The Salience of Family Worldview in Mourning an Elderly Husband and Father

Helen K. Black, PhD,* and Holly R. Santanello, BA

Sociology Department, Behavioral Research Institute, Arcadia University, Glenside, Pennsylvania.

*Address correspondence to Helen K. Black, Arcadia University, Behavioral Research Institute, 450 South Easton Road, Glenside, PA 19038. E-mail: blackh@arcadia.edu

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Objective: The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore family reaction to the death of the elderly husband and father in the family. Methods: We qualitatively interviewed 34 families (a family included a widow and 2 adult biological children) approximately 6–15 months after the death. In private, one-on-one in-depth interviews, we discussed how the death affected each family member as an individual and how each member perceived that the death altered the family as a unit. Results: An individual’s worldview, embedded in the smaller culture of the family and the larger culture of society, offers a template for appropriate grief reactions. Discussion: Our article builds on the constructs of worldview, grief for the husband and father, and narrative at the juncture of self-evaluation, as family members reflected on where they stood in their own journey through life.

Key Words: Family bereavement, Elderly man’s death, Narrative

The term worldview has been described as an organizing or plausibility structure for what happens in the wider world and in one’s life (Hiebert, 2009). Family is the primary agent for transmitting a worldview (Thomas, 1998), which emerges from the family’s unique background as well as the larger culture in which the notion of family is embedded (Rutjens & Loseman, 2010). Because a worldview offers a perspective on events, a family’s worldview is especially salient at a time of loss through death (Poulin & Silver, 2008).

Our article, which explores the significance of worldview in family bereavement, emerges from a study in which we qualitatively interviewed 34 families (a family included a widow and two adult biological children) about the death of the elderly father and husband in the family.

We chose to look at the families of deceased men for several reasons. According to the U.S. Census Bureau of 2001, 14% of men versus 45% of women older than the age of 65 are widowed. Among those aged 85 and older, 43% of men compared with 80% of women are widowed. Thus, a family in which the elderly father has died before the mother is the most typical of intact families. Along with following the most normative family configuration, we wanted to examine the relationship between the surviving parent (the mother) and bereaved adult children, and among the adult children as siblings, because these relationships have rarely been studied (Moss & Moss, 2007). The ways that the death of the husband and father affects surviving family members also has been little explored (Umberson & Terling, 1997). We attempted to view the family as a triad: the adult child, the widow, and the sibling. Also, most previous research has focused on the impact of the death of the last parent. Our focus on this
particular family triad demonstrates that how family orientation enlarges our understanding of how death in old age has an impact on families and individual members in the family.

Interview topics included how the death of the husband and father affected each member and how each member perceived that the death influenced the family as a whole. The question of our paper is how does a family’s narrative of death and bereavement reflect their worldview?

**Worldview**

The term worldview is used by various disciplines to describe persons’ perspectives on how the world generally works and the nature of human beings, including the self (Valk, 2009). At the core of a worldview are basic assumptions about the meaning of life and what happens after death (Poulin & Silver, 2008). Janoff-Bulman (1992) showed how positive assumptions about the world and the self add to well-being, especially in middle-aged and older adults. Positive assumptions lead individuals to believe they have a large say in how their lives turn out; they feel in control of life’s circumstances and thus have a sense of mastery and self-respect.

Worldview has a developmental component. Children learn the worldview of their family of origin; home is the first setting for looking at self, others, and the world (Thomas, 1998). As children grow, make friendships, and meet partners, their worldview usually expands and diffuses. As persons marry, they together construct a worldview for their new family. Thus, families build unique meaning structures that guide them to experience, interpret, and track their lives as individuals and as a family (Thomas, 1998).

The worldview of a family can span generations; it is organic, dynamic, and reflexive (Hiebert, 2009). It blends values prized by the larger culture, such as independence and self-reliance in North America, with the customs of the smaller culture of the family, such as how to celebrate a particular holiday. Understanding a family’s worldview offers a window into both cultures (Nadeau, 2001). Culture is a substratum for worldview; it creates a template for the customs and values upheld in a particular society, such as appropriate reactions in a family when one of its members dies. This template is a source of guidance when family solidarity is threatened by death (Thomas, 1998).

A long-standing worldview can be shaken due to traumatic events, such as an unexpected loss or violence committed against the self or a loved one (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). An assumption of control over life circumstances usually remains unchallenged until suffering or trauma occurs, which often results in a sense that life may not be ordered but chaotic (Jeavons & Graywood, 2007).

The death of a husband and father (even one who is ill and elderly) also threatens a family’s worldview with disorder as it highlights life’s unknowns (Nadeau, 2001). If he is considered “too young” (which can be young-old age), the family might view his death as off-time and their view of the world as organized and meaningful might be shaken (Matthews & Marwit, 2003–2004), forcing a reworking of the family’s basic assumptions about life. An on-time death, such as that of an elderly husband and father (old-old), may not rupture a family’s worldview, but the loss of a loved one often prompts mourners to ask existential questions about the why of suffering and death and the purpose of life (Black, Moss, Rubinstein, & Moss, 2011).

**Family Roles**

*Adult Children.*—All family roles carry abstract, theoretical or symbolic meanings, such as a protective father. This adjective illustrates an example of the “paradigm” of each role in a particular society at a particular place in time. For the adult child, the characteristics of a “parent,” both general and particular, take shape in early childhood. And although a parent’s image is usually altered (diminished or enhanced) throughout the adult child’s life, it continues to evoke powerful emotions (Umberson, 2003). Middle-aged adults still seek love and approval from elderly parents or answers to questions about the perceived lack of love, approval, or encouragement that plagued them since childhood (Nadeau, 2001).

Taking the role of authority figure, friend, or critic, parents create the “normativeness” of the family, the “we” of the family’s ethics, belief system, morality, and values. Parents also assign the boundary for who is family and who is not, the high or low importance of friends, the propriety of revealing emotion in various settings, and the verbal and nonverbal ways a family discloses, hides, or denies its secrets or allows itself to be known (Logan & Spitze, 1996).
Thus, an adult child’s conception of a parent’s end of life, in this case the father, is a complex blend of the various roles he played throughout the stages of the family’s life (Abeles, Victor, & Delano-Wood, 2004), such as protector or non-provider, buddy or judge, and all roles that are on the continuum of these examples, and the symbolic meaning of these roles. The father also represents attitudes, behaviors, and opinions from which the child may have attempted, throughout life, to break away. Just as a sense of unconditional love is gone after the father’s death, so also might be the judgment, disapproval, and disappointment that the adult child perceived and resented (Umberson, 2003). In the child’s mind, there are at least two images of the father: as the figure of a man and as a father and husband in a family. These images show how the relationship between father and child and father, mother, and children reflexively shape the family collective (Moss & Moss, 2007).

Significant to the adult child at the father’s end of life is a loss of identity as a son or daughter to the father, a loss of opportunity to win withheld love of the father or to elicit answers to questions that remained unanswered throughout life. Once he is gone, any hurt the children continue to feel might be viewed as irreparable and incapable of healing. To the child, unanswered questions remain unanswered; ruptures in the relationship stay broken; and the “potential” for intimacy is lost (Attig, 2001).

**The Widow.**—The changes and losses in a widow’s life after her husband’s death have been extensively examined (Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse, 2004; Carr, Nesse, & Wortman, 2006). What has been less examined is the emotion that attends the witnessing of the husband’s death, that is, the fear and uncertainty, during the dying process, of how much pain he and the family will endure, and how his death will change their lives. A loss of identity often accompanies the loss of role as wife and meaning in life is questioned after the loss of a spouse with whom one has lived for more than forty, fifty, or even sixty years. There are also economic, emotional, and social implications of the change in status from married woman to widow (DeMichele, 2009). At the end of her husband’s life, the widow realizes that a new chapter in life is beginning for each family member as well as for the family system and wonders whether, or not, this chapter will draw family members closer to her and to each other (Bonanno, 2009).

Although the depth of grief for the husband may be thought to equal the level of attachment between the couple, this is not always the case (Black et al., 2011). Some women have spoken of the gains experienced after the death of a long-time husband, such as freedom from caretaking and from the husband’s dominance or control. The roles that being “alone” might entail, such as making her own decisions and being able to “get out” because she is no longer giving care to an ill husband may lift self-esteem. Despite loneliness, the widow may find a new sense of self that was repressed during marriage (DeMichele, 2009).

**Widow and Adult Children.**—Awareness, through death, that one is no longer wife to the husband and child to the father may require transforming a self- and worldview. Some roles go lost or missing when the husband/father dies. No longer performing physical care tasks for the husband/father leaves a void, no matter how much relief the caregiver also feels. In the case of adult children, the role of helping with home repairs, finances, or acting as a sounding board for the mother’s worries may increase after the father’s death by assuming greater care, protection, or advice giving (Moss & Moss, 2007).

Experiencing the dying and death of the husband and father includes the loss of (a) an image of the self as wife or child, (b) a possibility of continuing the relationship with the loved one, and (c) a future in which the loved one plays a part (Bonanno, 2009), although family members may believe that the deceased continues his existence in some way, somewhere. The loss is both internal and external and, at root, is experienced as losing a part of oneself (Mitchell & Anderson, 1983).

**Grief**

In the smaller culture of the family, where the lived experience of death takes place, abstract theories of grief may be too broad and generalized to handle the uniqueness of loss. Thus, recent research on bereavement has focused on grief as something “smaller” and local (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2009). Belief in an afterlife is often connected to some sign of it, such as a perception that a pet dog or a friendly squirrel is a representation of the
The death of an elderly husband and father may not alter basic assumptions about the world or the self. It may even bolster perceptions about the world’s beneficence because he died in old age, after a relatively fruitful life (Black et al., 2011). As family members watch their loved one’s dying and death and mourn him, they stretch their worldview to include the reality of death and grief (Currier et al., 2009), which includes individual feelings of sorrow, guilt, and relief, and reaching out to other family members for support. Comfort is often found in family members’ united worldview about what should occur after a death, similar accounts of the death, and a shared meaning about the husband and father’s life (Attig, 2001). In the case of adult children, this may include more frequent contact with the widowed mother, assisting her with errands, home repairs, or finances. For many families, the widow and the family home remain the hub of the family and keep the family intact.

Conversely, family dissonance, cliques in the family or shunning, and speculation about other family members’ grief actions and intentions hinder meaning-making and can result in family estrangement (Nadeau, 2001). This might occur if the father, rather than the mother, was considered the keystone of the family and his death as the loss of the “cement” of the family (Black et al., 2011).

**Methods**

*Data Collection and Analysis*

This article emerged from data collected from National Institute on Aging–funded Research (The Meaning of Death of the First Elderly Parent: A Family Perspective). Thirty-four families were interviewed in the study (each family consisted of a widow, aged 69–90 and one or two adult children, aged 33–68) from 6 to 15 months after the husband and father’s death. Twenty-six families were European American and eight families were African American. Fourteen families reported being Catholic; 11 Protestant (six Baptist, two Presbyterian, two Lutheran, and one Methodist), two Nondenominational Christian, and seven families were Jewish. Our entry point to the family was an adult child recruited from the death notice of a man, aged 70 and older, who was survived by a widow and at least two adult biological children. A letter describing the study was sent to a focal child and was followed up with a telephone call approximately a week later (addresses and telephone numbers were identified using whitepages.com) as a screener. Exclusion from the study occurred if the focal child refused to be interviewed after originally agreeing to do so. Once we established contact with the adult child and interviewed him or her, we asked permission to contact a sibling and the mother/widow.

**Narrative**

A family’s worldview and their grief experience come together in their stories about the husband’s and father’s death (McAdams, 2001). In stories, members attempt to organize information, such as describing the last thing he said to each family member or their immediate reaction after the death. In their narratives, family members narrate a portrait of themselves, the bereaved, and other family members in light of the death. They also explicate their basic assumptions about life. That is, stories of the death reveal the history and expectations of family members about their relationships with one another, such as a husband and father’s perceived role in the family (Logan & Spitze, 1996; McAdams, 2001). If family members perceive consistency in the life and relationships with the deceased, they usually view themselves as unified in grief and their worldview as alive and flexible enough to assimilate information about suffering and death without shattering its foundation (Hiebert, 2009). Death and the life review (of the deceased and the family) that attends it may spotlight inconsistencies in the words and actions of the deceased, discord among family members, and expose expectations of family members that were never met. Individual members might question the beliefs and values that created the “we” of the family, or even if a family “we” exists, and if all family members are included. Family members might repeat contradictions in their stories without explaining or referencing them, either forgetting, ignoring, or denying the inconsistencies (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998).
Data for the study were collected through formal ethnographic interviews and informal conversation and were processed through digital recording and transcription for analysis or detailed in analyzable field notes. We interviewed respondents in their homes or in the office of the interviewer at Arcadia University. Each interview lasted approximately 2 hr in two sessions for a total of approximately 4 hr. Interviewers gained Institutional Review Board Consent from each respondent at the beginning of the first interview with a signed letter of informed consent, which each participant read and signed.

In this article, we present accounts of the husband and father’s death, which were culled from our interviews with family members, our informal conversations, and our field notes. The accounts show how family members’ assumptions about themselves, their family, and death, reflect the worldview they learned in childhood.

The main tool of this study was the semistructured interview schedule, which included open-ended questions. The first interview session focused on the reaction of the interviewee to the husband or father’s dying and death. It also explored the respondent’s opinion of their loved one’s care and examined respondents’ beliefs about an afterlife. The second interview asked about other family members’ reactions to the husband and father’s dying and death and an assessment of family members’ relationships with each other generally and specifically around their loved one’s end of life. We note that as respondents’ answered our questions, we confirmed their answers to ensure we understood their meaning and often used tailor-made follow-up questions to further ensure our understanding (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). A sampling of questions follows:

1. What were some of the highlights of your father/husband’s life?
2. When was the last time you talked to him? What did you say to each other?
3. How has the family changed since he died?
4. Do family members talk with one another about their feelings in relation to his death?

The general approach to data analysis for this project uses standard methods of qualitative research (Mischler, 1986; Silverman, 2001), which are as follows: After transcribing interviews, we analyzed them using data review, which asks the broad questions, “What is in the data?” and “How is this data relevant to the topic under study?” The next step is a large-level sorting of each transcript, which codes for broad themes and topics individually. Appropriateness of large-level codes was discussed in weekly meetings among all team members (interviewers and transcriptionist) and enabled us to more fully understand participants’ interpretations of questions that we asked them and their responses (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Flyvbjerg, 2006). We also did fine-grained analyses, which included coding for subthemes and patterns within respondents’ entire transcripts. Authors performed successive phases of grouping and refining codes until a satisfactory level of agreement was obtained by all team members (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Data also consisted of detailed field notes. We note that as each interview was transcribed and ideas and themes emerged, we looked to completed interviews to see how new data reflected themes already coded or if new data educed new material.

In the current article, the varied assumptive worlds in which people live and construct their expectations about family relationships emerged in respondents’ narratives about their loss and about their relationships with other family members. These patterns were discussed by research team members after reviewing and coding family transcript sets. In meetings, we noted that participants’ reactions to the husband and father’s death, their thoughts about a family “we,” and descriptions of his legacy reflected larger assumptions about life, death, family, and relationships.

Results

The accounts that follow disclosed the family’s experience of grief as well as each member’s distinctive relationship with the deceased and with other family members. We inductively discovered three interrelated themes that emerged from our data analysis of the families in our study (we also found other themes related to other topics of our study, which are explored in additional articles), and we used this data to organize and interpret individual and family worldviews in light of the loved one’s death. We present our findings under three interrelated themes: (a) The “we” of the family, (b) Reaction to the death, and (c) Legacy of the father. We present accounts that illustrate the three themes.

Theme 1: The “we” of the Family

The “we” of the family can be described as a family identity and a way of being a family. It includes
a system of beliefs and values and a mode of communication and emotionality. In regard to bereavement, a united “we” often manifests as a similar story about the death from all or several family members and a shared grief. In some families, unresolved relationships between family members, including the deceased, may produce factions of “we” in the family. For example, two sisters in the Marra family, Lilly and Sonia, aged 55 and 50, respectively, remember that their father, who worked as an entertainer in Las Vegas, was “hardly ever home” when they were children, which was confirmed by 80-year-old Mrs. Marra.

Interviewer: Now was he still in show business when the children were growing up?
Mrs. Marra: Oh yeah. He used to travel to Las Vegas and some other places, too.

Beyond this, the sisters’ views of their father and his relationship with each of them were discrepant, perhaps due to the difference in their ages and thus variations in their memories.

Lilly: We weren’t close with my father. He was just away so much. By the time he quit show business I was grown.
Interviewer: Do you think he regretted not being close with his family?
Lilly: I think he thought we were close.

Conversely, Sonia described her relationship with her father as “good, loving” and identifies with what she perceives were his feelings about his wife and Lilly.

Sonia: My mother and sister were really mean to him before he died. It was hard when I went there and watched the two of them talk about him. Lilly used to say, “I can’t wait ‘til he goes. He’s such a pain in the ass.” She threatened to put him in a home and my mother didn’t say no thing. My father asked me, “You wouldn’t do that, would you?”

Sonia and Lilly agreed that they were “not too close” with each other.

Lilly: After my father died I had a big argument with my sister at my mother’s house. I said, ‘You don’t do nothing. You don’t even come to see her [mother]. When you moved to Jersey you forgot your way back.’

To Lilly, the fact that Sonia moved away from the tight-knit Italian community where Lilly still lives was a symbol of betrayal. For Sonia, leaving the narrow street where she was raised to buy a home in New Jersey was a symbol of her broadened worldview. Sonia said, “I think [about mother and sister], ‘You are so naïve.’ They’re like in this little South Philly cocoon and they only know what’s around them.”

Each sister talked more about the shortcomings of the other sister and their mother than about the life and death of their father. Yet, as the sisters’ stories continued, they revealed their parents as both the architects and victims of discord in this family, as we will see later in the article.

Mr. West was a 79-year-old husband and father who died from Parkinson’s disease. His widow suffers from late-stage dementia and failed to recognize her husband at his death. There are six siblings in the West family. The two local daughters (Marie, 44, is the fourth in line; Donna, 33, is the youngest) share the “we” of the family with their demented mother whom they recently moved into a nursing home. Their “we” is poignantly captured by Donna’s memory of the first Thanksgiving dinner the family shared after Mr. West’s death.

Donna: It was after we ate and Mom was tired. Marie and I both said, “Mom needs to go home,” but nobody answered. So we got ready to take her, and we were frustrated with them. After we got her settled in her room, we came back and parked out front. I remember looking into my dining room, seeing it filled with my brothers and their kids all enjoying themselves. Marie and I are outside. We just looked at each other and cried, then we hugged each other and said, “What would we do without each other? We’re the only ones who go out of our way for Mom.”

Watching their brothers “laughing and talking” from outside highlights the sisters’ sense of both outsiders and a “we” in which they share grief for their father and giving care to their mother.

Marc is a 42-year-old married father of two young children and the youngest sibling of four in the Alexander family. His father, Mr. Alexander, died at age 83, 6 months before our interview, from brain cancer. The fact that Marc worked with his father everyday in their jointly owned meat market made their relationship especially close and the loss especially hard. He longed for the same type of relationship with other family members but felt he had not achieved this closeness with his mother and siblings. Marc offered his perspective of how his family should be: “I wish we [his family of origin] all lived on the same street. That’s just the way I see things.” Despite this wish, he reported that his siblings “don’t see things the same way I do,” and that there has been . . .
. . . growing tension with my brothers and sisters. There’s a lot of . . . just uneasy feelings. And I know once Mom goes, that’s it. I mean I like having family around. But . . . people [siblings] don’t have the same feelings, and everybody doesn’t want the same thing and I’ve come to realize that with age.

Marc reported that his siblings had “hard feelings” about the disbursement of his father’s personal items, especially his father’s wedding ring. Although it was promised to Marc, when he actually received it, his oldest sister, who also wanted the ring, stopped speaking to him.

When asked what his role was in his family of origin, Marc replied, “In the way. I mean I was a kid when the girls were teenagers and my brother was already grown.” He continued: “I still feel left out because of all the family secrets. I found out my sister’s daughter cuts herself. But I’m not supposed to know that.” When asked how he, his mother, and siblings grieved as a family, he questioned:

You mean as a unit? That unit was always lacking my oldest sister; she never came around a lot and it’s less now. My mother and other sister sort of ‘paired up’ after my dad died. And I told you my brother’s an enigma.

Marc realizes now, after his father’s death, that he shared the “we” of the family primarily with his father, and he doubts that there is a family “we.” He laments his estrangement from his siblings, which he believes is due to the difference in their ages and began in childhood, but also due, he thinks, to a lack of communication between them.

Wade is the 59-year-old married son in the Richards family, whose 88-year-old father died of renal failure after a year of illness and 6 months before our interview. When asked how he would describe his father, Wade spoke of how his father created the “we” in their family.

Well, he was controlling, but in a good way. He went to bed knowing what tomorrow was all about. Organization is important to our type of people. We are regimented; we don’t wake up and go, “What the heck are we going to do today?” We plan for tomorrow.

When 84-year-old Mrs. Richards was asked if she remembered her husband’s last words to her, she responded:

Oh yes. He said, “Keep a stiff upper lip and go buy a Porsche.” In fact those were his very last words to anyone, because he very seldom showed sadness. He’d rather joke about it.

Wade and his 56-year-old sister, Pat, assumed the worldview of their parents. Both said that they took on their father’s characteristics early in life; they describe themselves as “unemotional” and as having “a strong work ethic.” Roles are clearly defined in their respective families, which is similar to their family of origin.

Pat: My father was a firm parent and I’m a firm parent; my brother’s a strong parent also. Now my stepchildren [children of second husband], they’re all over the place. I believe my husband never put proper boundaries on them. I said to my children, ‘Whoever I date or marry, you don’t have to love them, but you need to be respectful.’ And I’m not sure my husband’s children heard that from him.

When Pat was asked how it feels to not have her dad around, she replied, “I feel less protected. Probably I wouldn’t feel that way if I had had a similar spouse in my life.” Neither Pat’s first nor present (second) husband fulfilled the role of protector and provider, which, as we will see later in the article, shattered inherited assumptions about appropriate gender roles and how married life should unfold.

Theme 1 shows that family members remain bound to each other in a variety of common and distinctive ways, such as a desire for closeness or mutual resentment. The “we” in the family is created in the family of origin early on, becomes part of the family’s worldview, may be reevaluated throughout life’s stages, and particularly at times of intense emotional experiences, such as a death in the family.

Theme 2: Reaction to the Death

Reactions to the death of an elderly husband and father vary in families and depend on many factors, including family history, expectations about family and about life, and individual family members’ circumstances. The larger and smaller cultural patterns that create a family worldview guide its members’ reactions after the death of the husband and father.

The older sister in the West family, Marie, said that the widow and six siblings “all cried together” after the death. Donna, the youngest daughter, said that the day after her father’s death, “I went to work because I thought it would keep my mind off things.” Both sisters clarified that although
they “thought constantly” about their father, they “didn’t dwell on his death.” Donna clarified: “I mean thinking about somebody and dwelling on something I feel is different.”

Many respondents in our study said they had not “dwelled” on their loved one’s death, which suggests a negative connotation to the word “dwell” when connected with death. A member of another family described the taboo of the word “dwell” definitively. “I did not dwell on my father’s death. If you dwell on death that means you are morbid, and if you are morbid you probably are depressed. And I’m not depressed.” This comment seems to infer that “dwelling on a death” is connected to depression, both of which are assumed to be culturally inappropriate and under a person’s control.

Marc Alexander was confused by his older brother’s reaction to their father’s death but felt unable to ask him about his feelings.

I know he [brother] was hurting inside, but he’s a school principal so he’s an in-charge kind of guy and that’s the façade he carries. I don’t agree that’s how he felt, but that’s what he projected.

Marc believes that his brother donned a take-charge façade for his job and now cannot do without it. When asked about his other siblings, Marc mentioned his older sister, Sally.

Sally got the call [about father’s death] and about a half hour later, she came over and immediately laid on top of my father’s body and wept terribly. Then within minutes, she’s up, talking about when the wake would be, making sure her daughter, who’s away at college, could attend. I hate to say this but my other sister, Dot, is not strong. The girls just aren’t strong.

Marc revealed that he thought his sisters were emotionally weak; they were unable to give physical care to his father because “they couldn’t stomach it.” When asked about his mother’s reaction to his father’s death, he sighed.

It wasn’t to our liking. I guess we wanted to see a little more sadness and grief and there wasn’t. She deeply misses him; I don’t want to say she doesn’t. I guess we were looking for more being upset.

For Marc, his brother showed little emotion; his sister’s grief was too strong in light of the little time she spent with their parents, and his mother did not seem (to all the siblings) grief-stricken enough. Marc revealed his assumptions about the propriety of grief reactions—the intensity of grief should equal the quality and quantity of love and care shown before death. His response to his family’s reaction to Mr. Alexander’s death resonates with our first theme—and reiterates his doubt about any united “we” of the family.

Reactions to the death of a family member also include how family members believe a family should mourn when others will witness their grief, such as the funeral. Mr. Gray was a 79-year-old minister who had died from Alzheimer’s disease 8 months before our interview. On the day of their father’s funeral, Kurt, the oldest son, told his siblings and their children how they should behave.

We’re going to go in there [church], we’re going to grieve, but we’re going to do it in a dignified way. We’re not going to be rolling all over the floor; we’re not going to be inconsolable. We’re going to cry but we’re going to do it in a way that honors our father’s memory.

His conversation resonated with our first theme, the “we” of the family. “The way we do things is the way we were brought up to be,” Kurt reiterated. He has taken on “the Dad role” with his siblings because “I have his [father’s] tools now.” Using those “tools” with his family, he tries to give out “sage advice” and “act with dignity,” the way his father had done.

Contrasting the Grays’ unity, the funeral for Mr. Marra echoed the daughters’ ongoing separateness. Sonia and her daughter became distraught by the behavior of Lilly’s family.

Sonia: My nephew’s [Lilly’s son] girlfriend brought her ultrasound pictures to the funeral. She came over to me and says, “Do you want to see my ultrasound pictures?” That really rubbed me the wrong way. I thought, ‘Did she just say that?’ I looked over at my sister and her friends and they were all sitting there laughing and it was really getting on my nerves. My daughter said, “Mom, I didn’t know this was going to be a party.”

According to Sonia, although she was focused on her father’s death, Lilly’s thoughts were on the coming of her first grandchild. Neither daughter could remember their mother’s reaction at the funeral.

Theme 2 shows that family members’ reactions to death emerge from their smaller familial worldviews about death and highlight each family member’s sense of appropriate, even if conflicting, ways to grieve. For the most part, reactions to and rituals acknowledging the husband and father’s death seem more local than universal and more made to order than made for all.
Theme 3: The Father’s Legacy

In this study, the nonmaterial legacy that the father bequeathed to the family brings our first two themes, the “we” of the family and their reaction to the death, together. It also crystallizes the family worldview.

A key element in the husband and father’s legacy is the role he assumed with his family, particularly as a husband. In the Richards family, 56-year-old Pat described her parents’ relationship as:

...deeply compassionate. They always had each other’s back. It made for a safe, secure environment for my brother Wade and me. They really talked to each other.

When discussing her parents’ relationship, Pat mentioned a traumatic life event that forced her to reconsider the assumptions about life that she learned from her parents. After 10 years of marriage to her first husband, with whom she had two children, she was “hit upside the head with a divorce.”

Pat: I was raised like my mother—protected, cared for, almost to the point of being naïve. Didn’t know the words divorce, mental illness, alcoholism. And I married into a family whose mother was bipolar and schizophrenic, whose flip side of the family had alcoholism in it, and I dealt with a man I was not used to. My mother really didn’t understand when I went through the divorce. How could she? She didn’t know how. She did the best she could. But she did it by withdrawing; she just couldn’t stand the intensity of what was going on with me.

Interviewer: What about your dad?
Pat: He wasn’t the go-to person for emotional things. If something came up he’d put my mother on the phone. Like after the divorce, he wanted to make sure we were financially okay.

Unable to alter her worldview to accommodate the fact that divorce and mental illness occur in all types of families, Pat said that her “bad marriage” grieved her parents and children as much as herself and caused her to look at her life regretfully.

My divorce was a disappointment to my parents. I probably would have been more like my mother had life not thrown me some curves. My children, especially my son, said to me, “Why can’t you be more like Nana?” And sometimes I felt jealous. My mother had it so easy. I was angry that she had a charmed life.

Pat’s brother, Wade, saw the upside of the same legacy. He mentioned that his son wondered what was discussed in the first session of the interview.

I told them you [interviewer] wanted to know what legacy Grandpop left us. So Ryan said, “How about everything.” I said, ‘You mean financially?’ And he said, “No. Everything—who we are, what we’re about, how we live.”

The elder Mr. Richards’ worldview found fertile soil within Wade’s son.

Marc reported that his father’s legacy was a “by-product” of his death. “It has to do with self-insight. After he died, I just sat back and looked at myself and my future.” He also reevaluated his family of origin “more critically.” As a marker in his development, his father’s death seems to have shaken his sense of self as a son to his mother, a sibling, and his sense of attachment to them. He does hope, however, that his children find the strong sense of “we” that he inherited from his father but cannot share with other members of his family.

My father was a patient man, a very gentle guy. My wife and I are the definition of impatience. [Pause] I know I was very satisfied, for lack of a better word, to see how saddened my son was by my dad’s death. And my daughter, she has this more long-term lingering sadness. I’m glad for that. I want my kids to know remorse and compassion. I want them to be close to their kids.

Just as in Marc’s poignant comment, the concept of generativity emerged in narratives about Mr. Gray’s death. The siblings recalled the importance their father placed on education. When Trina, the oldest daughter in the family, was asked if she had been able to “say goodbye” to her father before his death, she spoke of a remarkable interchange between them.

I got accepted into grad school. And by this time he forgot my name and he wasn’t talking a lot. I came over [to parents’ home] with the acceptance letter. I told my mom, but it was different telling my dad. I said, ‘Daddy, focus for a minute, Daddy, ’cause you will be so happy. I got accepted to Bryn Mawr! Can you believe it? ’ I broke down then. He was sitting there just staring, but he turned to look at me and said, “I’m so proud of you babe.” And just like that he turned and was gone again.

Kurt, Trina’s brother, reiterates his father’s legacy to Kurt’s children:

I tell my sons, ‘Your grandfather was a man that believed in hard work. He had religious and moral
convictions that we practice. He set standards for us. And we want people to say, “I can tell that those are the Grays over there by the way they act, the way they carry their self with dignity.” ‘See, Pop Pop knew what he was about.’ I try to pass on to them the ethic of studying and reading and treating people with respect.

Mrs. Gray revealed another aspect of her husband’s legacy when she told her son, Mike, that it was time for his son—nicknamed by his grandfather Little Dude—to stop crying over his grandfather’s death.

He [Little Dude] took it very hard. And I said to Mike, ‘No, he shouldn’t still be crying over Pop Pop. He should be able to transfer all that stuff that he saw in Pop Pop, he needs to see that in you.’

This comment shows Mr. Gray’s legacy as something that was sown in every member of the Gray family and that continues to grow. Mrs. Gray knows that the qualities that drew Little Dude to his grandfather, such as patience and playfulness, must be taken on by Mike, Little Dude’s father.

Donna West believes that the legacy her father left the family was the “importance of home.” I think of how many family dinners we had there [the family home, bought in 1959, where six children were raised]. We were all packed in for Thanksgiving and all the holidays and birthdays.

Marie agreed:

I’ve always been someone who wants to establish memories and happy feelings and comfort. I want their home as I felt growing up, to be a place of comfort, a place you’re accepted the way you are.

When Donna was asked if she believed her father continued in an afterlife, she replied:

I think that my father is with God in heaven and that type of thing. And he’s comforted and his family’s there. I kind of just picture heaven more like family dinners, like everyone sitting around a table. I think of pasta. My mom made spaghetti sauce and meatballs all the time.

Several respondents in our study spoke about their deceased father as “having a family dinner in heaven with his own parents and siblings” or other deceased loved ones. They transformed the custom of family dinners into pictures of the afterlife.

Mrs. Marra, mother of Lilly and Sonia, talked lovingly about her husband and reported that she “can still feel his arms around [her] at night.” She showed the interviewer a box filled with letters her husband had written to the family while working in Las Vegas. She said with a smile, “When others in the troupe went out after the show, my husband went to his room to read.” This comment became more meaningful when Sonia gave her interpretation of her parents’ marriage.

About five years ago when his brain started to go, my father confessed things to my mother. He said, “I should have stayed with that woman I met, but she didn’t want to break up a family, ‘cause she would never talk to me like you do.” It got bad and worse. She didn’t even want to live with him toward the end. But that’s what happens when a man travels nine months a year. You can’t expect it not to. And I admit when I first heard it I was like, ‘Yay, Daddy,’ ‘cause she was so cold.

Although Sonia believes that her mother “knew this [the affair] was going on,” in admitting his infidelity, his words could not be taken back or ignored. After his admission, Sonia reported that her mother “was unable to look at him or care for him.” Sonia felt “glad” that her father “found some happiness in his life.” Lilly discounted her father as a crucial part of her life because “he was hardly ever home.” Yet, after his death, Mrs. Marra seemed to put her husband’s admission of an affair out of her mind.

Mr. Marra’s illness and death was a catalyst for bringing family secrets into the open. Sonia thinks of herself as “the only open and honest one” in the family because she “brings up” the family’s “lies and secrets.” Lilly hinted at them, and Mrs. Marra did not speak of them at all. Interestingly, all three family members mentioned the letters that Mr. Marra wrote while he was away as his legacy. All three women proudly stated that the letters were “beautifully written.” The family may be bound as much by the concreteness of the love letters as they are by their feelings of betrayal, each by the husband and father and each by the other.

Theme 3 shows that a legacy is bequeathed in every family and that this legacy solidifies the family worldview. Among the nonmaterial bequests a father leaves to his children, his legacy may shape generative actions, dictate appropriate behavior and emotionality regarding death and bereavement, or evoke a diminished sense of safety and trust.

Limitations

The limitations of our article are related to the limitations of our study. For the most part,
participants came from a middle-class background and all had a high school education, with many participants having advanced education. Because we recruited from death notices in various newspapers, we lacked the diversity of persons who did not put their loved one’s obituary in the paper or in the case of paid obituaries, could not afford to.

Another limitation in our study involves the refusal of a few siblings and mothers to participate in the interview after agreeing to do so. In some cases, we could choose another sibling; in other cases, there were no other siblings. The reasons for not participating varied. Some potential respondents said that they felt unable to discuss such an emotional issue, others said that they were too busy, and others simply said they had changed their minds. We realize that their refusals, like silence, nonanswers, and gestures during an interview, are also part of our data.

Ethnicity and religious tradition are integral to worldview. It was beyond our article’s scope to address how these components shape personal and collective perspectives about family, death, and the loss of a father. We have addressed these subjects in other articles emerging from the same study (Black, Rubinstein, & Santanello, in press; Black et al., 2011).

Discussion

Intense emotional experiences, such as a death in the family and the attending bereavement, often highlight a family’s overarching meaning structures or worldview (Currier et al., 2009). Who the family is as a unit, how they react to the husband and father’s death, and how they discern his legacy are elements of this worldview.

In middle-aged and older persons, such as the respondents in our study, bereavement attitudes and behaviors usually reflect a worldview long in place (Poulin & Silver, 2008). The loss of a family member, no matter the age, still might threaten the taken-for-granted sense of an orderly world (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). After the husband and father’s death, our study participants did not seem to try to understand death’s meaning (Frankl, 1959; most respondents thought his death “had no meaning” yet went on to describe the legacy of his life and death; Black et al., 2011). They did attempt to sort out the consequences of his death to the self and the self within the family unit. The husband and father’s death encouraged self-evaluation and family members reflected on where they stood in their own journey through life. For some, the death of the husband and father, along with self-evaluation pointed to turning points in their own lives or the life of the family. For example, the death of Pat’s father triggered memories of her trauma—divorce and the change in her self-view and view of others, including anger toward her mother’s “charmed” life, and a continuing regret about her failed marriage. Although Marc seemed to know that he and his family members were “different” from one another since his early adult years, after his father’s death, the fact that family members did not share similar ways of being or structures of meaning seemed to be a point of sudden existential aloneness. It became crucial for him to engender his father’s beliefs and values, especially “remorse and compassion” in his children. The Marra sisters’ ambivalent worldview had been established early. They did not seem to trust each other and seemed to relive this mistrust each time they saw one another. Because they “got together” fairly often, they fostered their disconnection with anger and arguments. They treasured the husband and father’s letters rather than distinct memories of him; the letters, not his life, became the symbol of authenticity in their relationship with him.

In the research interview, the elicited narrative of the loved one’s deaths offered respondents a means to appraise those moments before, at, or after the death that most confused them or gave them pain, called into question the words or actions of the deceased, one’s own complex, multilayered grief reaction, or the responses of another family member (Braun & Berg, 1994). Narrative is thus a subjective and objective tool. It is subjective because the narrator decides what to include in the story; it is objective because the story becomes, after the telling, an “object” for the narrator to look at, reorganize, or restate, as she moves forward (Black, 2006).

Culturally embedded stories of death, derived from the unique beliefs, experiences, traditions, and worldview and told by the bereaved, have the power to construct frameworks of broader meanings for one’s life (Mangione & Keady, 2007). The lived experience of grief is intersected by many other lived experiences, such as life review and the examination of relationships with surviving family members. Contemplating this intersection may prompt mourners in untraveled directions for self-understanding (Attig, 2001).

We believe our article builds on the salient constructs used in this article: worldview, grief, and
narrative at the juncture of evaluation. In light of the death of the elderly husband and father in the family, family members evaluate the assumptions they hold about the world, themselves, and other family members and give voice in their own context, to the universal human experience of death (Koltko-Rivera, 2004).

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References


