Published in final edited form as:

J Aging Stud. 2012 December ; 26(4): 459–466. doi:10.1016/j.jaging.2012.06.005.

Multiple social contexts in qualitative bereavement research

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Abstract

Little research focuses on the ways that bereaved family members react to and make meaning of their experience of the death of an elderly father and husband. In a qualitative, ethnographic study of 34 bereaved families we examined how family members respond to two inter-related social contexts: 1. Social-cultural values and attitudes such as attitudes toward grieving for old persons, and 2. The inter-personal dyadic relationship between interviewer and interviewee. An underlying theme of uncertainty pervades the study participants' views of what is normal and expected in their own process of bereavement. Implications for future bereavement research are suggested.

This paper examines two little explored social contexts in which bereavement interviews take place, and examines ways that they can have an impact on study participants. Overall we suggest that these contexts of interviews mediate the organization and meanings of narratives (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). As qualitative researchers we stress the socially constructed nature of reality; and the intimate tie between the researcher, the study participant, and what is studied as they occur within the situational constraints of the inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

This paper was generated by a study that seeks to understand how family members—both adult children and the widow-- react to and make meaning of their experience of the death of an elderly father and husband. Here we examine how family members view (1) the socio-cultural values and attitudes toward normal and expected bereavement for an elderly parent or spouse and (2) the inter-personal dyadic relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. The focus of this paper is on the ways that the study participants refer to and express their perceptions of these contexts.

As qualitative researchers we consistently find gems of meaning in interviewees' words describing their perceptions of the research, of the interviewer and of how to perform as study participants. We will suggest that sensitivity to these perceptions may enrich the findings of our study of family bereavement. Comments of study participants often refer to substantive issues about subtle factors that add to our understanding of the focus of a research study (Rosenthal and Rosnow, 2009). Our examination of study participants' comments on pervasive socio-cultural beliefs about bereavement, on their views of interviewers' expectations about the appropriateness of their process of bereavement, and

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about their views of other bereaved persons in their family can help to clarify the process of family bereavement for an elderly father and spouse.

The respondent is an “active participant in a special form of socially defined interaction” (Orne, 2009, p. 110), here, taking part in a bereavement interview. We assume that “every act of ‘seeing’ or ‘saying’ is conditioned by cultural, institutional and interactional contingencies” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p vii). We recognize that the social world of a bereaved family is created through communication—talk and other means of interaction in the ordinary, everyday practices and behaviors that family members use to make their experience understandable and orderly.

At the outset we must stress that we in no way imply or suggest that the meaning and experience of widows for the loss of a husband is the same as the meaning and experience for adult children for the loss of their father. Extensive research on widowhood in old age (Carr, Nesse & Wortman, 2006) and more limited research on bereaved adult children (Moss & Moss, 2007; Umberson, 2003) have carefully studied these separate experiences of bereavement.

This paper, however, includes both widows and adult children because both are bereaved family members and both are affected by the social contexts we examine. Here we focus primarily upon the perspectives of the respondent. We know of little research that helps us to understand how social contexts of bereavement interviews may have an impact upon the responses of study participants.

METHOD

This paper is rooted in a multi-year study of *The Meaning of the Death of the First Elderly Parent: A Family Perspective*. For each family that participated in the research we sought to include both the widow and one or two local adult children.

Thirty-four families were recruited through death notices in community newspapers in the Philadelphia region. The father’s death had occurred 6 months to about one year prior to our recruitment of families. We initially contacted one of the local biological adult children in order to describe the study and to establish eligibility. All adult children were over age 40 (mean 52.3). Fathers were all over age 70 (mean 82.4). The parents had been married an average of 57.6 years at the time of the father’s death. We included European Americans and African Americans, persons with Protestant, Catholic and Jewish religious identities, and families from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds.

The study was reviewed by the University Institutional Review Board, and each study participant read and signed a consent letter. We assured each participating family member that all of the responses are confidential, private and not shared with anyone outside of our research staff. The research is guided by ethical values such as general principles of beneficence (maximizing good outcomes for science, humanity and study participants while avoiding harm), respect (for individual autonomy), and justice (assurance of non-exploitive research procedures) (Cook, 1995). Names and identifying characteristics of all family members are changed here to allow for confidentiality. Each study participant was paid \$75.

The interviewer’s task was to elicit the narrative while carrying the role of a sensitive human being. In our study the 3 highly experienced empathic interviewers each had a father die over 15 years ago. Two qualitative ethnographic interviews, ranging from 1 ½ to 2 hours, were held separately with each of two or three members of a family: one or two adult children and the widow. In most all families only one interviewer was responsible for all interviews in the family; in four families a second interviewer was involved with one family

member to respond to the convenience of the family. Most interviews were carried out in the home of each study participant and less often in the research offices at the University. Data is based on audio-taped and fully transcribed interviews, combined with detailed field notes and staff memos.

The interviews

Each interview was introduced by the following:

While we will ask you a number of specific questions today, we view our questions as the starting point for a conversation or a discussion. We hope you will feel free to say whatever comes to you mind. There are no wrong answers. Take as much time as you need. It is our hope to learn from you about your experiences, feelings and ideas.

The first of the two interviews focused on the individual respondents' narrative about their relationship with the elderly father/spouse over the years, and their personal reaction to his dying and death. We asked such questions as:

When you think of your father's/husband's life, what comes to mind?

Can you tell me the story of your father's/husband's death?

How would you describe your relationship with him over the years?

Have things changed for you in some ways since he died?

Although some spontaneous descriptions of the experience of other family members did arise in the first interview, the second interview explicitly focused on the person's perceptions of and relationships with other family members around the father/husband's death.

The interview method went beyond asking each bereaved family member about only his or her own feelings, attitudes, and behaviors that they experienced. In order to focus on the family system and elicit different perspectives and meanings around bereavement, we followed Nadeau's (1998) adaptation of the Milan circular questioning method (Weeks & L'Abate, 1982). Thus, in the second interview, all study participants were asked to talk not only of their own experience of bereavement, but talk about how the other family members have felt and responded, and how the others might describe them. In some way each narrative of the bereavement experience is seen in part through the lens of other family members. The family focus of this study tends to heighten the salience of family within the bereavement narrative. Thus, these individual family interviews, allowed us to learn more about family interactions and behaviors, than would be revealed without this circular questioning.

Another aspect of this study design is that in each bereaved family we are interviewing multiple family members, and each respondent knows that other members of the family have been or will be interviewed. Rather than focusing on one person, as in traditional bereavement research, we seek multiple perspectives. Each respondent is asked to talk about how other family members reacted to the father's/husband's death, and how other family members perceive the reactions of each other. We assure every respondent that whatever they say is confidential and private and will not be shared with anyone outside of the research staff.

When a study participant is interviewed knowing that other family member(s) will participate, it is likely that each may imagine possible responses and attitudes of the others. This awareness can potentially enrich as well as influence what is shared in the interview. When family members talked about individual or family problems such as mental illness,

drug addiction or estrangement with a sibling, the respondent sought to be assured of the privacy and confidentiality of the interview, so that family solidarity would not be threatened. The method was designed to enable us to be aware of bereaved family issues and dynamics that normally would not be exposed.

In the family-focused second interview, we asked such questions as:

We're interested in how your family has reacted to your father's/husband's death.

How would you describe your relationship with your mother/child over the years?

What do you think your mother/sibling/child is going through now that your father/husband has died? What would s/he say if you asked?

Putting yourself in your mother's/sibling's/child's shoes, how does s/he think you've felt about your father's/husband's death?

The general approach to data analysis for this project uses standard methods of qualitative research (Mischler, 1986; Silverman, 2001). After fully transcribing interviews, we analyzed them first using data review, that asks the broad questions, "What is the data?" and "How is this data relevant to the topic under study?" The next step is large level sorting of each transcript, that codes for broad themes and topics intra-individually. Then fine-grained analyses that include coding for sub-themes and patterns within respondent's entire transcript. Our method enabled us to better understand the respondents' interpretations of and responses to questions we asked. The data used in this article emerged from both gross level sorting and fine-grained analysis. As new data were transcribed and ideas and themes emerged, we back-checked them with data from respondents who had already completed the interview.

We recognize that our focus on family bereavement was dealing with sensitive subject matter and heightened emotionalism (Schulman-Green, McCorkle & Bradley, 2009). In our interviews by highly experienced bereavement interviewers, the family members were generally able to share intimate, potentially painful information with a stranger, that they often said they had not discussed with other persons.

TWO CONTEXTS

Grieving and bereavement are shaped by social contexts in which they occur (Rosenblatt, 1993). Throughout this paper we refer to "grieving" rather than "grief"; grieving is a process rather than a measurable "noun-thing-entity" that tends to remove it from lived experience (Kastenbaum, 2008, p72). Two inter-related contexts emerged for the study participants: the socio-cultural norms in regard to bereavement and the dyadic interactions between interviewer and respondent. Although we will address each sequentially, they are often inter-connected.

1) Socio-cultural values and attitudes provide a context that defines and influences what is seen by the respondent to be normal and expected responses to bereavement for an elderly father or spouse.

Bereaved persons often experience pressure to conform to perceived socio-cultural expectations of grieving (Harris, 2009; Hayslip & Peveto, 2005; Moller, 1996). There are conflicting, confusing and ambiguous social rules and norms that have an impact on who grieves, when, where, how long, and for whom one should grieve (Doka, 1989; 2002; Rosenblatt, 2008). Cultural and family rules are diverse, as they address what is appropriate to feel, believe and do during bereavement (Rosenblatt, 1993). Often subtle guidelines relate to inner thoughts and feelings, as well as overt expressions of grieving. Socio-cultural values and attitudes have implications for individual beliefs about what is normal for a bereaved

person's grieving (Parkes, Laungani & Young, 1997). Contemporary values in the United States often reflect pervasive themes of individualism, independence, privacy, personal mastery, control of emotional expression, and value of family continuity. When a family member is confronted with loss and grieving she may feel vulnerable (Harris, 2009). When personal feelings, attitudes and behaviors do not fit with general social and cultural expectations of bereavement, the expression of weakness and grieving may be devalued. It is not unexpected that study participants who are wrestling with personal and social expectations, spontaneously express varying degrees of uncertainty. Contemporary studies, however, have repeatedly found that bereaved persons tend to express resilience in the face of loss (Bonano, 2009), as they deal with dual processes of both loss (grieving) and restoration (adapting to life changes resulting from the death) (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007; Stroebe & Schut, 1999; 2010).

All of the men who died in this study were old—most (71%) were over 80. These deaths took place in a culture that has, in addition to the pervasive themes of individualism and personal control above, a strong implicit theme that is uniquely relevant to our topic: ageism, valuing youth and devaluing age (Levy & Banaji, 2002). Ageism has an impact on how people think, feel, and behave in response to the chronological age of an old person. Ageism tends to be pervasive and socially acceptable (Levy & Banaji, 2005). Ageism tends to devalue both the life and the death of very old persons. The survivor's grieving tends to be disenfranchised as a reflection of ageism (Moss & Moss, 1989; Moss & Moss, 2007; Umberson, 2003). Although the cultural context of ageism is probably significant for each of our bereaved family respondents, they often did not emphasize that their deceased father's/husband's age was a key factor influencing their reactions to the death. Implicit ageism is however an ever-present elephant in the room.

Four inter-related socio-cultural themes emerged from the interviews: expression of grieving should not be too intense; it is important to express enough emotional upset; death of a close person can represent a significant life transition; and concern with the lack of clarity about rules of expressing grieving.

Expressions of grieving should not be too intense

Family members often made an effort to tell us that they did not express too much upset after the initial shock of the death, and after the rituals of the funeral and burial. An underlying concern here, may be a fear of breaking down, and losing control in the process of grieving and bereavement.

We asked an 84 year old widow, six months after her husband died:

Int: How did things work out after he died? How did you handle it?

R: Well, I'm not handling it too well. I still miss him. I get depressed a lot. I talk to myself to get myself out of the mood. (*describes funeral and cremation*)

Int: So you have his ashes here? How does that work out for you?

R: It works out fine. I feel like he's still here.

Int: You do?

R: Uh huh. I talk to him every morning. I say goodnight to him every night. I even have part of his clothes up there that I still haven't gotten rid of. I don't know how long it takes for people to grieve. Literally, I don't sit and cry all day long, you know, I just have tears.

Contrast this with a 44 yr old married daughter who spoke about her reaction to her 74 year old father's death. He had been wheelchair bound for over a decade after a debilitating stroke.

Int: Well, overall, how much of a reaction would you say his death has produced in your life? A little, or moderate, or a lot or what?

R: I would say moderate. I wouldn't say a lot. ...It definitely affects me but it's not like I wake up every day crying about it, you know. I felt like it's a little – like it's not a big thing, but you know, I still think about it.

Each respondent, however, seems to imply in the narrative that his/her feelings and behaviors are in line with social expectations: the widow claims she doesn't "sit and cry all day long", while the daughter from another family says that she doesn't "wake up everyday crying about it".

Often we hear the word "dwell" -- a word that is not common in everyday parlance. Respondents frequently said that they did not dwell on the loss. When a person dwells on something, s/he is generally doing it too much. Dwelling was not seen as a good thing. Family members seem to tell themselves (and the interviewer) that their thoughts or feelings are not more intense or more frequent than they should be. In not dwelling they both distance themselves from the pain of the loss and protect themselves as resilient survivors.

A bereaved daughter, when thinking of her own death and personal mortality, says "I don't dwell on it". A son, talking about his family's attitude toward grieving, says "We don't dwell on things we have no control of.... We are not morbid."

An 87 year old widow whose husband died rather suddenly, was asked: "Did you worry about how you would handle his death should he happen to die?" She said, "I didn't worry. I thought about it but I didn't dwell on it." Later in the interview, she said after her husband died she wanted to be active and out in the world, and that she did not want to be "sitting there and dwelling on yourself." These respondents are making efforts to describe themselves as behaving in culturally and socially appropriate ways as they experience their grieving. They do not express intense unrelieved emotional upset. These comments reflect the themes of the dual process model of bereavement, emphasizing oscillation between loss oriented and restoration oriented coping processes (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

The study participants tended to be more concerned with too much expression of emotional upset rather than too little. Some, however, reacted to a second socio-cultural expectation: *Expressions of grieving should not be too little or muted*. When Hayslip & Peveto (2005) asked a large community sample how the respondent knows when someone is "not grieving normally and needs help", their respondents spoke about concern for those with "no reaction". This theme also emerged from some of the study participants in our research.

A 54 year old son suggested that his widowed mother's behavior during the funeral was not socially and culturally appropriate.

Int: How about the way that she [widow] did act, say, at the death and at the funeral and all?

R: The funeral was kind of scary because she was too good. I mean, she was too good! I guess the doctors gave her something to get through it, which they did ...But for the longest time, she was pretty amazing. Scary amazing, as a matter of fact. ...Everything was almost like it was normal – not breaking down, not being a basket case even at the funeral. Not breaking down!..... but personally, I was kind of happy because I guess, if

she got worse, we would all get worse with her. So she was okay, so we had to be okay. At least got through that spotlight of the funeral and all that stuff.

This son saw his mother too calm, acting as if everything was normal at the funeral. This was unsettling. It suggested that his mother was not sufficiently affected by the loss. The son recognized the strong significance of the death for his mother and himself and he said it was inappropriate for his mother to show so little feeling and to look “too good” at the funeral. When he used the word ‘scary’, it in part suggested that his assumptive world was shaken (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) and that he was uncertain how to respond to his mother’s lack of expected emotional upset.

A third socio-cultural expectation was expressed by several sons that the *death of a father, may have a profound transformative impact* on one’s sense of self and world view. There is a pervasive belief that the father’s role in the family carries a deep significance, and the loss of the father can potentially have an impact on surviving adult children, who now face their lives without his presence. The adult child is now a person without a living father, and certain cultural expectations may be felt: e.g. to take on a part of father’s role in the family, fulfill some of father’s legacy, or define oneself as less encumbered by filial ties.

We asked a 42 year old son, after the death of his 74 year old father:

Int: So some people say they feel differently about themselves after a parent dies. Is that true for you?

R: No. I actually question myself why I didn’t. A couple months afterwards, I said, “Shouldn’t I be having one of these life-altering moments?” No. Like I said, I had ten years to kind of grow to accept it [*father’s disabling stroke*].

The father here is similar to most of the deceased parents in our study. His death was viewed as an expected end-point after a long term serious chronic condition, with remissions as well as declines in functioning. Chronic illnesses often follow a challenging trajectory of potential threat to life and partial recovery, with a significant impact on patient and on family members (Lynn, Wilkerson, Cohn & Jones, 1998). In this study, it was rare for a high functioning elderly father to die suddenly. In light of the fathers’ past rallies of strength and continued survival, the moment of death was frequently seen as both expected and sudden.

Similarly, a 53 year old son questions whether he should be ‘over that grieving moment’ after his 80 year old father died suddenly of a brain aneurysm. We asked him:

Int: Overall, to summarize what we’ve talked about today, how has it been and how is it now for you and your family since your dad has passed?

R: There’s not that grieving moment. I think I’m over that moment. Sometimes I feel guilty because I don’t feel like a train wreck. I feel like it shouldn’t be over yet.... Well, it’s only been seven months. ... It’s just such a sort period of time. And you go on with your life.... Life as usual. Go to sporting events. And then I see some people that can’t get off the couch for a long time. Should I be a little more in mourning a little longer? Not that I want to.

The culture suggests that there is a time for grieving. Here the son wants to be over it, yet he is questioning whether his grieving was too short, and not what it should have been.

A fourth theme that pervades the other three is *uncertainty, little clarity about how one should react to bereavement*. Although we know that the pain of loss is inevitable, yet despite the ubiquity of grieving, it has been found that most bereaved people know little about what to expect, and that people who have suffered a major loss frequently do not

know whether their grieving is normal (Bonanno, 2009). Our findings are congruent with this.

Family members are concerned about how well they have responded to the loss, and how their reaction reflects their deep love of the deceased. They are often uncertain about the normality and appropriateness of too intense or too little emotional expression. Bereaved persons carry cultural expectations that they should be personally transformed after the loss of a parent or spouse, and they may be uncertain and guilty when they sense that they have failed to meet this expectation.

Throughout the interviews we assured the study participants that there were no correct ways of feeling, thinking and behaving, no clear guidelines, and no right or wrong answers to our questions. Rather, in this research, we were trying to learn about their experience.

We asked, a daughter:

Int: Some daughters have told us that they couldn't fully grieve about their dad's death because of their concern for their widowed mother. Has that been so for you?

R: No...I'm not sure what grieving is supposed to be.

Int: Good. Let's talk about that because to tell you the truth, I don't either.

R: I've never seen a definition of what you're supposed to do to grieve. Isn't it sort of a personal thing how you deal with death? But if you don't cry all the time, does that mean you're not grieving? I don't know what that answer is. I think I miss him in my own way, and if that's grieving, then I'm grieving. But I haven't broken down ...

She is concerned how she should express her feelings and how others will judge her. Here again, there is a concern with a threat of too much focus on loss and sadness. Need for personal efficacy again, is an undercurrent. Overall, a lack of clarity may imply that a person thinks that she should know and follow bereavement rules and customs, and that there is personal discomfort in not knowing. The other side of not knowing is to deny that it matters, and to create one's own definition of grieving.

The socio-cultural themes we have discussed tend to be interwoven in the dyadic interplay in the bereavement interviews—the second context we explore.

2. The interpersonal dyadic relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, provides a context influencing family members' responses.

The study participants were told that the interview is an opportunity for each family member to talk about his or her feelings, attitudes, and experiences around the father or spouse's death. We suggested that their responses could enable us to increase our understanding of family bereavement and potentially be of help to future bereaved family members.

In examining the respondents' view of their relationship with the interviewer, we are led to consider the demand characteristics of this qualitative research interview. These reflect the study participants' perceptions of the purpose of the research, and how they will meet the expectations of the interviewer (Orne, 2009). Demand characteristics have been described as related to the placebo effect in medical research; placebo comes from the word "to please" (Aronson, Ellsworth, P.C., Carlsmith, J.M. & Gonzales, M.H., 1990). The respondent tends to view the interviewer as an authority figure—controlling the structure of the interview and also as representing socio-cultural values and expectations about bereavement. The context of the interview interaction may bring the study participants a sense of "evaluation apprehension" reflecting their concern about whether and how the experienced professional

interviewer is judging them (Rosenberg, 2009). Respondents may try to present themselves in a socially desirable manner: as helpful to the research and as a compliant respondent.

We assume that in the bereavement interview both the interviewer and the interviewee bring obligations and expectations to their face-to-face meeting. We view the interview as one of complex feedbacks (Rosenthal, 2009). Both participants are playing roles on the stage of this interpersonal encounter. Each is involved in interpreting messages sent by the other (Berg, 2004). Each, aware of the other's presence, says things in certain ways for the other's benefit.

Here we are examining how the situational constraints of the bereavement interview may shape the inquiry and thus the responses of the study participants. The interviewer-respondent interaction both reflects the context and produces the context of the ethnographic interview. Some family members explicitly ask the interviewer if their response was what the researcher wanted to hear. A widow said, "I hope my answer is what you expected"

As the researcher and study participant meet, they come to know more about each other. Each is sensitive to the other's self presentation and the other's expectations (Goffman, 1959). In his or her narrative, the interviewee decides what to say, how to describe the life and the death of the deceased, and the family reactions to the death. Even though respondents are told that there are no right or wrong answers, they may assume that their answers can affect the way that the interviewer views them, and they may tend to present themselves in what they see as a positive and appropriate way (Aronson, et al 1990).

There is a process in which the study participant increasingly sees the interviewer not only as an authority figure but as a real person with whom to share one's thoughts and feelings (Greenson & Wexler, 1969). The family member notes when the interviewer remains silent, jots a note, and whether the interviewer seems to understand or not understand what the interviewee has said. These behaviors tend to create the study participant's impression of the beliefs, personality and expectations of the interviewer. With increasing rapport the interview becomes a mutually collaborative process.

Respondents have been poignantly described as depositing "a part of themselves, an image of who they are into [interviewer's] safekeeping" (Rubin & Rubin (2005, p 83). They can feel vulnerable if they fail to feel secure in the interview. Alternately, when bereaved family members believe they are understood, the interview can be an empowering experience, potentially enhancing one's sense of personal efficacy.

A study participant can put on a front, creating an intended image (Goffman (1959)—e.g. of the strong and independent widow; of the devoted adult child. This may help explain their occasional self-justifying accounts (Scott & Lyman, 1968) or explanations of their behaviors that might be considered socially or culturally unacceptable by the interviewer.

When a family member participates in an interview he describes his bereavement experience and the family's experience from his point of view. If he is critical of other bereaved family members, he may feel that his negativity could be judged by the interviewer as inappropriate and destructive of family cohesion. When the interviewer is perceived as understanding and supportive, rather than judgmental, the respondent tends to be more open in the narrative.

Listen to several adult children. We asked one son:

Int: Do you feel lonely in any way without your dad?

R: No. That's what I was really worried about. I'm a bad son. I don't feel lonely.

Here he apologizes as he acknowledges a sense of guilt that he is not lonely, although loneliness may be expected.

Another son, who had carried a caregiving role, was asked about the wake and the mass for his father.

Int: And how was that experience for you? ...Was there a lot of emotion on your part?

R: Oh yeah, sure. There was relief that—I want to be honest—my workload was over now, because that weighs on you. There was relief that he was out of that state that he was in, that misery. And then, the sadness. The emptiness.

This son may be seen as a “faithful subject” (Weber & Cook, 1972), leaning over backwards to be honest. Later in the interview, after describing that he was repeatedly called by the nursing home to change his father’s leaking urostomy, he said: “You know he’s soaking in urine”

Int: So even when he was in the [nursing] home you were called. That’s really something I guess....

R: I’m not trying to say I’m this terrific person here. Don’t take it that way.

There is a catch in praise that can both make a person feel good about himself, and also make the person feel burdened when the other (the interviewer) expects to learn of further praiseworthy behaviors.

In still another family, we asked a son after his father’s long terminal decline:

Int: What would you say you felt after he did die- at that moment when he was gone?

R: (Crying) At that moment I can just remember I just felt like this sense of like peace because he was not suffering. But now I was going to suffer; I know that sounds selfish but... I felt like he was finally resting without pain, and I was going to go home with all the pain now. As selfish as that sounds, but that’s how I felt.

Repeatedly, throughout many of the interviews, adult children and widows were sensitive to the way the interviewer would interpret and evaluate their responses. Respondents are concerned both about being perceived too negatively by the interviewer as well as being seen too positively. In their presentation of self, they seem to wish to be understood as they really are-- neither too selfish or too selfless.

Another daughter had been talking in some detail about how things were managed at the funeral.

R: Ohhh. Sorry to go off on... You didn’t write anything down, so I know it wasn’t important. (Laughs) No, I’m kidding.

Int: Yes it was. In fact, that was very important.

Each of these family members were sensitive to the interviewer’s behavior. Each sought to understand what the interviewer wanted to hear, each wanted to fit the role of a good respondent, and apologized when she thought she was not helpful.

In a number of situations the respondent asked the interviewer if the respondent’s thoughts or beliefs made sense. These were situations in which the cultural expectations seem unclear and the family member wants reassurance that his or her behavior was normal or appropriate.

We asked a widow:

Int: Could you tell me a little bit about the funeral? ...

R: ... I just, I couldn't share my grief with anyone. ... The way I would have wanted it was just me and my children, go to the cemetery and... I said, they had a lot of friends and people coming from far I guess, I said, "Do whatever you want." So, they had a luncheon over at P's, ... Which, they did have a nice, I guess... But I couldn't wait 'till it was all over and I could come home. (Long pause)... Does that make sense?

And later, she said: People grieve in different ways. Maybe my way is the wrong way. I wanted to have my grief to myself and just didn't want to share it with anybody, except my children.

The interviewer made repeated efforts to be supportive throughout this interview, as well as others, to indicate that she understood how the widow felt. With such responses as "uh-huh", "mmm-hmm", smiling or non-verbal gestures, she was assuring the widow there is no right or wrong way to grieve. This widow may have questioned whether her attitude toward the funeral arrangement made sense because her children, responding in line with cultural expectations, disagreed with the way the widow had preferred to arrange the final rituals. Perhaps the widow was implying to the interviewer that as the widow, her needs for privacy were more important than the needs of her bereaved children, a reflection of the culturally accepted "pecking order" of grieving (Kastenbaum, 2008).

Throughout the interviews, many family members felt anxious about the appropriateness and normality of their bereavement experience. Their spontaneous remarks to the interviewers reflected their uncertainty about what is to be expected, and their wish to be understood.

DISCUSSION

Three central themes emerged in the paper: first, bereaved family members are influenced by their views of socio-cultural values, such as ageism; second, bereaved respondents are influenced by the dynamics of the interview situation and its demand characteristics; and third, uncertainty underlies the experience of family bereavement and it is imbedded in the mix of the first two themes.

Uncertainty makes it a challenge for respondents to engage in cognitive evaluations of their feelings and those of other family members. Their uncertainty is reflected when they ask an interviewer whether their feelings and thoughts make sense, or whether the interviewer sees their narrative as understandable or appropriate. Widows and adult children explicitly say that they don't know how they should feel and how they should mourn.

There is an underlying uncertainty of socio-cultural expectations of bereaved persons: uncertainty about how much or how little one should feel and express their emotional reaction to death, how to decide about the rituals around the death and how to balance privacy and sharing between bereaved family members. There is also uncertainty about what the interviewer expects, about how study participants should talk about each other's problems and vulnerabilities, and about how the interviewer will assure confidentiality between family members.

Perhaps the uncertainty of how one should and should not feel and behave thwarts openness with others. In subsequent analyses of our data, we have found that it is rare for adult children or widows to say that they share their deep feelings of loss and sadness with each other. We may be told by Shakespeare to give sorrow words, but not too many follow this command in these contemporary American families. For some, there seems to be an expectation that one should grieve in privacy and thus look strong and be able to support

other bereaved family members rather than express feelings that would be upsetting to the other. The bereaved person may put on a reassuring face of control and well-being that is culturally preferred.

Limitations

This study has limitations beyond its small size. The sample of 34 families is not without some bias: death announcements in some newspapers can be costly, and therefore we may have a somewhat higher socio-economic group through this recruitment method.

There may be self-selective factors of the people who are willing and those who are not willing to participate in this bereavement research. In this study, however, refusal rates are quite low. Few adult children (9) refused to participate, after we spoke with them and described the study. Ten of the widows in the 34 families did not participate, however only one able widow, whom we contacted, refused. The widows who did not participate had significant cognitive limitations, or their adult children wanted to protect them from a potentially upsetting interview. In this research project, there is a pervasive theme of mutual protection of individual kin and also protection of the family as a whole. This is a topic for a forthcoming paper.

The basic design of the overall study included multiple family members separately interviewed about themselves, about other family members and the bereaved family as a whole. This may have been a limitation to the extent that individuals were somewhat constrained in their narrative when they considered protecting their kin from criticism. However, the method has been justified by the richness of the additional perspectives that have emerged from such a complex set of interviews. Using this method, an earlier study of four siblings in one family yielded unexpected family themes in parental bereavement (Moss & Moss, 2001); a detailed portrait of an atypical family yielded complex patterns of similarities and differences within a closed family (Black, Moss, Rubinstein & Moss, 2011); and an elaboration of the interface of individual and family worldviews yielded additional dimensions to our study of family bereavement (Black & Santanello, 2012).

As a reflection of themes of ageism and disenfranchised grief for old persons, widows and adult children may be likely to minimize the intensity of their grieving, and attempt to maximize their strength and coping skills. There may be a positive, personally affirming bias in this research, a tendency for the respondent to expect that we want to hear that she or he is strong, and is managing well. At some point in the interviews most widows and adult children openly became teary-eyed or briefly cried. Their common reaction was to apologize to the interviewer, and say "I'm sorry". Perhaps the interview context itself encourages narratives of positive and adaptive aspects of bereavement, with the respondent presenting his or her self as strong and emotionally able. Researchers should be increasingly sensitive to this positive bias.

We suggest that the interviewing process can have a positive, strengthening effect on the bereaved person. Family members were quite willing to participate in the family-focused second interview, none refused. At the end, we always thanked bereaved family members for their helpfulness. Often study participants told us that they deeply appreciated the value of talking with us about their own bereavement, a topic they had avoided discussing with others (Buckle, Dwyer & Jackson, 2010).

Implications

When we asked one family member about the feelings and attitudes of another, there was an initial tendency to deny any differences within the family, suggesting that all family members reacted to the death in the same way. Subsequent parts of most narratives very

rarely bore this out. It is our impression that most all respondents spoke more about differences, and talked less about similarities. Direct talk apparently is not the major way that one family member learns how the other feels. The many non-verbal and unspoken messages between kin are rich sources for mutual understandings. Future research might focus on conversational analysis among bereaved family members—to learn what is said and what is not said.

In this qualitative, ethnographic study, we have paid attention to how the participants respond to two contexts of the interview. We sought to know what bereaved persons see as normal and appropriate social-cultural ideas about bereavement, as well their expectations of the interviewer, and the interview. In so doing, we have enriched our data, and increased our understanding of the phenomena we are studying-- family bereavement. We suggest that for bereavement research, including surveys using standard measures and scales, it is important in interpreting results to be sensitive to the respondents' views of the demand characteristics of bereavement research, and socio-cultural contexts such as those we have explored.

We recognize that stories in society reflect the inner lives of bereaved persons and that the social context can influence the stories (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Interviewee responses are colored by their perceptions of the socio-cultural expectations of attitudes toward normative bereavement and by interactions within the dialogic interview. It is our belief that the meaning of bereavement may be enhanced through the lens of these contexts, and that they should be considered in future quantitative as well as qualitative research.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Bereaved respondents are influenced by their views of socio-cultural values, such as ageism
- Bereaved respondents are influenced by the dynamics of the interview situation and its demand characteristics
- Themes of uncertainty underlie the experience of family bereavement.