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### Parental Death, Shifting Family Dynamics and Female Identity Development

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## **PARENTAL DEATH, SHIFTING FAMILY DYNAMICS, AND FEMALE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article is a report of research that explored how the death of a parent influences a woman's identity development. Qualitative methodology and data analysis procedures based on grounded theory were used for the research. Eighteen women who experienced parental death between age 11 and 17, were recruited by convenience sampling. Shifts in family relationships and roles, in part, influenced who these young women became. Many young women were expected to take on a care-giving role to support the surviving parent and replace the deceased. The transition in the relationship between the adolescent girl and surviving parent was an important theme for identity development.

Studying death and its influence on people's lives is often done from an individualistic perspective (Shapiro, 2001). By doing this we remove people from the familial context within which the death is experienced. How do we understand how parental death influences relationships in the family? Reciprocally, how do the relational shifts after a parental death influence the adolescent in the family? Many resources help us understand the family's response to death; still, how do we understand an adolescent's response to parental death as she interacts within the family context? Far too often explanatory theories separate the interpersonal, the systemic and the intrapsychic (Altman, Briggs, Frankel, Gensler, & Pantone, 2002; Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999; Dent, 1999; Shapiro, 2001). Conceptualizing how the death of an adolescent's parent influences identity development from an integrated contextual perspective provides space for the confluence of factors involved.

The research presented in this article explores how the death of a parent influences a woman's identity development. Eighteen women who experienced parental death between age 11 and 17, were recruited by convenience sampling. This research points to the importance of understanding the changes in the family following a death as a means to understanding a woman's self development. Many young women are expected to take on a care-giving role to support the surviving parent and replace the deceased. The evolving relationship between the adolescent girl and surviving parent is an important theme for identity development.

Pertinent definitions and a literature review provide the frame for the research. Findings highlighting transition in roles for the women in their families and transition in relationships with the surviving parents are discussed.

### MAIN CONCEPTS

Identity development, for the purposes of this article is defined as a complex lifelong process, one rooted in an individual's context and culture and that integrates one's relationships, and internalized world. Our identity encompasses the choices we make, our priorities and the basic tenets that guide our life (Erikson, 1968; Josselson, 1987; Kohut, 1977). It becomes a way to organize our experiences, to understand ourselves and others in relation to us.

Theorists studying female development outline the centrality of interconnectedness and interpersonal relationships for identity development (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987; Lyons, 1990; Mahoney, 1996; Miller, 1976; Surrey, 1991). Intersubjectivity, interpersonal and relational theory, in their similarities, consider how the self develops in relationship to other selves and is based on patterns from this interactive process (Atwood & Stolorow, 1984; Benjamin, 1988; Mitchell, 1988; Sullivan, 1953). Applying these theories and empirical work to grief and loss Shapiro (2001) says, "grief as a human experience powerfully exposes the interpersonal construction of what only appears to be an isolated, individual self" (p. 301).

Shifting family dynamics refers to changes in roles in the family, patterns of communication and shifts in the relationship with the surviving parent and remaining siblings. The death of a parent for an adolescent does not happen in a vacuum; family context and the responses of other family members are important influences on the behavior of bereaved children and adolescents (Shapiro, 1994; Silverman, 2000; Silverman & Worden, 1992; Silverman, Baker, Cait, & Boerner, 2002-2003). Family systems need to reshape their identity, and to restructure both relationships and role functions in the family to create consistency in the survivor's life (Carse, 1987; LaGrand, 1991; Miles & Crandall, 1986; Shapiro, 1994).

Shapiro's (1994) systemic developmental framework for family bereavement illustrates the interface of identity and family: "Grief is a crisis of both attachment

and identity, disrupting family stability in the interrelated domains of emotions, interactions, social roles and meanings. Grief mobilizes a family's resources for managing intense emotions, reorganizing daily interactions, and redefining the identity of the complex, collaborative self" (p. 17).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Some research studies suggest that parentally bereaved children and adolescents are at risk for developing depression and emotional problems (Gersten, Beals, & Kallgren, 1991; Gray, 1987; Harris, 1991; Servaty & Hayslip, 2001; Worden & Silverman, 1996). Servaty & Hayslip (2001) found that the death of a parent negatively influences an adolescent's perception of interpersonal relationships, including a sense of inferiority and inadequacy in relation to others. This finding is particularly interesting and critical in light of other studies that suggest the importance of social supports for bereaved adolescents, that include their parents, relatives and friends (Gray, 1989; Rask, Kaunonen & Paunonen-Ilmonen, 2002).

Other studies highlight the influence of the surviving parent on the well being of bereaved children and adolescents; in particular, the prior relationship the adolescent had with the surviving parent and the parent's ability to cope with the loss (Gray, 1987; Silverman et. al, 2002-2003). Parental depression and anxiety are also related to the problem behavior of bereaved children (Worden & Silverman, 1993).

For parentally bereaved adolescents, the death can hold distinct significance for their development of self, since they are already negotiating closeness and distance in their relationships to parents (Balk, 1995; Christ, 2000; Fleming & Adolph, 1986; Gordon, 1986; Rosen, 1991; Silverman, 2000). It can also interfere with an adolescent's struggle to negotiate separation and differentiation from family. Some adolescents might feel as though they need to take on parental responsibilities to help their surviving parent; others might forego needs for self-expression and autonomy and remain closer to home than they might otherwise have done (Gordon, 1986; Rosen, 1991). Clearly family plays an important role in adolescent bereavement.

Family systems theory understands family as a whole unit made up of interdependent parts: "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). Family systems theories also focus on patterns of communication. Bowen (1978, 2004) in his model discusses "open relationship systems" and "closed relationship systems" representing different forms of communication within families. In an open system, an individual can express his or her inner thoughts and feelings to another who can do the same. In a closed system, individuals avoid such expressions. Bowen contends that anxiety is the reason for withholding expression. In situations of intense anxiety, a family system

shifts from being open to closed to protect individuals from feelings that can be aroused during discussions of these difficult situations. Silverman and Weiner's (1995) research supports this. They found in Israeli families where a parent had died that some surviving parents and children ceased communicating as a way to protect themselves from the sadness of the death.

The quality of communication between adolescents and their parents can be a critical factor in helping the adolescent develop self-esteem and a healthy identity (Olson, McCubbin, Barnes, Larsen, Muxen, & Wilson, 1989; Weingarten, 1996). High quality and the openness of communication between family members seem to be important tools for dealing with stress and crisis (Imig & Imig, 1986). Balk (1983) also notes that adolescents who feel closer to their families and have more open communication with them experienced less symptomatology.

Shapiro (1994) discusses the destabilizing effect the loss of one spouse can have on the other and how continuing to function can be an onerous task. Children are attuned to their parents' emotional stability and will move quickly to support them. This might mean taking on more household responsibilities or even monitoring their own emotional responses to match what they believe their parents can tolerate. Care taking is something that will likely need to be renegotiated in the family, regardless of whether a mother or father has died. Shapiro discusses how the death of a parent can be compounded for the adolescent by the additional loss of support of the surviving parent. Adolescents can then be faced with the extra responsibility of raising themselves. Walsh and McGoldrick (2004) discuss the importance of flexibility in the family and the need for family structure to be reorganized after the death.

Christ (2000) also discusses that girls age 12-14 in her study who had a mother die "usually lost the organizing and nurturing figure that kept the family running, provided opportunities to be with friends, and helped them with their homework" (p. 163). They missed the emotional confidante relationship with their mothers and were not able to establish that with their fathers.

Silverman (2000) conceptualizes the surviving parents' parenting as "parent-centered" or "child-centered." In "child-centered" families, parents strive to understand their children. They know a child's developmental stage means that he or she will have a different understanding of a parent's death and will also likely cope with the death much differently than themselves. In comparison, in "parent-centered" families the parents seem only reflective about how the death has influenced their lives. They think about how a child's behavior arouses different feelings in them rather than being curious about their child's thoughts and feelings. "These parents do not seem to have a grasp of the influence of the death on their children or that age makes a difference in how children act" (p. 70). A parent's ability to support the child's grief while not relying too heavily on the child for their own support can influence a child or adolescent's adaptation to the loss.

## METHODOLOGY

Sampling criteria was that participants be female between the ages of 11 and 18 when they experienced parental death. Eighteen women were recruited by convenience sampling from two all female colleges. The age ranges at the time of interview were between 18 and 45. Their age range at the time of death was between 11 and 17. Eight women had father's die and ten had a mother die. The age of the parents at time of death ranged from 39 to 76. The leading cause of death was cancer, followed by heart related illness (see Cait (2004) for more information about the sample). In terms of birth order and family position, four women were the only child, two were middle (one was the second youngest), seven were the youngest (with one being a twin), and five were the eldest.

The diversity in age range and time elapsed since death can be beneficial for a study using a grounded theory methodology based on the "constant comparative method" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990); with this methodology there are additional opportunities for comparison of similarities and differences in the participants' stories. Since no attempt is made by this method to, "ascertain the universality" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 103) of the data, but rather to identify emergent themes, the diversity in age range and time elapsed enriches the collected data.

An original semi-structured interview guide was used. Information collected from the respondents focused on the nature of the relationship with the deceased parent and surviving parent as characterized by the surviving daughter. One of the areas in the interview guide focused on identity and, as a part of this, the subjects were asked about friendships, intimate/love relationships, religious beliefs, occupation/education and worldview (Josselson, 1987).

Data were analyzed using principles of the "general method of comparative analysis" and was guided by the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). This method involved three different coding procedures, open, axial and selective coding (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The data analysis was verified (Miles & Huberman, 1984) and confirmed in ways outlined by Drisko (1997), Huberman and Miles (1994) and its trustworthiness assessed (Padgett, 1998). "Verification" takes place when the researcher attempts to verify themes emerging from the interviews (data) with new respondents. This is referred to as attempting to replicate the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Data analysis began as the subjects for the study were being interviewed. This made it possible to verify themes from the analysis with new respondents. Interviews were checked several times during the analysis and coding of it to confirm the different themes and categories. Lengthy, rigorous discussions took place between research colleagues to reach an "intersubjective consensus" about the coding of the data. Also, in the findings section the raw data from verbatim transcriptions is outlined extensively so that the analysis and interpretation of the data is clear for the reader to see. The reader

can then verify for him or herself the accuracy of the analysis. The codes and categories established from the data represented repeated instances of the central phenomenon in the study. The data were analyzed and attempts made not to constrain the analysis yet at the same time making sure that the respondents' stories were framed by a defensible structure. In addition to this, notes were taken after each interview and a journal kept that allowed for reflection on biases. This note taking and journaling is sometimes referred to as an "audit trail" (Padgett, 1998).

A tension arises between the strict use of grounded theory as a methodology and the establishment of specific areas addressed in the interview guide, including the section on identity. Having said this, there was no attempt to "confirm" or not a particular theory or to analyze the data according to already established theories on identity statuses (Marcia, 1966). Rather the categories were used as a guide for focusing the interview discussion.

The data collected represents "retrospective reappraisal" (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999) by the women interviewed. That is the information outlined in the findings is the women's evaluation of the influence of the loss over a period of time and their sense of its influence on their identity.

## FINDINGS

One of the main findings of the research was that the grieving process is not an encapsulated process that is neatly packaged and contained in a person's life. For the women in the study the death of the parent marked an evolving process they moved through in terms of dealing with the death. One area highlighted in this evolving process was the shifting family dynamics after the death and how this influenced a woman's development process and identity. Two main areas under shifting family dynamics were pronounced in the data: changes in the role for the surviving daughter, specifically with care giving and interwoven with that was a heightened sense of responsibility. The other area was the evolving relationship with the surviving parent. Tied to this, was new recognition of the surviving parent and an intensified significance of the surviving parent that I call "situational matrimony."

For many women (all but four) their role and how they functioned in the family changed because of the death. Of the 14 women who identified a shift in their role in the family, three were the only child, three were the eldest, six were the youngest and two were middle children. If there was an extended illness, the impending death introduced these changes. At times the daughters were expected to take on a care-giving role to support the surviving parent and replace the deceased. For some women the death of the parent meant a loss of emotional nurturing and a need to care for themselves more.

Often this care-giving aspect was integrated into their identities. They became the caregiver for their friends or partners and for some, after a period of time they

chose friends or intimate partners who could provide care and nurturing for them. For some women leaving home and going to college became an opportunity to relieve themselves of this role.

The transition in the relationship between the surviving daughter and the surviving parent was the other very important theme. The women recognized aspects of the surviving parent after the death that they had not previously recognized. With this new sense of recognition we begin to get a sense of what these women lost when a parent died and how the surviving parent or daughter fills the space. Some of the surviving parents were able to change and provide for their daughters what was lost through the death. Others could not. At times the intensified significance that the surviving parent held for the daughter took on a quality of situational matrimony. Examples from the data will be provided with attention paid to the influence on identity.

### SHIFTING FAMILY DYNAMICS: ROLE CHANGES

Caitlin, an eldest child, was 15 when her father died and 30 when interviewed. Her father died of cancer. Caitlin felt as though she was placed in a care-giving role after her father died, not only with her mother but also parenting her sister. She said:

She [mother] was really depressed for many years and really only started to come out of it five or six years after he died. She missed pretty much all of my adolescence it feels like . . . I did all my college applications—she didn't really know. She would ask me a lot of advice on my sister and how to talk to her about things, and so I ended up doing a lot of parenting of my sister, as well as my Mom.

Caitlin continues to discuss how this influenced her friendships. In college her friends called her mother Kate because of her predilection to take care of others. Caitlin's lessons in the family after her father's death influence how close she is able to become to people.

I'd say that I think I'm pretty guarded around friendships. I have a lot of friends that I keep in touch with . . . but there are only a couple of friendships that I really have invested myself into. And I think that I'm not sure people can take care of me very well, and partly it's because I don't share very much, so no one gets to practice at it. But I don't think my Mom was able to do that very well and so I don't think that I have a whole lot of confidence, because my Dad was the caretaker and she didn't then prove herself very well of being able to do it. So I think I'm very careful who I let take care of me because if I let them and then they don't do it, I'm disappointed and then I'm more guarded and walled.

Caitlin's role shift in the family after the death and the lessons learned from this became a pattern replicated in her interactions with friends and intimate partners.

Jackie, also an eldest child, was 16 when her mother died of cancer and 19 when interviewed. She was caregiver for her mother, as well as, her father and brother. Essentially she became parent to her brother and spouse to her father. She was expected to take on many responsibilities in the house. This process led to her maturing quite quickly. Jackie talks about her various roles:

I feel to a large degree that I raised my brother and that was my mother's role. I took over raising him before she had died and that made for a large power struggle and she was upset. I also took over the role of being a wife while she was still alive and I know that was extremely difficult for her to watch and was the source of a lot of conflict between us. I would go out to social functions with my father or I would help around the house. I would help do the cooking, do a lot of the, ya know, the vacuuming and the dry cleaning, and all of those things . . . raising my brother, disciplining my brother.

Jackie then discusses how the care-giving role she played in the family became woven into her identity with her friends when she was in high school.

I think that a lot of the friends that I had in high school, the relationships that I had with them were more maternal, where I was taking care of them. And consequently I was friends with a lot of kids with a lot of problems ya know suicide attempts and drug problems and things like that . . . because of probably what I went through with my family and so I was seeking out friendships where I would be in the same position even though that meant being friends with people who were very troubled.

Jackie describes leaving home to go to college as a deliberate attempt to leave behind the responsibilities associated with her home and family. There is an interesting parallel when Jackie discusses her career interests after college.

The one thing that I think about now is that what I would like to do is a career in Foreign Service, which would keep me very far away from home, keep me constantly moving, probably living out of the country a lot.

These words echo Jackie's earlier sentiments as she leaves home and her onerous duties there, to go to college.

There are many variables that may be involved in the care-giving roles and extra responsibility the women acquired. In part, it could be related to birth order or to their gender and/or cultural expectations in the above families. It is understandable that some women might play a role in care giving with the ill parent and/or take on extra responsibilities in the house after the death. Doing so does not necessarily mean that it would negatively influence their identity and development; however, it is also very important to remember that these women were adolescents when their parents died and still required parenting themselves. Their shifting role expectations in certain situations could be inappropriate.

It is possible that the heightened sense of self-sufficiency and reliance that these women developed after the death of a parent had a potential defensive component

to it. This could be thought of as a “compulsive self-reliance.” That is, after the parent’s death the women might feel that they could not count on anyone to be in their life forever and therefore can only depend on themselves. Some of the women did speak about how this had become problematic in terms of their friendships and intimate relationships. At times they felt that they did not open up to friends or share their needs with those close to them as much as they would have liked. This theme presents itself throughout the data.

### **EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP WITH SURVIVING PARENT: RECOGNITION, DISRUPTION AND REPAIR**

I have used the terms recognition, disruption and repair to describe the evolving relational process between the daughter and surviving parent. These terms have been borrowed from intersubjectivity (Benjamin, 1988) and infant research (Beebe & Lachmann, 1994) where they are used to understand the relationship between infant and caregiver.

Shapiro (1994) discusses intersubjective theorist Stolorow’s reflections on his spousal loss. He notes the “isolation and singularity” associated with bereavement that can prevent people from experiencing empathic attunement from others. In part, this insularity made it difficult for some parents and daughters to recognize the other as having his or her different experience of the loss. This self-absorption can interfere with mutual recognition (Benjamin, 1988); the sense of knowing and being known/ understood by another person. When a parent could truly hear and recognize the grief of the daughter this contributed to the success of the relationship; whereas, the inability to do this could lead to disruption of the relationship. Over time some of the women were able to recognize a parent’s experience or understand the parent’s experience differently. For some women this contributed to the repair of the relationship. Some parents were better able than others to understand and recognize the influence of the death on their daughters. Where this was not the case, the absence of the deceased parent and the awareness by the daughter that the surviving parent was not able to fill that space became more apparent.

Caitlin, described earlier, was responsible for a lot of care giving after her father’s death; she felt that her mother was not able to support her in the same way her father had. As time passes and she has new life experiences such as, falling in love and getting married, she recognizes her mother’s position differently:

On one part I’m really angry and in another sense I really understand. Even now I haven’t even been married a year and the thought of losing him when you have all these plans. And I don’t have kids and I don’t have those kinds of responsibilities. I didn’t have twenty years with him—I don’t yet—and that scares me to death. So, I think as I get older and have lived life closer to what hers must’ve been like, I can have a greater understanding of what that was like for her.

As Caitlin understands her mother's situation from a new position herself, she also recognizes that she does not want to be and feel as dependent in her relationship as her mother had with her father. She says,

And he [father] pampered her. He did all of the shopping and all of the bills. And I'm scared to death of ever being that dependent, because when he died she was completely lost. She didn't know how to do any of the bills. She didn't know anything about their investments. She didn't know anything about the finances and she was a wreck.

Caitlin integrates this new understanding into her own identity when it becomes more meaningful for her because of life experience and life cycle transition. Likewise, her relationship with her mother shifts as she develops a new appreciation for her mother's situation.

Alysa was 16 when her mother died of an aneurysm and was 21 when interviewed. She was the youngest child. Alysa discussed how she sees her father differently after her mother's death. This seems to negatively influence their relationship:

I always thought that we had a good close relationship. And it was only after my mom died that it kind of became clear to me about how much he really just doesn't connect to people. . . . He can't take responsibility for any of his own actions. He is really not good with dealing with feelings or anything on an emotional level. He is a very very weak man and I don't think I really understood that until my mom died. And so it was pretty rapid after my mom died my illusion of him crumbled. And it is still crumbling.

Alysa had a very close relationship with her mother and would have "great long talks" about a variety of taboo subjects including sex and drugs. Alysa's relationship with her father was close though more task-oriented. After her mother died, Alysa required something different from her father, someone with whom she could talk. The space her mother filled becomes glaringly empty. As this happens Alysa realizes new things about her father's personality and his inability to provide for her what her mother once had. Unfortunately Alysa feels, at times, invisible with her father and no longer part of the family and this seems to influence her sense of self-esteem. Alysa says that she does not feel loveable anymore. She said that her mother was very loving and supportive. She "always made a concerted effort to say you are beautiful, you are wonderful, you are smart. Always positive."

For Alysa it is recognition of what is missing after her mother's death that is troubling. That her father is not able to fill this space begins to exacerbate how she feels about herself. Feeling that she has also lost her father intensifies the experience of the death of her mother.

In contrast, Ruth's relationship with her father evolves differently than Alysa's. Before the death of her mother, Ruth like Alysa, had more of a task-oriented

relationship with her father. Ruth was 17 when her mother died of a blood clot in the lung and was 19 when interviewed. She was a youngest child. She said:

And I guess in my perspective I just always thought that he was very hard to talk to and if I had an emotional problem I went to my Mom and if I had like a school problem, "Dad, I can't edit this paper. Dad, I can't do this. Can you help me do this?" He would do it in a second. Like, he was always very loving, but ya know for me to be like "I love you" before I go to bed, it was just always kind of, I don't know, it was never something that I relied on. It was just like there was always a distance but it was definitely a distance that was enhanced because I went to her so much, and so, when she died I guess the words that she just kept saying that we needed to get closer just kind of rang in both of our heads.

Ruth speaks about the importance of communication in the relationship and acknowledging that her father can play a different role than he once had.

It just became like a building up of things and, I don't know, we would work on it, the constant. It's not something that is just there. We both have to work on it. We're not used to it. We've had 18 years of struggle but now everything is just different. We have to redefine what our relationship even is. We don't know what it is and nobody is there to tell us. So, we're kind of feeling our way at times, but it's worth it. Definitely worth it. . . . Like, the one thing that has come across so clear is that he just loves me so much. Like before it was always just something that I believed. . . .

Ruth had relied on her mother for emotional care giving while she was alive. After her mother's death Ruth reflects on the family dynamics. This helps her recognize that she can be closer to her father and that he is capable of providing more emotional support. With the mutual recognition between father and daughter each can see the other as approachable. As Ruth's father works hard to shift in the relationship with his daughter, his love for her is actively clarified. This contributes to Ruth's self-esteem.

### **SITUATIONAL MATRIMONY**

The relationship with the surviving parent shifted after the death of a parent. As previously discussed, in part, some of the changes in relationships were based on role changes with the surviving daughter. That is, the daughter took more responsibility for self and others; at times, she was supportive to the surviving parent by assuming a quasi-parental role. These shifts are important and can be subsumed under the category situational matrimony. There is; however, another important dynamic woven in the relationship. For some women the surviving parent took on an intensified significance. That is, only having one surviving parent heightened the importance of the remaining parent. The surviving parent became all-important in terms of someone to please, make happy and someone

with whom to spend time and be friends. The surviving parent took on primary importance in the daughter's life. This was not a static category or phase; it shifted as the women's experiences did; however, it was a clearly notable phenomenon. This I call "situational matrimony."

Zulaika, an only child, discussed her father, the role he plays in her life and the influence he has:

Being away from him in the last few months have been really hard and I really do miss him in my life and I think it was necessary because I have grown a lot too. . . . Like I really don't want to do anything to mess up my relationship with my Dad because he is really all I have. And whether I agree with him or not is not the issue the issue is either him or the guy so I pick my Dad. . . . And he always says that I am all that he has. And I'd really like to live up to. . . .

The relationship Zulaika has with her father influences her friendships at the point when she was interviewed. Zulaika realizes that she does not always assert herself with friends. She said that she is an outgoing young woman but has difficulty stating her opinions when "it will cause trouble between my friends and I." Zulaika takes care to maintain the peace in both her relationships with her friends and with her father. It seems as though maintaining relationships comes at the cost of remaining silent and/or not voicing her opinions and feelings.

The relationship Zulaika has with her father has new meaning since her mother's death. Since Zulaika only has one parent left his importance in her life is magnified. In addition, because she is an only child, she has no siblings with which she might be close. Father and daughter, since the death, play a reciprocally very important role in each others lives; each one takes on primary importance in the other's life.

At this point in time Zulaika does not seem to be impaired by this. She has been able to make friends, been involved in intimate relationships despite how her father might feel and has moved away from home to go to college. It would be interesting to meet with Zulaika in the future to see if her desire to please her father becomes so encompassing that she cannot move on to new roles and/or cannot express her own needs and desires separately from her father's.

Celia was 12 when her father died of a heart attack and 20 when interviewed. She is a middle child. Like Zulaika, she discusses the heightened importance her mother has in her life and how she feels this has influenced her development in terms of her friendships:

Because I am so close with my family . . . so close with my mother. I socialize in school but I don't try and make really good. . . . I didn't have a great friendship because I was always best friends with my mom and maybe that is why I don't have. I have such a close relationship with my mom its kind of like other relationships with friends can't be that satisfying or that close. It is hard for me to be friends with people because you never

have that history like I do with my mom where I can yell and bitch at her but it's okay because we're mother and daughter and that bond is never going to be broken so I think its hard for me to make other friends.

Celia alluded to the fact that she feels that family, namely her mother, has become more important than friendships because of her age when her father died. At this point in an adolescent's life she might turn energy that had been formerly directed at parents toward friends. This, however, did not happen for Celia. Celia might have developed a closer relationship with her sister; however, her older sister went off to college shortly after the death. The closeness in the mother/daughter relationship might also have been driven by Celia's mother's needs since the eldest sister had moved away for college.

Another important dimension in all of this might be gender. After Celia's father died she became very close with her mother. Celia might have pursued friendships outside of the family more so, if it was her mother who died. The need to pursue outside friendships might not have been as strong because she was able to bond with her mother in a way that would have been different if it had been her father. The relationship with her mother seemed to satiate the need and desire to look elsewhere for friendship.

In discussing her recent visit home, Celia comments on her mother's limited interaction with her new boyfriend. She was upset by her mother's seeming lack of interest; however, attempts to understand it. She thinks it was difficult for her mother since they had been so close and her boyfriend seems to be replacing her mother. Placing herself in her mother's position she says that it would be difficult for her if her mother dated someone and then married that person. In her own words she continues:

Because I feel like I am married to her . . . that was part of the problem what I had trouble with last semester. It was like we got a divorce, we got separated. I got separated from the person who since my dad died . . . not like I became the husband but we just became so close. It was like a marriage so we're separated.

## LIMITATIONS

Since this research was not originally designed to specifically examine family dynamics following parental death, questions that might have been asked were not and further probing did not happen. It could have been helpful in the interview to ask about sibling relationships. While this was raised it was not specifically addressed. Asking questions about siblings could help us understand their role and widen the relational and systemic view. During the interview respondents were asked to discuss the relationship with both parents before and after the death and other influential people in their lives. Through data analysis it was clear that family was an extremely important factor.

The sample collected was homogeneous with respect to ethnicity and gender. It is difficult to know whether the data would lead to different findings if we interviewed men or more women of color.

Finally, the information in this research was collected retrospectively. The women are reflecting on an earlier time in their life. While this can add richness to the data and another level of complexity, it also does not provide a picture of adolescence through an adolescent's eyes. Rather the development of these women was explained by the women at the point in time and age when interviewed. This means that their understanding of the death and their parents has likely been revised through the years. Since there was a wide age range of subjects interviewed, there was also a wide range in years elapsed since time of death. Time elapsed since the death can influence the revision process as can the point in the woman's life cycle and development when interviewed. The women in this study were interviewed at distinct points in their lives and their answers, in part, reflect this.

## DISCUSSION

For this study identity development was understood as a life-long evolving process that involved intrapsychic and interpersonal elements; however, the question originally posed for this research, how does the death of a parent influence an adolescent's identity development, presupposes a self that exists in isolation.

The data from this research clearly suggests that how the women made sense of the death was in part an internal process; influenced by interactive patterns before the death, which came to influence relational dynamics after the death.

For some women their role in the family shifted to caregiver with the accompanying added responsibility. From a systemic perspective, in families where the deceased was a primary caregiver, the family system needs to rebalance and stabilize itself. This is done through the surviving children/child taking on more responsibility and care-taking functions. Instead of allowing the family to experience a period of destabilization after the death, the new role of the surviving daughter is accepted and instituted and balance restored. This might be the family's organic way of adapting to a stressful situation and is beneficial in the short-run (Shapiro, 1994; Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). As seen in this research, there can be long-term repercussions of this. A woman's relational pattern of interacting with others through care giving can be internalized and become a patterned way of relating to others in her life. This gendered care giving can also be supported through gendered socialization and the societal status-quo (Dominelli, 2002). Focusing on caring for people can leave relationships/friendships unidirectional, lacking in mutuality and intimacy. A focus on care giving can also be used as a defensive strategy by preventing us from becoming too close to others and the inevitable pain from further loss. This new construal of self can also be seen as a control strategy for dealing with the death.

The evolving relationship with the surviving parent can influence identity, a bereaved adolescent's behavior and the course of bereavement (Gray, 1987; Silverman et al., 2002-2003; Worden & Silverman, 1993). Furman (1974) says that when a person's parent dies it can feel as though s/he is losing a part of him/herself. An adolescent can begin to think that s/he was abandoned and that if s/he were worth living for, or more loveable, the parent would still be alive. All of these beliefs can influence one's self-esteem (Rochlin, 1961) and sense of themselves in their relationships, including a sense of inferiority (Servaty & Hayslip, 2001). Often omitted in these conceptualizations is the very important role that a surviving parent can play in mediating these feelings.

In some families where over a period of time more open communication was allowed, the surviving daughters felt understood and recognized by the surviving parent. This supported self-esteem. For example with Ruth discussed earlier, her father was able to make his love for his daughter clear. That Ruth feels loved and important in her father's life is extremely important for her identity, her sense of self-worth and esteem. In other families this was not the case and the women were either left feeling more isolated and alone and/or developing a stronger sense of self-reliance to compensate for this. This provides an interesting dilemma. Some research suggests that open communication in the family and between parent and adolescent is beneficial (Balk, 1983; Bowen, 1978). Certainly in this study it seems that even in families where parents and daughters were not terribly close before the death, communication with each other allowed a woman to feel closer to her parent. However, as has also been noted, it is natural and even protective that communication in some families becomes less open to prevent members from the pain of the loss. Can communication and talking about the death be overrated as suggested with research on the grief work hypothesis and grief therapy (Stroebe, 1992-1993)? Research in this area is not definitive to date. I will not attempt to answer this larger question; however, what seems to be important in this research is that the parent be focused on the child and her needs allowing her to feel loved and understood. This supports the work of Silverman (2000) and her discussion of child-centered parenting.

In some families, an extreme closeness developed between the surviving parent and daughter prohibiting individual expressions of grief, while interfering with friendships and relationships. This I call "situational matrimony." A similar concept "parentification" is discussed in the family therapy literature. The concept I have introduced is related; though, different from parentification. Parentification assumes a delegation of parental roles and responsibilities to a child. This was evident with some of the young women in this study; however, a woman's new position in relationship to the surviving parent encompassed more than an increase in parental responsibilities. As has also been discussed in Shapiro (1994) an intense emotional closeness developed between parent and daughter. This closeness was strengthened after the death.

As has often been the case, the theories that we have used in the past to help us conceptualize our ideas have left us with models that promote one theory over another often simplifying very complex ideas. A relational systemic theoretical perspective seems to most accurately capture dynamics after parental death that can influence identity development. Relational theory is interested in what happens in relationships, relationships between child and parent and the relationship between the external environment and internal world (Aron, 1996). Earlier important relationships are internalized and create the blueprint for our future interactions with people in everyday life. Our relationships are influenced by our subjective sense of self, how we experience others and our expectations of these interactions. It is clear through this data that a relational perspective on its own would not be enough to understand the processes in the family. A systemic understanding is also necessary to understand the complexity of family organization including communication patterns, role designation and the emotional flow in the family. A theory that includes a systemic perspective while acknowledging the psychological worlds of individuals can help us understand how relationships in the family after parental death influence identity development.

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