

Parental Grief after the Loss of an Only Child: Anthropological Narratives from Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Although death is a universal human experience, there is great diversity in the way death related grief is expressed, experienced, and managed within and across cultures. This study seeks, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, to explore how parents experience and express grief following the death of their only child, and to understand the sociocultural factors that shape this experience. It pays particular attention to how the meanings of the loss are constructed through social interaction. The sample consisted of twenty participants and data were gathered through in-depth interviews conducted in five regions of Cameroon. The findings show that while participants commonly experienced guilt, anger, emptiness and loneliness, and depression, the intensity and duration of these emotions varied significantly. This can be attributed to a host of interacting sociocultural factors, including the cultural perception and classification of types of deaths, the cultural value and symbolism of children, societal discourse, religious beliefs, and the nature of the social network in which the bereaved parents are embedded. These dynamic factors coalesced to define the extent of the loss, with deep implications for parents' sense of self-worth, belonging and roles.

Keywords: Only-child, parental grief, self, loss, death

INTRODUCTION

Adopting the holistic approach of the discipline of anthropology, this study seeks to explore the varied expressions of parental grief and their socio-cultural determinants in the specific circumstance of the loss of an only child. In the words of Edward Bruner (1986:3), we are seeking to tell “our stories about their stories; we are interpreting the people as they are interpreting themselves”.

It is the story of a culture where children are culturally regarded as the potential guarantors of the welfare of parents at old age, and of the continuity and survival of the lineage and family.

Death-related grief, variously described as the emotional response to the loss of a significant other (Horwitz & Wakefield, 2007), the involuntary severance of a cherished relationship (Lofland, 1982) and a multidimensional range of experiences following a loss (Bonanno, 2001; Silverman et al., 2021) is a universal human experience. It involves a variety of emotional, cognitive, spiritual, behavioural, and functional responses of individuals following the loss of a significant person (Zisook & Shear, 2009). Along the course of human evolution, all societies, ancient and modern, have had to contend with the sobering and unpredictable reality of death and its attendant grief. Despite its universality, grief is expressed and managed differently across cultures and traditions, and the various ontologies of the dead which usually generate a variety of relational possibilities (Conlin, 2001; Kaufman & Morgan, 2005; Moran, 2017; Robarchek & Robarchek, 2005; Silverman et al., 2021).

Research on the subject of grief has yielded a wide scope of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. The range of emotional reactions to death as determined by cultural norms and institutions has been well documented in anthropological and sociological literature (Small & Hockney, 2001; Walter, 2006; Shepard, 2002). Bowlby (1961, 1980) and Parkes (1972) propounded the first stage theory, according to which grief

included four stages (Numbing, yearning and searching, disorganisation and despair). Similarly, Kubler-Ross (1969) proposed a theory of Five Stages of Grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). Following this line of argumentation, a good number of scholars considered grief as a linear process, a sequential progression through specific stages. They assumed a progressive timeline for grief as a work or task to be undertaken by the bereaved (Rosaldo, 1984; Worden, 1996). This model has been criticised as being prescriptive and for neglecting the interacting social contexts which render grieving a dynamic, complex and unpredictable phenomena (Avis et al., 2021). These concerns are addressed by Stroebe and Schut (1999, 2010) in their dual-process of grief, which underscores the unpredictable and on-going transformation of relationship and changing psychosocial needs that structure the grieving process. According to this model, bereaved persons often oscillate between a loss orientation and a restoration-oriented model of coping. Accordingly, the bereaved person may at one moment experience an intense feeling of the loss of the loved one and at another feel okay and the process continually shifts. They may sometimes have both feelings at once. Similarly, Klass, Nickman and Silverman (1996) proposed the Continuing Bond Theory, according to which grief may be a life-long process that may never be completed or finished. Relationships with the dead are not static; they change and develop as life unfolds. What this model seeks to demonstrate is the complexity of human relationships and the ways in which people remain connected to each other in life and in death (Bowlby, 1980).

More recent studies have focused on the ways by which bereaved persons try to reconstruct meaning in a world without their loved ones. Neimeyer's Narrative Grief Therapy (1999; 2001) intimates that grieving requires us to reconstruct a world that again 'makes sense', that restores a semblance of meaning, direction, and interpretability to a life that is forever transformed. This process of meaning-making may involve rituals, narratives, arts and community solidarity. The dual-process model and the theory of continuing bonds provide relevant insights into the dynamic nature of the experience of grief and the process of narrative meaning-making which are central to this study.

Over the years, a significant shift of focus has occurred in the study of grief. While earlier studies placed emphases on rituals and institutional processes of managing the dead and reorienting social relations (Durkheim, 1915; Hertz, 1960; Huntington & Metcalf, 1991), current anthropological approaches to the study of grief have increasingly focused on the social, cultural, religious, economic, political and even historical contexts which structure the expression and experience of grief, and how grief is shaped by worldview and the understanding of self as more or less autonomous (Silverman et al., 2021; Anarsonson, 2007; Robarchek & Robarchek, 2005).

Although several studies have investigated parental grief (Riches & Dawson, 2000; Ahmadi & Zandi, 2021; Aho et al., 2009; Brabant et al., 1995; Buckle & Fleming, 2011), very few, if any, have intensely focused on the grief experience of parents when the only child dies. This study is undertaken in Cameroon, a socio-cultural universe which fully shares the African cultural concern for progeny as status symbol and guarantee of the propagation of the family and welfare of parents in old age (Dyer, 2007; Nauck, 2007; Nauck & Klaus, 2007; Eekelaar, 2004; Oyefara, 2017). The study aims to decode, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, the narratives of bereaved lone-child parents, paying attention to the broader contexts in which death occurs and in which mourning takes place, as well as to the host of interacting social factors that shape the grieving process.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study made use of the qualitative approach which seeks to understand and interpret the meanings, experiences, and social realities of people in their natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Punch, 2013). We opted for open-ended questions in order to allow the participants to share their thoughts and feelings in their own words, and to effectively communicate their lived experiences and the understandings and the meanings of their loss.

The theoretical framework of this study is provided by the theory of symbolic interactionism, which lays emphasis on the social construction of the self and the role of significant others in one's self-definition, and the conception of reality (Mead, 1965; Blumer, 1969). Blumer (1969), a student and interpreter of Mead,

formalized symbolic interactionism and laid out its three central premises as follows:

- *that people act toward things, including each other, on the basis of the meanings they have for them;*
- *that these meanings are derived through social interaction with others; and*
- *that these meanings are managed and transformed through an interpretive process that people use to make sense of and handle the objects that constitute their social worlds.*

In his book, *Symbolic Interactionism: An Introduction, An Interpretation, An Integration*, Charon (2004:31) states the basic tenets of the symbolic interactionist theory, according to which as rational beings, humans are in constant and transforming interaction with one another, and with society and their environment. Through this social interaction they define their situation and obtain meaning. One of the central and organizing concepts of symbolic interactionism which has particular relevance to our study is the concept of the self, for the reason that every significant loss, such as bereavement, brings about a “crisis of self” (Charmaz, 1997; Charmaz et Milligan, 2006), a loss of the self socially constructed through social interactions and relationships with the other (Valentine, 2008).

Sample

Sampling was purposively done. Consistent with our topic and study design, our choice of participants was limited only to parents (males and females) who have lost their only children and have personally experienced the reality of grief in their specific circumstance. The sample for this study consisted of 20 parents (08 males and 12 females) within the age bracket 65 to 85 years. This population of parents who have lost the only child is relatively rare and required significant time to locate. Apart from the fact that we did not locate younger parents, this age bracket was preferred because generally those between the ages of 65 to 85 years find it difficult to have another child even if they wanted to do so. While all the women had given up on this, only 3 % of the men said they were still entertaining the possibility of having another child. By the time we interviewed the twentieth participants, the research had attained a saturation point. This study was conducted between July 2024 and February 2025. Participants were located and interviewed in five regions of Cameroon, namely, North West, West, South West, Littoral and Centre.

Data collection

Data were collected using in-depth interviews. This open-ended, discovery-oriented method enabled us to explore in depth the points of view, feelings, experiences and perspectives of the bereaved parents. Directed by an interview guide with open-ended questions, participants expressed their experiences in their own words and gestures, reflecting their emotional and cultural realities. The interviews were conducted in English and Pidgin English and each session lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes. All interviewees were thoroughly briefed on the study objectives and their informed consent (oral or written) was sought and obtained before the interviews began. Ethics approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the Catholic University of Cameroon, Bamenda. Participants who requested anonymity were assured that their identities would be kept confidential. Permission was also obtained to record the conversations. Mindful of the emotional and psychological dimensions of the subject, the participants were told that they could discontinue the interview at any point without consequence or pressure. Two participants actually discontinued the interview for reasons related to their emotions. Arrangements were made for them to meet a certified counsellor. We actually ensured this help was obtained.

Data analysis

Data obtained from the in-depth interviews were analysed using thematic analysis of narratives and verbatim quotations. Thematic analysis is essentially a comparative process in which various accounts are compared with each other to classify themes that recur or are common in and across the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The analysis of data proceeded according to the steps recommended by Braun and Clark (2006). Firstly, to immerse ourselves in the data, we listened attentively and repeatedly to the audiotaped interviews, and read the interview transepts several times. This was to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the participants' narratives.

Secondly, we proceeded to generate initial codes by a systematic line-by-line coding of all interesting features across the data that captured the perspectives of the participants. Thirdly, we began searching for themes through a review of all the quotations of the identified codes and grouping the codes into potential themes. Fourthly, we reviewed the themes by ensuring that the data within the themes coherently fitted together and reflected the overarching theme. Fifthly, we defined and named the themes to demonstrate patterns, meanings and relationships.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Sociodemographic characteristics of grieving parents and their children

A total 20 grieving parents (09 males and 11 females) participated in this study. Their ages ranged between 65 and 85.

Parental Characteristics

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	09	45
Female	11	55
Age		
55-65	05	25
65-75	07	35
75-85	08	40
Level of education		
No Schooling	02	10
Primary	09	45
Secondary	06	30
University	03	15
Religious affiliation		
Christianity	10	50
Islam	05	25
African Traditional Religion	03	15
No affiliation	02	10
Relational status		
Couple	10	50
Single	03	15
Widower	02	10
Widow	05	25
Length of time after the death of the child		
3-10 years	04	20
10-15 years	07	35
15-25 years	09	45

Characteristics of Deceased Child

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	09	45
Female	11	55
Age		
20-30	05	25
30-50	08	40
50-60	07	35
Character		
Good Conduct	12	60
Fair Conduct	05	25
Bad Conduct	03	15
Marital status		
Single with children	05	25
Single without children	04	20
Married with Children	08	40
Married without children	03	15
Cause of death of the child		
Illness	10	50
Car Accident	05	25
Suicide	03	15
Murder	02	10

Manifestations of grief

Guilt

The feeling of guilt was strongly present among 65% of the grieving parents. Contemplating the reasons and circumstances in which the death of their children occurred, some of the participants blamed themselves by thinking that something they did, omitted to do neglected or delayed may have contributed to the death of their children. Some went as far back as to parental neglect during the child's primary socialization as having determined the child's attitudes and behaviour, shaped the course of their lives and, consequently, led to their death. This feeling was often reinforced by the blame discourse of others. A parent whose daughter died after a complicated surgery expressed the emotion of guilt in the following words:

I wish I brought my daughter to the hospital as soon she began to complain of pains. Not having enough money at the time, I waited to get paid. Poverty is a bad thing. My daughter is gone because her father does not have enough money.

The parents of 2 of the 5 children who were crushed to death in a car accident blamed themselves for allowing their children aged 24 and 27 to drive their cars. One of them expressed his predicament as follows:

I should have known that young people can be reckless. I did not listen to the wise warning of my wife when she expressed fears about allowing my son to driving one of my cars. People are now saying that I have “sold” my only child to make money. My friend had told me that none of his children living under his roof will drive a car before their thirtieth birthday. I thought this was an obsolete idea. Now, I see that he is right and I am wrong.

Similarly, a parent whose son lived a wayward life of drug addiction and alcoholism and ended up committing suicide attributed these defects in the life of his son to the lack of parental discipline and absence at the tender age of the child. The lamentation of this grieving parent was movingly pathetic:

I should have known that the family is one’s greatest investment and treasure. I neglected my family and was practically absent from the life of my son, having to work far away from home. In my own disordered life, I could not have any positive influence on my son. It was too late to straighten the bended tree.

Seven (35%) of the parents regarded the death of their children as some form of punishment from God or ancestors for some transgressions. Even when the good people found it difficult to identify any area of wicked or wayward conduct in their lives, some still argued that there may be generational curses affecting their families. It was much easier among parents who have done some wicked acts and done injustice against others to see their faults as bringing harm to their families.

The sense of failure in the performance of social roles as parents is prominent in the foregoing narratives. The identity and status of parenthood is constituted by a set of culturally defined expectations of behaviour and responsibility. Conformity with these societal expectations defines one’s place in society, just as failure robs one of the dignity accorded to parenthood.

Anger

The emotion of anger was intermittently manifested by all the participants. The intensity and duration, however, differed according to personality, changing circumstances and the passage of time. Anniversaries, encounters with institutions and persons believed to have contributed in some way to the death of their child were all triggers of the emotion of anger. Apart from 25% of the participants whose manifestation of anger was predominantly inwardly, 80% of respondents expressed at different times, in addition, outward and even passive anger. Those who did not verbalise or physically manifested anger generally experienced poor health. A sixty-year-old parent whose son died during an operation at the theatre felt anger towards the healthcare system and their representatives:

I hold a grudge against the hospital in which my son died. The medical team was hopelessly slow. I will never set my foot there or encourage anyone to go there for their medical needs. I have stopped taking the road that passes beside that centre of death because I get angry each my taxi takes that road. I do not also want to see some of my relatives who hated my son. I believed they contributed to kill my son. I do not see why I should join fortunate people to rejoice. My world crumbled four years ago and I prefer to stay in this dark corner, groaning and grumbling.

According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, people act toward things, including each other, on the basis of the meanings they have for them, and these meanings are derived through social interaction with others. The narrative of this participant displays the social process of meaning-making. The decisions taken and the attitudes towards the hospital are the outcome of an unpleasant experience as a client. Anger was also expressed towards God. A seventy-seven-year-old man whose son died at the age of 40 years after a long period of illnesses, expressed anger against God in the following passionate word:

I feel terribly disappointed and angry with God. I feel let down by the one in whom I have put my trust and who has promised to bless those who believe. How could he allow my only child, the seed of my descendance, to die after being scorched by illness and after I spent all that I ever saved. My friends who had told me to seek tradition means of protection from diviners and witch doctors are now mocking at me for not having listened to them. They are right and I am wrong.

Emptiness and loneliness

Feelings of emptiness, characterised by hopelessness, social disconnection, low self-esteem, loss of interest in things one used to enjoy, loneliness and the loss of motivation, were common among the majority of participants, especially among widows and widowers, and those whose grief journey was between 3 and 5 years. While couples found great support in each other, widows and widowers who lost the only child had a deeper and prolonged experience of emptiness and loneliness. A sixty-five-year-old widow whose child was murdered by bandits vividly describes her feeling of emptiness in the following words:

Look at me, a poor thing!. My son stood at the centre of my life He was everything to me; all I ever had. He was my happiness and my life. Who will take care of me in my old age? I am just empty shell. What is a childless mother? What will I leave behind? He too died childless. No one will be left behind to mark my presence and to remember me.

This quote reveals an emotional evaluation of the self-concept of the participant. Self-concept is influenced by one's experiences, relationships, and the messages one receives from society. The loss of a significant and defining relationship like that of an only son reported to have stood at the centre of the parent's life, brings a disruption of the sense of self, so great that the participant considers himself an "empty shell".

The feeling of loneliness and emptiness were, however, less severe in cases where the deceased had children. One of the parents who drew her consolation from the progeny of her daughter expressed this view in the following words: *"Although the departure of my daughter has created a gap in my life, I find consolation in her children."*

Participants also reported a gnawing feeling of nostalgia for the pleasant encounters they had with their departed children. A man of eighty years whose son perished in a car accident expressed this reality as follows:

How can I ever stop hearing his gentle voice, having memories of how he usually brought us gifts at Christmas and Easter. As I speak, those words of appreciation he always offered to me and his mother for being good parent come alive! At one moment I just feel his presence. Yesterday, I sat in front of the house watching cars passing up and down, and I kept wishing that he will alight from one of them and call as he usually did. That voice keeps ringing in the air. On some days, we meet in our dreams and I get up very frustrated.

Similarly, a sixty-eight-year woman whose daughter was a journalist and who died after a protracted illness six years ago sees her daughter as living in every female journalist who reads the news on television.

Depression

In their struggle to come to terms with the reality of the death of their children and its impact on their lives, all the participants reported that there were some periods when they felt extremely sad. During those periods, they found it extremely difficult to concentrate and to perform their family and professional duties. While some of the parents were gradually coming to terms with the reality of the death of their children, especially those who lost them between 10 and 15 years ago, 4 of parents were still caught up in deep and prolonged sadness and depression. A seventy-year-old mother whose forty-five-year-old son was brutally murdered passionately described her situation as follow:

I have lived in deep pain for over three years. Everything is falling apart. Even my thinking has been affected. I cry almost every day; I do not sleep well; I do not have the appetite to anything. I just feel overwhelmed. For these three years, I have not attended any celebration. I was never prepared for this. I have been in shock since the day my son was murdered, such a sudden and brutal death. No time to say goodbye.

Socio-Cultural Determinants of The Grief Process

The ethnographic data gathered and presented in the previous section of this paper documents several reactions to the huge reality of the loss of the only child. The principal manifestations of grief, the diversity of social and historical circumstances notwithstanding, include anger, guilt, fear, loneliness and nostalgia. These are generally

human and normal expressions of grief as previous studies have elaborately demonstrated (Littlewood, 1992; Ozel & Ozkan, 2020; Avis et al., 2021).

This segment of our studies seeks to identify the sociocultural determinants of grief. True to the anthropological principle of holism, light will be shed on the nuances in contexts and circumstances that shape the individual process of grieving (Schultz & Lavenda, 2009). These sociocultural factors include: the kind of death, cultural value of children and the question of progeny in societal discourse, age of the departed, character and dependableness of the departed and religious belief.

The Kind of death

The manner of dying, whether it was sudden or tragic, occurred as a natural process or the result of malice and wickedness, had a tremendous impact on the intensity and the process of grief. Generally, parents who lost their children as a result of a protracted illness during which time they had the opportunity to share their pains, care for them, mull over the poor prognosis and contemplate the sinister prospect of death, were comparatively less devastated than those who lost their child to a sudden and tragic death, and, worst still, to suicide or murder.

Cultures have notions of how and when death ought to occur, and this forms the basis for the classification of death as good or bad. These perceptions constructed as forms of societal phenomena are directly informed by religion, language and culture (Radzilani, 2010). Although the pain of loss and separation could not be completely taken away, parents whose children died by culturally accepted forms of death, were more consolable and easily disposed to accept the reality of their loss than those who lost their child through suicide or murder. In many African societies, suicide, the wilful destruction of one's life is a cultural taboo and a religious offence with serious consequences for the departed person, the community and society. It comes with stigma and dents the social prestige of the family (Nwosu & Odesamni, 2001; Ole, 2017). In the premarital investigations undertaken in many African societies, families with a history of suicide are often avoided for fear that the evil may revisit the descendants of the stigmatised family. This conception of things is partly based on the belief that suicide and suicidal behaviour can be transmitted through the family line (Brent & Man, 2005).

The cultural value and symbolism of a child

At the disappearance of their child, some parents felt that they were no longer parents and asked such agonising questions as:

I have lost it all. I am no longer a parent. What will I leave behind when I die? Who will take care of me when I am old?

These loaded questions convey so much of the cultural value and symbolism of children especially in the African culture. Children represent a value of extended cultural significance. They are the pledge of the continuity of the family, they are the seeds of descendance, the guarantors of its survival and of the care and sustenance of parents when they are old (Silke, 2007). Children contribute to the social construction of the self-identification of their parents and this explains why the loss of the only child is perceived as the loss of the social status and identity of the parents (Abels, 2010). Thinking of old age and its associated vulnerability, the loss of the only child causes uncertainty. There are more guarantees about one's own child reciprocating love by being the provider and caregivers of their parents when they are old. There were, however, two modifiers of this feeling. First, grieving parents whose departed son or daughter had children easily saw their replacement in the survivors. A grieving mother said:

Although, my son has gone, he is still very much alive in her three children. One of them bears his name.

The second modifier of grief was found among parents who brought up many other children together with their lone child, and took care of all of them with equal parental love, without discrimination. One parent even said, concerning relatives they have brought up as their own children: *"He is gone, but his brothers and sisters are here to take care of us."* Conversely, parents who formed a much-closed nuclei family, consisting only of the parents and their child had a greater sense of loss and were more burdened by fears of an uncertain future in old

age.

Relationship between the departed child and the parents

Although there was a general sense of the loss that follows the death of any relation, the character and behaviour of the departed person in relation to their filial responsibilities towards their parents emerged as significant determinants of the intensity of grief. Referring to a son who was a major and constant source of trouble for the parents, one parent remarked:

Let him go and rest so that I too can also have some rest. Many times, I found myself in the police station and at the Gendarmerie because of a thirty-five-year-old man. I have borrowed money a good number of times to pay for loans and stolen articles. He had no respect for us and very often he bullied and insulted us. He even threatened on several to brutalise us. We thank God for his cousins who have grown in our hands. These are our children.

Conversely, some of the most inconsolable parents were those whose children exhibited a lot of responsibility and love for their parents. Some, who were already working, were taking good care of their parents. For those who died very young but who were respectful, obedient and very responsive, their parents interpreted these positive attributes as suggestive of the fact that they were going to grow up and look after their welfare. In his utterance of regret, one parent made the following statements:

In her tender age, she had already shown herself to be a reliable and generous person. She loved everyone and had a very sympathetic heart, ready to share the little she had with everybody. She was going to grow up to be a gatherer of persons. God alone knows!

Societal discourse about the probable cause of death

The grieving process of two parents was compounded by the burdensome accusation that they were the ones who killed their children through witchcraft. They were very conscious of the defamatory narratives of their neighbours and members of the society according to which they “had eaten” their children through sorcery witchcraft. The narrative of a mother whose son died suddenly at the age of 45 years was poignant:

The stories I hear around here eat me up. They say that I am a witch and it is I who sacrificed my child in an occultic society. Some even say that I was the one who killed my husband and now I have also killed my son. Some even say that I am looking younger because of the blood I drank. Some people now treat me with a lot of suspicion. I now live a very lonely life, afraid to mingle among people because I am not sure of what they say or think about me. The pain is too deep for words and this has gone on for three years now. They keep reminding me of the loss of my son and victimising me.

The belief that there are mystical powers in the universe which could be manipulated for good or evil represents a constitutive element of African cultural and religious thought (Mbiti, 1969; Idowu, 1973; Gehman, 1989; Onyinah, 2004). In some cases, it is believed that mysterious power are invoked and used to cause calamities including accidents, illness and death (Cimpric, 2010; Harries, 2011). The accusation of the above-mentioned parent as being the cause of her son’s death, feeds on this cultural belief in the possibility of the harmful use of supernatural powers. While an accident, illness, natural disaster may be the immediate cause of an illness, there is always among some African paradigms, an invisible force that ultimately causes the harm (Mumo, 2023; Nkosi, 2012).

Religious faith

The reactions and experiences of more than 45% of the participants were greatly influenced by their religious convictions and faith. Statements such as: “I leave all things in God’s hands”, “*God will take care of the situation,*” “*God alone knows why*”, “*He never abandons his children in their troubles.*” Show that these grieving parents found an interpretation of their misfortune and their consolation in their religious beliefs.

Religion, according to Clifford Geertz (1966), is “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful,

pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic”

The narratives of respondents echoed three basic themes which are recurrent in research findings on the functional perspective of religion: 1) the use of religion (religious beliefs) as a framework for interpreting the challenging experiences of life, 2) religion as a practical resource for coping with the incomprehensible, and 3) religion as a source of hope and healing (Koenig, 1997; Koenig & Cohen, 2002).

Religious beliefs provided a theoretical framework for interpreting the phenomenon of the loss of the only child. Overwhelmed by the loss, some parents drew strength from religious teachings on God’s will, abiding presence and providence. Generally, religious beliefs provide a worldview that is optimistic and hopeful, infusing difficult or traumatic life events with purpose and meaning (Koenig & Cohen, 2002). Religion is also a practical resource for coping. The Christian concept of grace has been reported as effective in coping with fears and anxiety, which are two key components of the experience of loss (Loewenthal & MacLeod, 2006).

Nature of the network of social relationships

From the narratives of the grieving parents, the nature of the social network in which they were embedded emerged as a major modifier of the grieving process. Isolated and stigmatised parents who felt neglected or accused of killing their child by their relatives and friends were less able to cope with their loss than those who received social support from friends who, by their presence and very comforting words and kind gestures, assured them that they were not alone.

Research on the positive influence of social support indicates that it operates through a combination of mechanisms, including: intimate companionship, social integration, reassurance of social and personal worth, assistance with the provision of tangible resources, guidance and advice, access to new contacts and information, and positive interpretation of circumstances contributive to perceived control of one’s condition (Taylor, 2011; Heaney & Israel, 2008; Uchino, 2004). Social support has been found to have a significant impact on physical and mental health, acting as a buffer against stress and improving overall wellbeing. The loss of an only child can generate strong stressors. Studies have consistently shown that social networks are associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety and stress (Peyravi & Abedian, 2007; Riahi et al., 2011).

According to Winkelman (2009;314), social support affects biological pathways through behavioural, psychological, physiological and social responses. Empathic actions and attitudes from family and friends provide the intimacy, nurturance, reassurance and sense of belonging that can counteract the stress response, create positive self-evaluation, and give a sense of mastery and purpose, strong enough to prevent despair or anxiety together with their detrimental physiological consequences.

DISCUSSION

An in-depth analysis of the narratives reveals that the loss of the “significant other” brought about significant disruptions in their lives, created a sense of the loss of a defining relationship and altered how they saw themselves and their imaginations of how others saw them. The grieving parents’ identities were redefined through their interactions with others and the expectations of their community.

The narratives of the participants replicate some major concepts of the symbolic interactionist perspective and confirm the findings of previous studies exploring the phenomena of bereavement and grief. In the context of their loss, the self-image and social identity of the grieving parents was a dynamic reality. According to symbolic interactionists, the ideas and feelings people have about themselves are social products created through perception and the internalisation of how others perceive and evaluate them (Mead, 1965; Goffman, 2002; Chandler & Munday, 2011). The self is therefore realised in a relationship with others. Similarly, according to Cooley’s (1902) looking-glass theory, the self-concept derives from interpersonal interactions and the perceptions of others.

A good number of statements proffered by the participants indicate a “crisis of self” as a consequence of the loss of their only child. The following quotations clearly illustrate this claim:

Look at me, a poor thing! My son stood at the centre of my life He was everything to me; all I ever had. He was my happiness and my life. Who will take care of me in my old age? I am just empty shell. What is a childless mother? What will I leave behind?

Similarly, *“I have lost it all. I am no longer a parent. What will I leave behind when I die? Who will take care of me when I am old”*

The foregoing statements demonstrate the extent to which significant others play a role in one’s self-definition and social identity or status. These narratives reflect the three components of the looking-glass self: how individuals imagine themselves to appear to others, how they imagine others judge their situation and how they respond emotionally. Statements such as *“Look at me, a poor thing!... I am just empty shell... What is a childless mother?”* echo societal expectations and what George Herbert Mead (1965) described as ‘organised set of attitudes’. Similar studies have identified radical disruptions in way of life, relationships, self-image and social status as important dimensions of bereavement and grief (Marris, 1986; Horwitz & Wakefield, 2007).

Another significant element in the narratives of the participants is the creative efficacy language in shaping the reality of grief. This can be seen in the effects of the accusation by some members of the society of some parents as having killed their own children through witchcraft. In the conversations, register of words and attitudes of members of the community, there was an on-going definition of the condition of loss and the creation of a reality in which the bereaved parents were victimised and stigmatised, thereby making their loss more burdensome. This is clearly reflected in the lamentation of the following participant:

The stories I hear around here eat me up. They say that I am a witch and it is I who sacrificed my child in an occultic society. Some even say that I was the one who killed my husband and now I have also killed my son. Some even say that I am looking younger because of the blood I drank. Some people now treat me with a lot of suspicion. I now live a very lonely life, afraid to mingle among people because I am not sure of what they say or think about me. The pain is too deep for words and this has gone on for three years now. They keep reminding me of the loss of my son and victimising me.

Societal discourse involves the use of language to convey information, express ideas, construct identities, and negotiate power dynamics. It is not limited to individual communication or speeches but includes any form of communication to create meaning and understanding within specific cultural, historical and social settings (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015; Van Bergen & Hogeweg, 2021). The derogatory and accusing remarks of society were interpreted by the grieving parents as the way they appear to others, how others judged them and this had a significant impact on their self-concept and the intensity of their grief. According to Charon (2004), reality is composed of societal definitions and interactions. Societal discourse regulates forms of experience and perceptions and enhances meaning.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the varied expressions and experience of parental grief at the death of the lone-child. Parental grief encompassed a variety of emotional, cognitive, spiritual and behavioural reactions to the reality of the loss of a significant and self-defining relationship. Although the manifestations of grief were common among the participants, there was great diversity in their duration and intensity. This was because the process of grief occurred in dynamic and complex personal and sociocultural contexts and was shaped by them. The findings of this study illustrate how the experience of grief, self-concept and identity are socially constructed in the interaction of a host of sociocultural factors, including cultural perceptions of kinds of death, expectations of social roles, the cultural value and symbolism of children, stigmatising societal discourse, religious beliefs and the nature of the social networks.

Grieving parents’ identities were redefined through their interaction with others and with the expectations of their community. Societal discourse – what others thought and said about the grieving parents and their loss,

judgements about their social roles, and attitudes towards them – was a major contributor to the experience and the meaning of parental grief. Pursuing its major objective and theoretical perspective, this study has shown how the experience and meaning of grief are socially constructed in interaction with cultural expectations, world views and significant others.

Like any human endeavour, this research has strengths and limitations. Integrating a symbolic interactionist approach with qualitative methods of data collection enabled us to obtain valuable insights into the experience and sociocultural determinants of parental grief after the death of an only child. The findings of this study can have practical relevance for mental health services, community healing and policy formulation targeting bereaved persons. Listening to the stories of grieving parents points to a need of counselling and accompaniment that has to be answered professionally.

There are two major limitations in this study that could be addressed in future research. First, the study focused on self-reported data which can be limited by the fact that it rarely can be independently verified. What participants said whether in interviews and focus groups was taken at face value. However, self-reported data can contain several potential sources of bias. Although this is a potential limitation, social construction assumes subjectivity as part of the understanding of reality. Second, given the sample size of this research, the results may not be generalizable to a larger population. This is because the findings of the research are not tested to discover whether they are statistically significant or due to chance (Kothari, 2008). Aware of the fact that a researcher can hardly be completely neutral in such emotionally engaging research, a consistent attempt was made to present the participants' perspective. A future study may adopt a quantitative approach, with an expanded research population. Cross-cultural studies, comparing the experiences of people in urban settings to those of people in rural contexts may be ethnographically rich and enlightening. The narratives of the participants revealed significant aspects of gender sensitivity which also could be explored in future studies.

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