward grief, death, and dying vary between families of different socio-cultural backgrounds, religious backgrounds, and family experiences. Second, orientations toward material artifacts and the home vary between families of different backgrounds and life experiences. For example, migrants or refugees may make meaning through objects differently than a family that has always lived in the same home and community. Meaning may be especially salient if the objects connect individuals to family far away, yielding a whole other element of grief. Third, storytelling content and behaviors may vary interculturally, a prospect related to CNSM which should be further explored. Fourth, making reliable critical claims without a diverse representation of perspectives is a challenge, if not impossible. So, if translational implications are to be drawn from storytelling interactions, the interactions analyzed ought to include a diverse sample to best support all families experiencing grief.

As a second limitation, the breadth of my participant pool allowed only for broad findings. Studying a more specific population (e.g., bereaved *parents* rather than *family members*) could yield more specific findings to "cleaning out the closet" as it relates to one type of loss, specifically. In this dataset, families that lost a child tended to preserve their space and belongings longer than families who had lost a spouse or parent. Future research should explore the nuances between different types of relationships lost. Similarly, future research should explore the variances in "cleaning out the closet" between different causes of death. As the data showed, families who anticipated their loved one's death often began "cleaning out the closet" before the family member died. The process, and its associated sense-making, surely looks quite different for families whose loss was quite sudden.

As a third limitation, the qualitative approach taken in this study does not allow for generalizations to the greater population. While the approach was intention and serves important

functions in studying families (Ganong & Coleman, 2014), the findings can be applied only to the sample at hand. Future scholarship could compliment, support, validate, or adjust the assessed findings so as to make broader generalizations about grief and "cleaning out the closet" across populations.

Finally, two areas of error are worth noting. First, by inviting participants involved in the "cleaning out the closet" process but who did not live in the home with the deceased, I inadvertently manipulated storytelling interactions. Naturally, family members who lived in the home had more of the story to tell. Future research should isolate family members who all cohabitated with the now-deceased loved one, because the home will inevitably hold different meaning if it was shared amongst all participating family members. This research may shed more light on the theirs-ours tension, which should also be further explored in future research related to relational dialectics (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Suter & Seurer, 2018). As a second area of error, research utilizing CNSM theory should prompt families to tell one story, rather than several. By asking ten storytelling prompts, it was a challenge to discern each family's degree of coherence, primarily when operationalizing organization. By asking just one story, the beginning, middle, and end could be more distinguishable.

My intention for the study is not to make value claims about the three types of sense-making, especially considering the complexity of sense-making in grief. The existence of individual and incomplete sense-making is consistent in literature about grief as it intersects with meaning (Halliwell & Franken, 2016; Neimeyer, et al., 2014), storytelling (Baddeley & Singer, 2010; Rolbiecki et al., 2017; Walter, 1996), identity (Barney & Yoshimura, 2020), and well-being (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001; Bonanno et al., 2004; LeClair-Underber, 2008). However, *family* grief presents a need to negotiate meaning and identity at both the individual and

communal level. Future research ought to explore how types of sense-making, and their associated interactional storytelling characteristics, relate to family satisfaction, coping and adjustment to loss, and other elements of family life. Similarly, future research ought to assess family sense-making longitudinally. Sense-making is not static, especially in the context of grief. For many families, grief will be a lifelong narrative (Barney & Yoshimura, 2020; Goldie, 2011) even if "cleaning out the closet" is not.

While the storytelling data provided ongoing support for CNSM theory (Koenig Kellas, 2018) and was consistent with established grief literature, future research ought to explore "cleaning out the closet" through other theoretical frameworks. For example, future scholarship could approach family communication in "cleaning out the closet" to analyze family systems (Yoshimura & Galvin, 2018), narrative performance (Langellier & Peterson, 2018), dialectics (Baxter, 2011), resilience (Buzzanell, 2018), family communication patterns (Koerner et al., 2018), and critical theories (e.g., social constructionist theory; Braithwaite, Foster, et al., 2018), among others. Further, future research ought to explore the *communication* category outlined in the findings more closely with communication theory. An abundance of interpersonal communication theory exists to explore decision-making and emotional support, for example, in a more in-depth manner within the context of "cleaning out the closet." Exploring these individual modes and communicating through "cleaning out the closet," and identifying other communicative manifestations of the process, could yield insight on how families communicate through grief and change.

A significant observation regarding perspective-taking is worth mentioning. Across all three sense-making dimensions, every family that participated did attend to the perspectives of the deceased family member. Whether through details such as, "That's what she would have

done anyway," or "he'd be 20 now and it's not a 20-year old's room anymore. It's an 18-year old's room," the family members tended to consider the deceased, re-member the deceased, defy the deceased, and relate to the deceased within their stories. Taking the deceased's perspective was consistent and persistent, even for families who lost the loved one over a decade ago. Perhaps taking the deceased's perspective plays an important role in sense-making surrounding "cleaning out the closet" and grief in general. Future research should explore the role the deceased plays in family narratives about adjustment to grief.

Conclusion

Loss is a story understood retrospectively and interactively (Gilbert, 2010). Taking an interpretive approach, this study isolated the home as a site of communicated narrative sense-making amidst grief. The findings demonstrate how grief, the home, and storytelling are intertwined in communicated narrative sense-making processes for families. "Cleaning out the closet" narratives shed light on the complex and nuanced interactions that occur between family members experiencing grief, providing insight on grief communication, meaning making, and communal identity performance. The home is not merely a backdrop where grief takes place, but a dynamic and polysemic place imbedded in sense-making, identity, grief, and family. Changing the home, then, is an agentic and rhetorical act: a dense and significant story within the family's whole grief narrative.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Schedule

Introduction

Warming Up Questions
1. Could you provide me some background about your family? What is your communication style, generally?

At this point, the questions I ask will pertain to your family's experience with grief. Is it okay for me to move forward?

Background of Loss
2. **Do you have a story or two about *name of deceased* that you remember fondly and wouldn't mind sharing with me?**[23]
3. What else should I know about *name*?

"Cleaning out the closet"
4. **Can you tell me a story about *name*'s bedroom or how they set it up while they were alive?**
    a. How did *name* organize their bedroom, from what you remember?
5. **Could you tell me a story or two about how *names*'s bedroom changed since their death?**
6. After *name* died, did you sort through their belongings in their bedroom, closet, etc.?
    a. If yes,
        i. **Could you tell me a story about that experience, and how it was for you?**
        ii. At what point did you decide to sort through *name*'s belongings?
        iii. Why did you feel a need/want to sort through *name*'s belongings?
    b. If no,
        i. **Could you tell me a story about why you chose not to change *name*'s bedrooms/keep their belongings?**
        ii. How did you come to this decision?
        iii. **Could you tell me a story about being in *name*'s space after their death?**
        iv. Do you think, at any point, that you will sort through *name*'s belongings? Why or why not?
7. **Did looking through *name*'s belongings influence your family to remember and retell stories?**
        i. **What were some of these stories?**
        ii. Do you still have the item(s) that triggered your memory of these stories?

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[23] Questions in bold are storytelling prompts that I will emphasize during interviews. Questions non-bolded are potential follow-up questions.

8. **Could you tell me a story or two about that communication your family had about things you would like to keep or get rid of?**
   a. What decisions did you come to? What did you keep? What did you get rid of? What did you do with it (donate, sell, throw away…)?
   b. Did your family have disagreements about these decisions? If so, could you tell me a story to provide an example?
9. **Could you tell me a story about making decisions on where to place *name*'s belongings?**
   a. For the items you kept, did you keep them in *name*'s bedroom, or elsewhere in your home?
   b. What were the thoughts behind those decisions?
   c. Why do you display some items and tuck others away?
10. **Could you tell me a story of how other parts of your home have changed since *name*s death?**

Cultural influence

11. **Can you tell me a story about any ways you feel or felt social pressure or expectations from others to perform your grief a certain way?**
    a. In what ways have your family members added to these pressures?
    b. How has that been communicated?
    c. Where do you think these social pressures come from?
12. **Could you provide me with a story of what you thought grief looked like or felt like before it happened to you?**
    a. What caused you to have these assumptions (movies, books, songs, etc.)?
    b. How have your assumptions changed now that you have experienced loss?
13. **Can you tell me a story of how others' expectations influenced your grieving experience?**
    a. How do you think these social expectations potentially influenced your decisions in how you've changed your home after *name*'s death?

Closing

Appendix B

Summary of Retrospective Storytelling Codes

Table 1 *Summary of Retrospective Storytelling Codes*		
Motivations	Space	E.g., conceptualization of space (theirs-ours), need for space, "feel" of space
	Artifacts	E.g., function, personal taste, memorialization, disposal
Communication	Decision-making	E.g., "…he finally got on board when you really understood how difficult it was for me" (p. 41).
	Emotional support	E.g., "My father has been the person I could go to, to process what was going on with my mom" (p. 43).
	Future plans	E.g., "Well, I've always said that if we do ever really change it away from being Sam's room the only thing I can imagine changing it too is like a cat palace" (p. 46).
	Re-membering through storytelling	E.g., "Yeah, I do remember just sitting on this couch with you right after that we got that book and just flipping through it and telling stories" (p. 47).
	Anticipatory changes	E.g., "He gave some things that he knew had sentimental value or just kind of that people enjoyed. He gave some of that stuff away, actually, before he, before he died" (p. 48).
Impacts	Effects of change or maintenance	E.g., "It was almost like this huge weight lifted off my shoulders" (p. 50).
	Lack of effects of change or maintenance	E.g., "I don't think it'll change anything" (p. 51).

Appendix C

Joint Narrative Process Rating Scheme

Joint Process Rating Sheet
Engagement

Family #_____   Rater_____

Topic_____

INVOLVEMENT

Liveliness; Degree to which the family as a whole verbally participates in telling the story and nonverbally expresses interest and engagement both while speaking and while listening.

- *Behavioral indicators* of involvement include kinesic/proxemic animation (use of gestures, facial expressiveness), vocal animation, eye contact, back channels (head nods, uh huhs), touch, forward lean as well as verbal contributions to the story being told. Verbal indicators of involvement include lively contribution to the story (talking and adding on to one another's' comments with interest and engagement).

Rating indicates level of agreement with the following statement:

As a whole, the family storytelling is lively, members are nonverbally and verbally interested and engaged in the story being told

Uninvolved   1   2   3   4   5   Involved

Notes:

5:      All three family members are both verbally and nonverbally engaged in the telling of the story. Each person shows interest in both telling and listening to the story. Family members are consistently animated, interested, and engaged verbally and nonverbally and are involved throughout the telling.

4:      All family members are animated and engaged for most of the telling, with infrequent occurrences of family members "tuning out" at certain points in the story. Or, two members are highly involved throughout and one member is involved through part of the story and not involved at other times.

3:      There is either a balance between involvement and uninvolvement or moderate involvement throughout. Family members are at times verbally and nonverbally engaged in the telling and at times seem to "tune out" from involvement in telling or listening. Or, one member is highly involved in the telling and listening of the story and the other two

members are sometimes involved and sometimes uninvolved. Alternatively, family members may be moderately involved, somewhat lively but not highly animated.

2:      Family members are less animated and interested in the telling. They less frequently engage in involvement behaviors while telling or listening to the story. One family member might be involved, but others appear uninterested or two people are moderately involved and one is quite uninvolved in the story telling.

1:      Family members do not seem interested in telling the story (e.g., seem bored and uninvolved) or in listening to other members (e.g., no eye contact or backchanneling). There is little to no liveliness; telling the story seems like a chore.

Joint Process Rating Sheet
Engagement

Family #_____   Rater_____

Topic_____

WARMTH

Degree to which the family's interaction (both verbal and nonverbal) is characterized by warmth, affection, and positive affect versus coldness, distance, dissociation from each other and/or negative affect.

- *Behavioral indicators* of warmth include nonverbal behaviors such as pleasant facial expressions, smiles, forward lean, touch, vocal warmth, eye contact and verbal statements of encouragement, affection, and/or approval as well as attentiveness in contrast to verbal statements of disapproval, distancing statements, negatively expressed disagreement. Verbal indicators include the extent to which family members express positive feelings/affect about each other and the story (e.g., "he was so sweet;" "that was a really fun time"). Family members may contribute positive and emotions and liking as opposed to negative feelings and disliking or the verbal engagement in negative conflict. Verbal warmth is characterized by fondness, humor and liking, whereas verbal coldness is characterized by negative statements, conflict, or cold or stunted contribution. Verbal warmth is also determined by tone (e.g., family members may engage in conflict, but if the tone is positive, it can still be warm).

Rating indicates level of agreement with the following statement:

As a whole, the family storytelling is characterized by warmth, approach behaviors, and positivity (as contrasted with distance, dissociation, and negativity)

Cold   1   2   3   4   5   Warm

<u>Notes:</u>

5:      Family interaction is characterized by warm interaction including laughter, smiles, verbal attentiveness and encouragement and affection both verbally and nonverbally.

4:      The family interaction is mostly warm with some instances of family members disassociating themselves from the interaction. And/or the story is often, but not always characterized by warmth and affection. If engage in conflict, do so with positive nonverbal cues.

3:      The storytelling interaction is balanced between warm attentiveness and distance or is neither warm nor cold, but relatively neutral.

2:       Family members are more distant than they are warm. There may be one or two instances of laughter, attentiveness, or affection, but, in general, the family is distant and does not express warm attentiveness. Expressions of negative affect also possible.

1:       Family members appear distant and cold. There is very little or no warmth and affection. Family members do not appear associated with one another. May express negativity and engage in negatively valenced conflict

Joint Process Rating Sheet
Turn-Taking

Family #_____   Rater_____

Topic_____

DYNAMIC

Degree to which families' turn-taking or shifts in speech are segmented and compartmentalized versus mixed, free-flowing, and dynamic.

- *Behavioral indicators* or more dynamic turn-taking include interruptions, additions to what others are saying, interjection, and elaborations. Indicators of more structured turn-taking are distinct, separate turns and explicit turn-taking behaviors such as, "And what would you like to add?"

Rating indicates level of agreement with the following statement:

As a whole, turn-taking in this story is fluid, dynamic, and free-flowing.

Strongly Disagree   **Strongly Agree**
Structured   **1   2   3   4   5   Fluid**

Notes:

5:      Family members interact in a fluid, dynamic, and free manner. The interaction is marked by interruptions, overlaps, and energy. Little attention is paid to structured/polite turn-taking. Family members add without asking.

4:      The interaction is fluid and flowing, but somewhat more reserved. Family members may still interrupt and build off one another freely, but they ask more frequently (e.g., "I just have to add something here").

3:      Family members occasionally interrupt each other and build dynamically upon each others' comments, but they tend to also listen politely and wait their turn to talk. Or part of the story may be one family member telling the story and then the other half is marked by interruptions, overlaps, and energy.

2:      Family members rarely jump in to add to another's comments. Aside from a few additions or interruptions, family members wait their turn to talk.

1:      Turn-taking is extremely structured. The telling is characterized by one person talking/telling their version of the story, followed by the next person, followed by the next person. Each person has a turn and they rarely deviate from that format.

Joint Process Rating Sheet
Turn-Taking

Family #_____   Rater_____

Topic_____

DISTRIBUTION OF TURNS

Degree to which each family member both takes and is allowed to take turns at telling the story.

- ***Behavioral indicators*** of turn distribution are primarily talk time.

Rating indicates level of agreement with the following statement:

    Across the story as a whole, family members' turns are balanced.

**Uneven Distribution 1   2   3   4   5   Even Distribution
    of Turns   of Turns**

Notes:

5:      Each family members contributes equally to the telling of the story. There is an even distribution of who gets to talk; how many turns each person takes.

4:      The telling is fairly evenly distributed across the family. One or two family members may dominate the telling, but the other(s) contribute a fair/almost equal amount.

3:      Every family member gets a turn, but there is a sense that one or two family members take more turns than others. There is some uneven distribution.

2:      At least one or two family members have more room to tell the story than others. Turns are more unevenly than they are evenly distributed.

1:      One person dominates the telling of the story, with the others' taking very few to no turns.

Joint Process Rating Sheet
Perspective-Taking

Family #_____   Rater_____

Topic_____

ATTENTIVENESS TO OTHERS' PERSPECTIVES

Degree to which family members, as they tell the story together, acknowledge each other's views and perspectives, and combine and integrate them to create the story.

- *Behavioral indicators* of attentiveness to others' perspectives include asking others about their perspectives explicitly, statements that indicate an understanding that others may have seen things differently, acknowledging perspectives others have contributed to the story, and including others' perspectives in one's own contribution to the story. Nonverbal cues such as gestures and eye contact toward others may accompany these verbal perspective-taking moves.

Rating indicates level of agreement with the following statement:

As a whole, family members solicit, listen to, and incorporate others' perspectives into the telling of the story.

Strongly Disagree   **Strongly Agree**
Ignored   **1   2   3   4   5**   **Integrated**

Notes:

5:      During the telling of the story, family members demonstrate an understanding that others may have a different perspective, listen to others' views, and incorporate others' perspectives into the telling (e.g., acknowledge others' comment and make it part of their subsequent comments).

4:      Family members sometimes acknowledge each others' perspectives and include them in their subsequent comments. And/or one or two family members are particularly attentive to others' perspectives throughout the storytelling.

3:      Family members sometimes acknowledge each others' perspectives and sometimes ignore them (e.g., do not acknowledge the other person had a different experience/something to add and do not incorporate this perspective into their subsequent comments). There is a balance in perspective taking. It may be that one person consistently acknowledges others' perspectives, but the other two family members do so minimally. Family members acknowledge others' perspectives, but do not integrate them into their own comments.

2:       Family members rarely take each others' perspectives into account. Family members may occasionally verbally or nonverbally acknowledge the other person(s)' comments, but generally do not integrate these comments into their own and do not explicitly seek out others' perspectives. May be that two family members engage in moderate perspective-taking behavior and one ignores others' perspectives.

1:       Family members seem to ignore the perspectives of others in the family. There is a sense that the stories are separate and distinct for each family member and members only recognize their own experience of the story.

Joint Process Rating Sheet
Perspective-Taking

Family #_____   Rater_____

Topic_____

CONFIRMATION OF PERSPECTIVES

Degree to which family members are confirming of the experience/perspective of other members of the family and respond positively to their contributions to the story. Focuses specifically on how family members respond to others' contributions to the story.

- *Behavioral indicators* of confirmation of perspectives include statements affirming the validity of others' experiences (e.g., that's a good point) or agreement (not necessarily agreement with the point, but with the description of their own experience, e.g., yes, I can see where you would feel that way). Nonverbal behaviors indicating agreement or disagreement would also contribute to this process (e.g., head nodding or shaking, disbelieving/believing or disapproving/approving facial or vocal expressions).

Rating indicates level of agreement with the following statement:

As a whole, family members respond positively and in affirming ways both verbally and nonverbally to the contributions of other family members to the story.

Disconfirming   **1   2   3   4   5**   **Confirming**

Notes:

5:     Others' perspectives are always or almost always acknowledged and confirmed (e.g. "Oh that's a good point;" "Yes, I can see where you would feel that way"; nodding, smiling at another's perspective)

4:     Family members confirm each others' perspectives some of the time and do not engage in any disconfirming behaviors.

3:     Family members sometimes confirm and sometimes disconfirm (e.g., "that's not what happened;" "no, you're wrong, I was there") each others' perspectives or they are neither particularly confirming nor particulary disconfirming, but relatively neutral.

2:     Family members tend to disagree with each other's tellings more than agree. There is more of a disconfirming tone in response to others' contributions than confirming comments. More disagreement.

1:      Family members consistently disconfirm each others' experience of the story. They continually disagree with the other person(s)' comments. Disagreements are frequently and potentially negative.

Joint Process Rating Sheet
Coherence

Family #_____   Rater_____

Topic_____

ORGANIZATION

Degree to which the overall story told is logically organized and clearly sequential.

- ***Behavioral indicators*** of organization include a clear beginning, middle, and end as well as minimal jumping around from one part of the story to the other.

Rating indicates level of agreement with the following statement:

As a whole, the story is very well-organized, with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Strongly Disagree						**Strongly Agree**
Disorganized	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**Organized**

Notes:

5:     Very Well-Organized: The story follows a logical sequence throughout with a clear beginning, middle and end.   Very little to no backing up and jumping around.

4:     Relatively Well-Organized: The story has an overall structure that generally gets followed with only some places where the telling gets messy and disorganized.

3:     Moderately between the two: Parts of the story are well organized and parts are quite disorganized or it is moderately organized throughout with a moderately discernable underlying structure guiding plot development.

2:     Relatively Disorganized: Much of the story does not follow a logical sequential development of the plot very well but there is some minimal discernable underlying structure.

1:     Very Disorganized: The story doesn't have a discernable overall structure and lacks sequential development.

Joint Process Rating Sheet
Coherence

Family #_____   Rater_____

Topic_____

INTEGRATION

Degree to which family members tell a single, intertwined, integrated story that hangs together and makes sense.

- ***Behavioral indicators*** of low integration include stories that are chaotic and completely lacking in coherence, or conflictual, with individually coherent stories that are competing. As a judgment of the joint construction of a story overall, stories that contain somewhat coherent individual contributions, but fail to hang together as a whole receive a low rating, despite individual coherence.

Rating indicates level of agreement with the following statement:

As a whole, family members contribute to the telling of one collaboratively constructed overall story that has a high degree of jointness and "hangs together."

Strongly Disagree   **Strongly Agree**
Parallel   1   2   3   4   5   **Collaborative**

Notes:

5:      Family members consistently add on to each others' comments to build the story.
        There is one overall story being told and the various contributions "hang together".
        A high degree of "jointness" to the story.

4:      Family members often build on each others' comments, integrating their stories, although occasionally one or two members tell portions of the story without much collaboration from other(st) members. Generally, with some exceptions, the parts of the overall story being told fit together.

3:      Family members balance between adding to each others' stories and telling more separate individual versions. Family members sometimes collaborate and sometimes provide parallel comments. Overall, moderately coherent story with parts that fit together well and other parts that don't.

2:      Family members generally tell separate versions of the story, with rare additions from other members. Family members occasionally add onto one anothers' comments, but it is rare.

1:      Family members tell parallel stories, with little to no integration. They seem to be separate stories that don't hang together well at all.