

**A NARRATIVE STUDY ON CONTINUING BONDS WITH DECEASED PARENTS:
A SAMPLE OF UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO STUDENTS, SOUTH AFRICA**

by

MATOME CALVONIA MOLEPO

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Supervisor: Prof. M. Makgahlela

Co-Supervisors: Dr. M. Maotoana, Dr. M. B Setwaba, Dr. M. Mothapo

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Declaration

I, Matome Calvonina Molepo, declare that “**A Narrative Study on Continuing Bonds with Deceased Parents: A Sample of University of Limpopo Students, South Africa**” submitted to the University of Limpopo in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology**, has not been previously submitted by me for a degree at any other university, that it is my own work in design and accomplishment, and that all the material contained therein has been duly acknowledged.



Ms MC Molepo

20/04/2025

Date

Prof M Makgahlela

Supervisor



Signature

20/04/2025

Date

Dr. M Maotoana

Co-supervisor



Signature

20/04/2025

Date

Dr. M Setwaba

Co-supervisor



Signature

20/04/2025

Date

Dr M Mothapo

Supervisor



Signature

20/04/2025

Date:

Dedication

I dedicate this Mini-thesis to my late, great-grandmother **Mosima Kgadi Molepo**. You were and remain the best. I love you Tlou. To my late uncle **Matsobane Mokgohloa**, your memory inspired this study, I love you. To my mother **Pheladi Molepo**, this one's for you. Without you, all of this would remain a dream. Thank you for everything, I love you.

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- To my Uncle Candy Mokgohloa, for always showing me love and kindness.

List of Acronyms

CBs	Continuing Bonds
ECBs	Externalised Continuing Bonds
ICBs	Internalised Continuing Bonds
DPM	Dual Process Model

Abstract

Continuing bonds (CBs) after bereavement have been the subject of contemporary research interest. Unlike previously understood, maintaining bonds with deceased relatives has been shown to have some adaptive value. CBs have been investigated mainly within the general bereaved population, especially among bereaved spouses. However, comparative studies are lacking with parentally bereaved university students. The present study sought to fill this gap by exploring student narratives on the nature and role of CBs after the loss of a parent. A qualitative methodology was adopted using a narrative inquiry to capture the nuances of loss and CBs among the student population. Eleven (n = 11) participants were recruited and interviewed using the biographical interview strategy. Narrative thematic analysis was used to analyse the data wherein various facets of CBs were identified. The identified CBs were particularly magnified in times of distress or when the students were experiencing life challenges. The students reasoned CBs as comforting strategies that also improved their post-bereavement coping. The present study adds another dimension to CBs research and highlights the important role of CBs in the wake of bereavement. The outcomes of the study carry multiple implications for future research on continuing bonds (CBs) and for interventions regarding bereavement within the context of student population.

Keywords: Continuing Bonds, Bereavement, Grief, Parents, Students

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TAKE THEM WITH YOU

If someone you love
did not make it on that trip
you can take it
for them
with them.

If someone you love
did not witness that milestone
you can show them
anytime you like.

If someone you love
did not get to do their living
you can finish those dreams
on their behalf.

The beautiful thing about love
you see
is that death
need not stop life.

If you carry someone
in your heart
you can take them with you
anywhere you like.

Donna Ashworth (27 August 2022)

Chapter 1: Background and Motivation

Parental bereavement is associated with various coping strategies. For young people, especially those in institutions of higher learning, bereavement impacts their personal, social and academic lives (Elsner et al., 2022; Hay et al., 2022; Lundberg et al., 2018), triggering diverse coping mechanisms. Approximately 30% of students in higher learning institutions drop out within the first year of their studies following the death of a parent (Balk et al., 2010; Bistricean & Shea, 2021; Bustamante, 2019; Lipp & O'Brien, 2022). For some, they try to cope with the loss by revisiting previous mental representations of the departed while also striving to accept the permanent physical separation (Pitcho-Prelorentzos et al., 2022; Tidwell et al., 2021). The process of restructuring or reformulating one's relationship with a deceased parent or key attachment figure may result in adjustments or maladjustments (Tidwell et al., 2021; Hagström, 2019).

The role of Continuing Bonds (CBs) - defined as an active and ongoing internal relationship with a deceased person (Lalande & Bonanno, 2006) in the wake of bereavement has been the subject of contemporary research interest. More precisely, whether maintaining or relinquishing such bonds is adaptive or maladaptive is inconclusive (Hewson et al., 2023). Seemingly, how young adults particularly university students express their CBs following parental loss has received scant attention. One reason for the neglect has been that CBs research has, in the main, been conducted with samples of bereaved parents (Clabburn et al., 2021; Hagström, 2019; Klass, 2017; Lipp & O'Brien, 2022), suggesting a need for studies with young people, especially in higher institutions of learning.

It is important to investigate CBs with student samples since difficulties associated with post-bereavement adjustment place the bereaved at a higher risk of health issues, mental health diagnoses, chronic stress reactions (Tidwell et al., 2021) and academic difficulties (Balk et al., 2010; Evans, 2014). Investigating the role and purpose of CBs in student populations will add value to the delivery of bereavement interventions for grieving students. This will also be in keeping with the SDGs and NDP, 2030 goal of ensuring healthy lives and promoting the well-being of all, including bereaved students.

Research Problem

No child should experience the trauma of a parent's death, particularly when they still depend on them. In spite, any child may indeed lose a parent before becoming independent. Parents play a crucial role in providing emotional, financial and instrumental support for their children which are essential for emotional and cognitive development (Choi & Pyun, 2014; Gaspar et al., 2022). Regrettably, the death of a parent exposes young people to psychological, behavioural, educational, and economic hardships thus jeopardising their future (Ntuli et al., 2020). In their study with older orphans (aged 15 – 24 years), Ntuli and colleagues found that post-parental loss, the bereaved young people suffered several other losses ranging from “loss of the family home, loss of multiple family members, loss of support from relatives, loss of friendships, loss of educational opportunities and future aspirations, and loss of childhood” (Ntuli et al., 2020, p. 10). Similar findings were reported in an earlier study by Hayslip et al. (2015).

Post-parental loss, bereaved students were found to engage in coping strategies aimed at maintaining a connection with their parents (Kubayi, 2022). This is not surprising given that young adults still rely on parental support for emotional regulation and decision-making (Szkody et al., 2020). Additionally, this group of individuals still lacks the ability to cope with loss and hardships compared to middle-aged adults (Hayslip et al., 2015). Lipp and O'Brien (2022) found that bereaved students were engaging in both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. Meanwhile, Santos and David's (2016) found that students tended to use maladaptive coping strategies more than adaptive coping strategies post parental loss.

Recent studies also reveal that some college students considered it important to engage in CBs with the deceased to cope with their loss (Black, 2020; Clabburn, 2021; Lipp & O'Brien, 2022). For instance, Kubayi (2022) while investigating the bereavement experiences of parentally bereaved students in the same context as the present study, found that two of study participants engaged in externalised continuing bond strategies to cope with their losses. To illustrate, one student continued to be comforted by watching an old video of herself with her deceased mother, while another one held dearly onto a photo of her lost parent. A recent study by Lipp and O'Brien (2022) found that some students relied on social media to cope with their grief, which is a form of externalised CB strategy linked to complicated bereavement.

Despite some limited CBs studies having been documented with university students, studies especially on parentally bereaved students in higher institutions of learning, are lacking. More so, studies documenting CBs with the student populations within the South African context are visibly sparse. For instance, available studies investigating continuing bonds in young people either treat adolescents and young adults as one age group or fail to represent those who are parentally bereaved

(Clabburn et al., 2021; Lipp & O'Brien, 2022). Additionally, available studies specifically focusing on parentally bereaved young people and students focus on the general impact of loss on survivors (e.g. Kubayi, 2022; Ntuli et al., 2020; Sherr et al; 2014). Consequently, the lack of studies specifically focusing on continuing bonds among parentally bereaved students in higher learning institutions hinders a comprehensive understanding of whether students relied on adaptive or maladaptive CBs, including how these CBs impact their well-being and academic achievements.

It is against this backdrop that this study was undertaken to explore the nature and functions of CBs maintained by students. The knowledge generated from this study will contribute to the accumulation of literature on CBs, including clarifying some inconsistent findings regarding the role that CBs play in bereavement (see, e.g., Root & Exline, 2014; Goodall et al., 2022). Additionally, the knowledge generated by this study will contribute towards the realisation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in this case, SDG 3, the promotion of good health and well-being, which is to prevent needless suffering, preventable diseases and premature death. The findings of the study can therefore provide insights into bereavement experiences within this population, thus informing specialised intervention programmes underpinned by evidence-based clinical practice.

Study purpose

Aim of the Study

- To explore student narratives on the nature and role of continuing bonds (CBs) with deceased parents.

Study Objectives

- To highlight the nature of parent-child relationship prior to bereavement;

- To establish the circumstances surrounding the death of parent/s;
- To identify the types of bereavement bonds maintained and their associated functions; and
- To determine the consequences of the identified bonds to students' post-bereavement adjustment.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons, namely:

Psychological well-being: For individuals who have lost a parent, the process of grieving and coping with the loss can be challenging. The study can contribute to identifying processes that facilitate healthy coping and the development of CBs with the deceased parent, which can promote psychological well-being.

Academic performance: As the study is conducted among university students, the findings can have implications for academic performance. The death of a parent can be a significant stressor, and the ability to express their lived experiences to a neutral person can perhaps be met with some emotional relief by students who may have been struggling to process the loss, thus impacting positively on their well-being, including their studies.

Clinical implications: The findings of the study can have implications for clinical practice, as they could help inform grief therapy, especially with the student population.

Overall, the study on CBs with a deceased parent in a sample of parentally bereaved students at the University of Limpopo is significant as it contributes to a better understanding of grief and loss in this specific population and context, with potential implications for psychological well-being in line with the goal of good health

and well-being as per the SDGs and NDP, 2030. Furthermore, the findings can have potential implications for academic performance, cultural practices and clinical practice, including evidence-based intervention thus promoting specialised support for this population.

Operational Definition of Concepts

Death:

According to biological definitions, death is a permanent loss of an organism's ability to function as a whole; this usually happens after the loss of cardiorespiratory function (Lazaridis, 2021). The same meaning will apply in the present study.

Bereavement

Bereavement is one kind of loss that results from another person's passing (Zisook et al., 2007). For this study, bereavement refers to loss of a parent or parents by students, as well as their individual experiences.

Grief

According to Zisook et al. (2007), grief is the collection of emotions, actions, thoughts and functional changes that follow any form of loss. While loss may be behavioural, psychological (cognitive or emotional), physical or spiritual, social or emotive (Buote, 2018), the focus of this study is particularly on grieving after a death.

Parents

A parent is “one that begets or brings forth offspring.” In other situations, such as a guardian or a foster parent, it can be “a person who brings up and cares for another” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). The term “parent” in this study refers to the student’s biological mother or father.

Continuing bonds

Continuing bonds (CBs) are defined as an active and ongoing internal relationship with a deceased person (Lalande & Bonanno, 2006; Stroebe et al., 2005). The bereaved may make “attempts to keep memories alive through dialogue with others, engagement with possessions and photographs, and use of the deceased as a role model” (Hewson et al., 2023, p. 1001).

Outline of study chapters

The present chapter outlined the background, the research problem, the aim, the objectives, and the research questions of the study. In Chapter 2, the relevant literature on the research topic is outlined. In addition, the chapter discusses the chosen theoretical framework. Chapter 3 discusses the procedures and techniques used for data collection and analysis. The findings of the study are presented in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, the findings are discussed in relation to the body of literature that has already been written on the topic. The chapter also discusses the key findings, the study limitations and recommendations of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a discussion of existing literature relevant to the present study. The review mainly focuses on scientific studies on bereavement and CBs. In particular, the role of continuing bonds in bereavement, including factors that influence the process, are interrogated. Towards the end, the theoretical framework that anchored the study is discussed.

Death, Grief and Bereavement

Death and bereavement are unavoidable and natural aspects of life that people experience either directly or indirectly (Carr, 2007; Yousuf-Abramson, 2021). Although it is a common life transition for individuals (Marks et al., 2007), bereavement can cause severe psychological discomfort, increased risk of depression, poor physical health, and increased alcohol intake (Holland et al., 2014; Granek et al., 2015; Tan & Andriessen, 2021; Umberson, 2003). Although a majority of people are able to handle the loss of a loved one without experiencing persistent difficulties, a sizable fraction of people is prone to complications in bereavement (Houwen et al., 2010).

Losing a loved one usually involves a difficult transition in life because the bereaved must reconstruct their ongoing sense of attachment to the deceased in their physical absence, as well as negotiate a variety of biopsychosocial symptomatology such as separation distress, strained family relationships, and difficulty focusing on work or other obligations (Currier et al., 2015). In addition, this prolonged disruption can include a marked preoccupation with or yearning for the deceased; a diminished sense of self and a perception of the future as bleak and meaningless for those at the extreme end of the continuum of bereavement (Currier et al., 2015; Holland et al.,

2009; Tan & Andriessen, 2021). Death shatters fundamental beliefs of the bereaved about the world (Currier et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2000). More so, it may reinforce negative beliefs in those who already held negative perceptions about the world, consequently adding to the distress (Bonanno et al., 2002; Currier et al., 2009; Mancini et al., 2011).

Grief theorists agree that bereavement is distinct and influenced by a variety of factors, including the kind of loss (of a child, partner, parent, sibling, or close friend); gender differences in coping mechanisms; variations in attachment styles; and cultural differences (Goodall et al., 2022; Hewson et al., 2023; Rostila & Saarela, 2011). It is argued that mourning for a close relative may manifest differently than mourning for a far-off friend (Boute, 2008). For instance, parental loss in minors is as intense as widowhood, a state known to have a serious impact on the health of the bereaved, including mortality risk (Rostila & Saarela, 2011).

Gender is also another significant factor in grief. Rostila and Saarela (2011) found that the gender of the deceased parent may influence the intensity of grief. Their findings seemed to suggest that the death of a mother has a greater impact on the likelihood of child mortality than the death of a father. In addition, they found evidence that suggests that males are more susceptible than women to grief complications following parental death in their adult years, the reason being that compared to women, men suppress their grief experiences.

The type of loss also influences the grieving process. Violent losses were found to lead to greater grief symptomatology compared to natural losses (Burke & Neimeyer, 2014; Currier et al., 2015; Holland & Neimeyer, 2010). Holland and Neimeyer (2010) found that participants who were bereaved by natural deaths were marked by acceptance and sense-making, while those who were bereaved by violent

deaths were marked by a response of disbelief. The differences in reactions in these cases may be that contrary to natural deaths, violent deaths can cause terrible and bizarre circumstances for the bereaved (Rostila & Saarela, 2011), while natural deaths are less disruptive as they generally result from diseases and take time to develop (Currier et al., 2015). Even though natural deaths are less disruptive, Carr (2007) highlights that those who suffer loss due to natural occurrences such as long-term chronic illnesses like cancer or Alzheimer's disease may be more susceptible to anticipatory grief, or the sadness and loss that set in even before the death.

While it is evident that the loss of a loved one has negative experiences on the bereaved, it is also accepted that a great deal of individuals handle the temporary upheaval caused by the loss or perhaps traumatic experiences very well, seeming to move on to new problems with apparent ease and experiencing no discernible impairment in their capacity to function at work or in intimate relationships (Bonanno, 2004). For instance, it is noted that people who experience losses arising from illnesses that require intensive caregiving adjust well to bereavement (Bonanno et al., 2002; Rostila & Saarela, 2011). In fact, Bonanno and colleagues (2002) maintain that spousal loss following a chronic illness may be experienced as relief from chronic stress; therefore, enhancing psychological health throughout the grief process. Similarly, Rostila and Saarela (2011) also point out that the death of an aging and ill parent may even bring relief for the bereaved child as it relieves them from the caregiving burden.

Nahvi and Saxena (2024) and Sadian-Cercado (2021) found that grief may bring about transformation in the lives of the bereaved and that the bereaved come out of the depths of loss with fresh fortitude, compassion, understanding, appreciation of life and the awareness of life's transience. Additionally, Asgari and Naghavi (2019)

have found that although their adolescent participants experienced negative emotions such as shock and sadness post-death of their parents, they also experienced post-traumatic growth after some time. Similarly, it was found that in the face of loss, a sizable portion of bereaved people seemed capable of true resilience, with 45.6% showing low levels of depression following bereavement (Powers et al., 2014). Mancini and colleagues (2011), and Tan and Andriessen (2021) found the source of this resilience to be the bereaved's pre-loss acceptance and their view of the world as fair. These findings highlight that the experience of loss does not always lead to negative outcomes, but that in fact, this experience can also lead to growth. This is an aspect that is often overlooked by grief and bereavement researchers (Wolchik et al., 2009).

Bereavement and the Attachment Perspective

One of the main frameworks for comprehending bereavement has been attachment theory (Currier et al., 2015). Bowlby's groundbreaking examination of the loss of an attachment figure serves as an initial point of departure for examining how the nature and quality of pre-existing relationships with a deceased person influence coping post-bereavement (Stroebe et al., 2005). According to Bowlby's theory, human beings are born with an innate psychobiological system known as the attachment behavioural system, that motivates them to seek proximity with their attachment figure to obtain safety, comfort and support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2022). Separation with or threat to the attachment figure is thus met with a strong feeling of protest and anxiety (Russ et al., 2024; Worden, 2018). Consequently, the type of attachment that emerges in infancy and persists into adulthood can have a significant impact on the grief experience following bereavement (Stroebe et al., 2012). Grief is, therefore,

conceptualised as an adaptive response that seeks to ensure safety and security (Russ et al., 2024; Schouwink, 2023).

The two distinct attachments that are associated with grief complications are avoidant and anxious attachment styles (Delespaux et al., 2013; Russ et al., 2024). Maladjusted attachment styles are labelled insecure, and individuals with these attachment styles have been found to have difficulties with grief resolution (Field & Filanosky, 2009). People with anxious attachment typically exhibit a lack of self-confidence, worry about being abandoned, difficulty managing attachment-related emotions, and tend to be clingy (Delespaux et al., 2013). By this view, Bonanno, and co-workers (2002) found that this pre-loss dependency is associated with chronic grief. Houwen and co-workers (2010) also identified attachment anxiety as one of the risk factors for complicated grief and having significant a contribution to the prediction of complicated grief and depression. Those with avoidant attachment, on the other hand, have a strong suspicion of other people, exhibit obsessive independence, avoid intense emotional interdependence, and repress feelings connected to attachment (Delespaux et al., 2013).

Accordingly, attachment disruptions following death have been noted to lead to suffering from shock, disbelief or numbness (Pearce & Komaromy, 2022). The bereaved go on to yearn or search for the deceased, accompanied by anger and protest. Subsequently, they may experience despair and disorganisation, which is accompanied by feelings of depression and hopelessness as they give up the search and may strive to reorganise their lives by accepting the loss and gradually return to former interests (Janusz et al., 2018; Stroebe et al., 2012; Holland & Neimeyer, 2010). For instance, from an attachment perspective, during the reorganisation phase, the bereaved are faced with the task of transferring the deceased person into a symbolic

source of security (Janusz et al., 2018; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2022). Simultaneously, the bereaved are also faced with another task of accepting the loss and transferring the attachment functions to other available attachment figures (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2022).

Continuing Bonds and Attachment

According to attachment theorists, maintaining a relationship with the deceased may be an aspect of the grieving process that enables the bereaved to maintain a sense of identity and a deep connection to the past (Field et al., 2003). For this reason, researchers are starting to pay attention to the phenomenon of CBs in the context of post-bereavement coping and adjustment (Stroebe et al., 2012). Continuing bonds are characterised as either internalised or externalised. From an attachment perspective, externalised continuing bonds (ECBs) are an emotional bond to the deceased, which entails the use of external objects and quasi-sensory experiences directed at regaining physical proximity to the deceased (Field & Filanosky, 2009; Medina, 2019; Sekowski, 2021). Internalised bonds (ICBs), on the other hand, are founded on an exclusive mental representational relationship that recognises the inability to regain physical proximity to the deceased (Field & Filanosky, 2009; Medina, 2019; Sekowski, 2021).

Various factors were found to have a significant impact on continuing bonds. Consequently, these factors influence how the bereaved experience and express CBs thus contributing to the conflicting findings regarding the adaptive and maladaptive nature of CBs (Clabburn et al., 2021; Hewson et al., 2023). Despite conflicting results, there is evidence of more participants reporting positive than negative CB experiences (Goodall et al., 2022; Hewson, et al., 2023). This highlights a need for research

focusing on the effects of these factors on CB expressions (Goodall et al., 2022; Hewson, et al., 2023). The bereaved individual's attachment style is identified as one of the factors that affect CB expressions. An attachment style refers to an individual's overall manner of relating to others (Carr, 2007). Several studies established that securely attached individuals are found to be more likely to engage in internalised bonds while those with insecure attachments engage in externalised bonds (Black, 2020; Field & Filanosky, 2009; Tal Young et al., 2022). For instance, an avoidant attachment style was found to be negatively correlated to CBs, while attachment anxiety is positively correlated to CBs (Black et al., 2020; Currier et al., 2015). Currier and colleagues (2015) also found that CBs were more predictive of complicated grief for bereaved adults whose attachment styles were more highly avoidant and less anxious, and less predictive of complicated grief symptomatology for those with high anxiety and low avoidance.

Individuals with a high level of avoidance shun closeness and suppress their feelings, whereas those with a high level of anxiety dread abandonment (Black et al., 2020); this understanding helps explain why the latter group often engages in CBs. In the same light, having a sense of connection to the deceased goes against avoidant individuals' interpersonal style of relating, and as such may cause distress, thus predisposing them to complicated grief (Currier et al., 2015; Russ et al., 2024). For the anxiously attached, however, seeking closeness in times of distress is synchronous with their interpersonal style as such; a sense of connection to the deceased may provide comfort in accepting the physical absence of the deceased (Currier et al., 2015).

Continuing bonds may partially explain the relationship between attachment and complicated grief in situations of extreme loss or grief under potentially traumatic

conditions (Currier et al., 2015; Field & Filanosky, 2009). For example, minor children and adolescents were observed to experience greater grief intensity compared to adult children post-parental loss (Holland & Neimeyer, 2011; Rostila & Saarela, 2011). The view is that parental attachment is stronger in childhood than in adulthood. As adults, children shift their attachment focus onto their partners and own children (Rostila & Saarela, 2011). A study by Hayslip and colleagues (2015) however shows that parental loss also has dire consequences in adulthood, especially for young adults. After all, adults share a longstanding attachment relationship with their parents marked by reciprocal emotional and instrumental support (Marks et al., 2007). As such, a disruption of this mutually beneficial relationship can be detrimental for them as they rely on this relationship for emotional regulation and decision-making (Szkody et al., 2020). A study by Field and colleagues (2003) with bereaved spouses found that participants who experienced high satisfaction levels in their prior relationship with their spouse predicted high CB scores. The researchers also found that a more positive depiction of the previous relationship with a deceased predicted a greater later use of CBs by the bereaved. Similarly, conflict in the pre-death relationship may also lead to experiencing CBs as distressful (Hewson et al., 2023; Sabucedo et al., 2021; Testoni et al., 2020). This provides support that the quality of a prior relationship with the deceased also contributes to the differences in CB expressions (Black 2020; Nigel, et al., 2003; Rothaupt & Becker, 2007, Sekowski & Prigerson, 2022).

The Context of Loss and Continuing Bonds

Continuing bonds are also influenced by circumstances surrounding the death of a family member. Deaths that are violent, sudden or result from suicide have all been demonstrated to cause distress; thus, making it difficult for the bereaved to adjust

to the loss (Hewson et al., 2023; Holland & Neimeyer, 2011; Pitcho-Prelorentzos et al., 2022). These types of losses make it difficult to integrate loss since the devastating nature of such losses defies the bereaved individual's ideas about themselves and the world (Black et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2000; Field & Filanosky, 2009). Pitcho-Prelorentzos and colleagues (2022) found that femicide-bereaved daughters predominately engaged in ECBs. This finding is explained by the fact that ICBs entail maintaining a connection with the memory of the deceased; however, in the case of traumatic deaths, the memory of the deceased mother is tied up to the trauma (Pitcho-Prelorentzos et al., 2022). The traumatic memory of the deceased parents thus becomes distressing to the bereaved children such that they defensively avoid or keep memories from consciousness. This therefore prevents the process of internalising the lost parent into a secure base to have a continued internal relationship with them (Pitcho-Prelorentzos et al., 2022).

Similarly, ECBs were also noted among the suicide-bereaved individuals (Silvén Hagström, 2019). For instance, one participant in the Silvén Hagström study expressed her anger towards her deceased father by yelling and stubbing cigarettes on the father's tombstone. The monologue of blame toward the deceased indicates that anger may work to prevent ICBs (Field et al., 2003). In addition, grief following a suicidal death often entails self-blame and feelings of responsibility for the death of a loved one, which puts the bereaved at risk of complicated grief (Feigelman & Cerel, 2020; Wagner et al., 2021). Consequently, a feeling of responsibility is associated with ECBs (Hopf et al., 2022). This association is not surprising considering that ECBs are also associated with maladjustment and traumatic reactions (Black et al., 2021; Field & Filanosky, 2009; Kamp et al., 2018; Hewson et al., 2023).

Stroebe and colleagues (2012) found that people who experienced a sudden loss and maintained strong bonds with the deceased were the least adjusted. In contrast, the study also found that those who expected the loss and maintained strong bonds with the deceased experienced initial suffering with gradual improvement. This may be because natural deaths resulting from illnesses typically occur gradually, and ought to cause less inconvenience and become easier to handle (Rostila & Saarela, 2011; Field et al., 2003). Lastly, Stroebe and colleagues (2012) also found that those who had a weak bond with the deceased showed low maladaptation despite the loss being expected or unexpected.

Culture and Continuing Bonds

According to Carr (2007), CBs are heavily influenced by culture and tradition. Religious and cultural settings influence how bereaved people understand and express their continued connection with the deceased, as well as provide terminology, structure, and creative opportunities for interactions with them (Hsu & Palitsky, 2023). For instance, certain religious beliefs, such as believing that the deceased continue to live in an invisible dimension of reality and that they will one day be reunited with their loved one may also help to ease an existential crisis (Bojuwoye, 2013; Davis et al., 2000). Additional evidence is found in Mexican and Japanese cultures, in which people continue a relationship with their deceased through celebrations such as the Day of the Dead in the former and constructions of Buddha altars in the latter (Lalande & Bonanno, 2006). This give-and-take relationship between the deceased and the living is also embraced in Chinese and African cultures (Berg, 2003; Klass, 2014; Lalande & Bonanno, 2006; Lebaka, 2019; Makgahlela, 2021). The same beliefs were also found among Bapedi people in South Africa. Lebaka (2021) found that Bapedi people

hold the belief that ancestors have unlimited powers over the lives of the living. Still in South Africa, a common form of connection with the dead is through the practice of ancestral veneration known as 'ku pahla swikwembu' (Baloyi (2008). These views highlight the intersubjective nature of CBs and function as a reminder of the deceased's presence and their role within the family (Berg, 2003; Klaas, 2014; Klaas, 2017).

People's worldviews guide CB practices and rituals while also providing insight regarding the maintenance of post-bereavement relationships with the deceased (Čepulienė & Pučinskaitė, 2023). While this is the case, there is an opposite side to maintaining CBs with the deceased or there could be negative implications for the bereaved. Klaas (2017) found numerous reports on the negative influence of restless spirits, hungry ghosts and harmful dead people on the grief trajectory in various cultures. For instance, a study by Kgatla (2014) found that bereaved people engage in ceremonies aimed at assisting the spirits of deceased loved ones to rest. This practice is important as some bereaved people believe that deceased relatives may be captured as zombies or trapped in wonderland as restless spirits (Makgahlela, 2021). For instance, Northern Sotho people believe that witches can turn deceased people into zombies and use them for sinister motives, including harming their own families (Makgahlela, 2021). Seemingly, in the Japanese culture, the spirits of aborted and stillborn children are considered to be also deadly since they have been robbed of life, and out of veneration from their descendants (Klaas, 2014). On the other hand, Burke et al. (2012) and Van Heerden (2002) highlighted that even the much cherished and protective ancestors can become malicious when expected rituals are not performed at all, or to their satisfaction. Consequently, these appraisals may need to be investigated in the context of CB research. As indicated, religious or spiritual beliefs

may in part provide people with an understanding of their trauma by offering a suitable context within which to incorporate negative experiences (Davis et al., 2000). Consequently, how some of the traditional beliefs could influence CBs may need thorough investigation.

Theoretical Framework: Continuing Bonds Theory

The present study adopted the continuing bonds theory as a lens. The notion of CBs was first introduced by Klass and colleagues in 1996 and provided an alternative perspective on the nature and role of relationships maintained between the deceased and their surviving relatives (Stroebe et al., 2010). The basic tenet of the theory is that contrary to what was previously believed, a healthy bereavement trajectory involves maintaining and adjusting the relationship with the departed rather than severing them (Pitcho-Prelorentzos et al., 2022).

The central argument is that people from various cultural backgrounds show adaptive and healthy coping by maintaining relationships with their significant departed ones and that these types of continuing bonds differ from chronic or unresolved grief (De Luca et al., 2016). According to the theory, people may adjust to loss in a way that keeps them connected to the deceased; thus, giving their continued relationship purpose (Schouwink, 2023).

This view is contrary to earlier grief formulations such as Freud's 1917 groundbreaking perspectives on "Mourning and Melancholia" (Boerner et al., 2015; Stroebe & Schut, 2015). This approach posited that the energy invested in the departed loved one required to be "worked through" for it to be withdrawn and invested in another person (Stroebe et al., 2012). The process entails a mental process of accepting the existence of loss, reviewing the circumstances leading up to the death,

concentrating on memories, and striving to separate from (or relocate) the departed (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Consequently, the traditional grief work paradigm placed a greater emphasis on the withdrawal of the libidinal energy from the deceased or in general terms, "moving on" as soon as possible to resume "normal" functioning (Hall, 2014).

Stage theorists (Kübler-Ross, 1969; Bowlby, 1980; Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Worden, 1982/2008) followed the same logic of grief, in which grief was conceptualised as happening in a sequence of predictable stages, phases, and tasks (Hall, 2014). From this, the griever was expected to resolve several tasks including accepting the loss and moving on.

It is also noteworthy that while attachment theory acknowledges the ongoing relationship between the bereaved and their deceased loved one, the theory also has its limitations. Recently, a study by Zeynep & Klass (2025) revealed this limitation by providing distinctions between attachment theory and the continuing bonds model. In their distinction, they highlight that attachment theory conceptualises continuing bonds as compensatory adaptive efforts given the impossibility of reunion with the deceased. They further highlighted that attachment theory emphasises individual adaptation within an intrapsychic framework that frequently ignores cultural and societal factors, framing ongoing relationships. In contrast, the continuing bonds model places grief within intersubjective, relational, and cultural aspects by conceptualising ongoing relationships as evolving extensions of preexisting relationships (Zeynep & Klass, 2025).

Grief work within the Continuing Bonds Model therefore entails keeping the departed alive in the web of social and familial interactions by giving them a continuing place in the lives of the bereaved (Madison, 2005). Consequently, creating a new and

different identity for the departed to allow for their ongoing presence in the lives of the bereaved is an important aspect of loss and mourning (Clabburn et al., 2021; Mahat-Shamir et al., 2022). For this reason, emphasis is placed on continuously negotiating and renegotiating the significance of the loss (Madison, 2005).

With literature showing conflicting views about the adaptive and maladaptive nature of CBs and current studies revealing CB use among students (Clabburn et al., 2021; Hewson et al., 2023; Kubayi, 2022; Lipp & d O'Brien, 2022), the continuing bonds theory becomes important in this study as it provides a framework for understanding the ongoing relationships students have with their deceased parents. First, the model is important due to its emphasis on the importance of storytelling and sharing one's lived experiences of loss, the nature of CBs, their associated meanings, and their role in bereavement. As Clabburn and colleagues (2021) would argue, the model relies more on social contexts of death, dying and bereavement, which emphasise the importance of speaking with other survivors about the departed to compile a lasting biography. Secondly, the narrative stance of the model will assist in obtaining the objectives, which include establishing the parent-child relationship before death, circumstances surrounding a parent/s death, identifying the type of bonds established and their perceived role in their adjustment post-bereavement. Thirdly, the model is rooted in the postmodernist view; as such, it recognises the uniqueness of grieving and mourning experiences among the bereaved. This approach thus aligns with the study's aim of exploring students' narratives of their unique bereavement experiences (Rothaupt & Becker, 2007).

Conclusion

This chapter discussed literature relevant to this study. The chapter began by discussing the impact of death and bereavement on people. Consequently, the literature has indicated different factors that play a role in coping with bereavement and inconsistent findings on the adaptive nature of CBs in bereavement. Additionally, the continuing bonds model was discussed as a chosen theoretical framework, including its main tenets, role in bereavement and its suitability in the current study.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research methods applied in the current study. This covers the study design employed, the sample techniques utilised, the data gathering process, and data analysis. Ethical considerations, including study quality criteria are also covered towards the end.

Research Design

The present study was purely qualitative and informed by the interpretivist paradigm. Qualitative research seeks to elicit participants' descriptions of meaning, experiences or perceptions. Such research also generates descriptive data in the form of the participants' own written or spoken words (De Vos et al., 2011). To capture the spoken words or the meaning-making process of study participants, a narrative design was adopted. In qualitative research, narratives have been accepted as a means of understanding human experiences. Riessman (2008) refers to this aspect of narratives as 'experience-centred'. Narratives are also 'event-centred' because they illustrate human activity (Riessman, 2008). To say 'experience-centred' and 'event-centred' highlights that, narratives not only recount what a person does to their environment but also what the environment does to the person (Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry therefore supports the nature of reality as changing and becoming, as well as the constructivist manner of knowing reality (Barkhuizen, 2019). It not only collects stories of human experiences, but also attempts to understand how they are assembled, who produces the stories, what components they are composed of, what objectives they are formed for, and what discourses they draw on (Nigar, 2020).

Sampling and Recruitment Strategy

The study employed both the purposive and snowball sampling strategies to enrol students who lost either one or both parents. Purposive sampling, sometimes referred to as judgemental, selective or subjective sampling, refers to a sampling technique that depends on the researcher's judgment when it comes to choosing the units to be investigated (Etikan et al., 2016). Therefore, participants were selected based on sharing similar characteristics, namely, being, a) registered university students; and b) having experienced the death of a parent or parents. For this reason, bereaved students who lost significant others besides their parents were not eligible to participate. Additionally, sampling population was limited to one university in the Limpopo Province. As such, parentally bereaved students from other universities were excluded from participation. Snowball or Chain referral sampling was also utilised whereby initial participants were asked to refer the researcher to other students possessing similar characteristics. A total of 11 students were sampled for participation whereby the sample size was determined by data saturation.

Ellard-Gray and colleagues (2015) highlight that studies with sensitive topics are often met with challenges regarding the recruitment of participants. This is because vulnerable or hidden populations may avoid participation due to the psychological risk that may arise from having to recall and retell painful or embarrassing experiences (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). Since the current study was also sensitive, the researcher was aware that the same recruitment challenges may also be met with parentally bereaved students. For this reason, participants were mainly recruited through social media/network sites (Barratt et al., 2015). This recruitment method was ideal for this study because young people are highly active on social media (Sikkens, 2017). The process of recruitment entailed posting the recruitment

advert (see Appendix D) in student groups across social network sites, including WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook. In appreciation of the sensitive nature of the current research topic, the researcher's contact details were included in the recruitment advert for private enquiries about the study, including ease of contacting the researcher by prospective participants. Only students who declared interest by contacting the researcher were selected to participate in the study.

Setting and Data Collection

The study was conducted in a township-based university in Limpopo Province. All registered students at the time of data collection were eligible for participation. A combination of in-person and online interviews was utilised according to the participants' preferences. Two participants were interviewed at a private space on the university premises, while the remaining participants were interviewed online using WhatsApp audio calls and a Google Meet app. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to approximately one hour. Participants were interviewed individually using the biographical narrative interview technique. The technique is based on an unstructured, open-ended interview format and allows an in-depth study of individuals' lives (Kim, 2016). Two phases of narrative interviews were utilised, namely, the narrative phase and the conversation phase (Kim, 2016).

First, the narrative phase was utilised to allow participants to narrate their stories without any disturbance from the researcher (Kim, 2016). To elicit the narratives, participants were asked to tell a story about life before and after they lost their parent(s). Secondly, the conversation phase was utilised to ask clarification questions to the participants to obtain more details than what their narration had offered. This was achieved by using narrative questions to generate a collaborative

(re)construction of their stories (Kim, 2016). The narrative questions were informed by the objectives of the study and were included in the interview schedule guide (see Appendix B). The majority of the interviews were conducted in English; however, two interviews were conducted in Sepedi language to accommodate the two participants who were not comfortable with English. A tape recorder was used to record the interviews.

Data Analysis

The study employed narrative thematic analysis to analyse the data. Narrative analysis is a technique that aims to explain how individuals see the environment, make sense of it, and engage in social interactions (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). It also permits a thorough analysis of the contexts in which these narratives are set (Shankar et al., 2017). This technique was useful since it focuses on the intentions, and reasoning processes, and attempts to make sense of subjective, complicated experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2009; Woike, 2008).

Guided by the aim of the study, the researcher used Riessman's (2008) thematic model of narrative analysis to highlight circumstances pertaining to continuing bonds within this population. The thematic model is known for its data-driven, inductive approach (Čepulienė & Pučinskaitė, 2023) and was useful in this study. It aided in the analysis of the content of narratives and theorising across several examples, identifying both similar and distinct theme components within the stories of various research participants (Esin, 2011; Riessman, 2008). Analysis entailed the following stages:

Stage one, *Indwelling*: Indwelling entails reviewing data numerous times, listening to recordings, and noting first impressions while doing so (Smith, 2016). Re-

listening to audio recordings allowed the researcher to become fully immersed in the data while reading the transcripts reflexively and reflectively allowed the researcher to become aware of personal beliefs that may influence the study (Shankar et al., 2017).

Stage two, Transcription of the Interviews: Transcription entails converting audio recordings into a text format. The transcription process generated two versions of transcripts. The first version consists of transcribed verbatim to include pauses, non-lexicals, discourse markers and emotions of how the narrative was delivered such as laughing, crying and tone of voice (see appendix F) (Esin, 2011).

To comply with Riessman's (2008) approach of keeping the story intact for analysis, the initial version of the transcript was updated to exclude prompts of the interviewer, non-lexical and other signs of listener participation. The stories were reduced into narrative blocks which only relay the narrator's words in the original narrative sequence (see Appendix G).

Stage three, identifying stories: This stage entails identifying stories in the actual data (Smith, 2016). The researcher searched for classic elements of a story in the text, which indicates the beginning and the end of a story.

Stage four, coding the narrative Blocks: This stage entails working with one interview at a time. The researcher separated and arranged relevant events into a chronological biographical narrative (Riessman, 2008). This entailed carefully studying the text and identifying patterns within each story in a manner that kept the story intact (Smith, 2016). Secondly, analysis entailed Identifying **narrative themes and thematic relationships**. After studying every interview and identifying the codes, the researcher proceeded further by recognising and coding the underlying presumptions in every narrative. This included finding similarities and contrasts between the stories and concerning each theme (Shankar et al., 2017; Smith, 2016). Finally, a collective review

of all narrations was undertaken to find trends or contradictions in the stories (Riessman, 2008). An idiographic or inductive approach was utilised to identify the emerging themes within the stories.

Stage five, drawing conclusions and telling the core narrative: This entailed organising the key themes into logical stories that tell the core narrative of the participants' experiences (Frost, 2011).

Quality Criteria

Trustworthiness is defined as the researcher's level of assurance that their qualitative data and findings are credible, transferable and dependable (Cope, 2013). The trustworthiness of the study is achieved through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility is one of the most significant criteria in ensuring a study's trustworthiness and involves analysing the consistency of the findings with reality (Cope, 2013). It is recognised when there is alignment between theory, research question/s, data collection, analysis and results. In the current study, credibility was attained by using purposive sampling to choose people capable of providing reliable data related to the phenomena under inquiry and to elicit credible information and persuasive results.

The sample size was determined through data saturation, and the analytical steps taken aligned with the selected methodological framework of a narrative enquiry. Additionally, member-checking was utilised by sending the narrative blocks to the individual participants to provide feedback. The majority of the narratives were accepted as they were while only two had minor corrections. One participant did not

send feedback despite numerous requests made by the researcher. As such, her narrative block was taken to be a true reflection of her story.

Dependability

Dependability refers to having enough information and documentation about the procedures used so that the study may be scrutinised, and where necessary, duplicated (Cope, 2013). In this study, the researcher ensured that the proposed study design was strictly adhered to, that is, making sure that there was consistency in data collection, data analysis and documentation of the entire research process.

Transferability

Transferability necessitates that the researcher provide enough data and context for the audience to determine if the findings may be applied to other situations and circumstances (Cope, 2013). Transferability was attained in the current study by providing a detailed description of the phenomenon under study, the study population, and a detailed account of the adopted research methodology. In addition, the researcher pronounced the extent of the study findings' transferability to other contexts.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to verifying that the conclusions of the study are the product of the informants' experiences rather than the researcher's preferences and may be done by an audit trail of the raw data, memoranda, notes, data reduction and analysis (Cope, 2013). Confirmability was assured first by making use of data records during data collection for later analysis. The researcher also took notes of the observations made, points that needed clarification and personal reflections immediately after each interview. Additionally, the researcher made sure to follow

rather than lead the direction of the interviews by allowing the participants to narrate their stories to a point of satisfaction before asking clarification questions.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an ongoing process of interacting with and explaining the researcher's position and the study situation. As suggested by Stenfors and colleagues (2020), reflexivity was achieved by describing how the research process unfolded, including any personal limitations or experiences, which could have unwittingly compromised the quality of the study. As a researcher and university student who recently lost a loved one, the researcher found the participant narratives to be both enlightening and emotionally challenging. The similarities between their stories and the researcher's experiences triggered feelings of grief, confirming the negative impact that grief can have on academic performance. However, the researcher was able to seek support for her grief while proceeding with the study, which in turn led her to reflect on her coping strategies, which were compared with the participants' strategies, generating deeper insights into the significance of CBs in the study. Recognizing the importance of personal support proved essential for the research process, particularly for the researcher to become more interested in the literature on CBs. Additionally, it enhanced sustained engagements with participants during fieldwork, leading to the acquisition of rich narrative data. These processes helped to strengthen the study outcomes.

Ethical Considerations

Permission to Conduct the Study

Prior to data collection, the researcher applied for ethical clearance from the University of Limpopo's Research and Ethics Committee. The ethical approval number is TREC/1533/2024:PG

Voluntary Participation and Informed Consent

Informed consent is one of the most important ethical challenges in research since it entails that an individual knowingly, voluntarily, intelligently, and clearly and manifestly, gives his or her consent. As such, informed consent highlights the participant's right to autonomy, which is the ability to behave with self-determination in accordance with a personal strategy (Akaranga & Makau, 2016). To comply with the ethics of informed consent and voluntary participation, participants were provided with a consent letter that explained the nature and purpose of the study (refer to Appendix A1). The form indicated that the participants were free to withdraw from the study at any given time. As soon as the participants contacted the researcher and stated their intention to participate in the study, the researcher sent back a prompt reply with the consent letter and informed consent form, which they read, signed and returned before the scheduled interview (Refer to Appendix A2 for informed consent form).

Confidentiality, Anonymity, and Privacy

The researcher ensured that confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. Before the interviews, the issue of the release of information was discussed with the participants. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher did not share the participants' information or identify them in terms of their responses to the interview questions or disclose their names as participants in the study. To ensure anonymity and protect their identities, participants' names were replaced with code names

(Participants 1-11). Since the study utilised a combination of in-person and online interviews, privacy was maintained by holding online interviews at times both the researcher and the participants agreed would be suitable enough for a private interview without any disturbance. For those who preferred in-person interviews, privacy was ensured by holding the interviews in a private space within the university premises.

Avoidance of Harm

The researcher has an ethical duty to protect participants from any sort of physical, psychological or economic discomfort that may result from the study activity within all reasonable limits (De Vos et al., 2011). In addition, De Vos and colleagues (2011) highlight that although emotional harm is often hard to predict compared to physical harm, it often has more repercussions for participants. As such, researchers have a bigger responsibility than just to repair and minimise harm. For this reason, the researcher took precautionary measures to protect the participants. Before the commencement of the interviews, participants were prepared to monitor their inner state from moment to moment and to report to the researcher. The researcher also monitored and noted their reactions throughout the interview. Observed or felt discomforts were addressed according to Gibson et al.'s (2012) recommendations. Firstly, this involved responding to the level of risk or intensity of distress: at the lowest level, this meant, for example, taking a break and focusing on positive aspects of the participant's life. Secondly, the researcher noted those who had minor discomforts to later explore if they may need psychological intervention.

Aftercare of Participants

The researcher was aware that the study may cause pain and emotional responses for some participants even way after the conclusion of the study. As such,

before the commencement of data collection, the researcher took the precautionary measure of arranging appointments with psychological service centres, including the University of Limpopo's Student Counselling Centre and Mankweng Hospital Psychology Clinic to cater to participants who might experience negative emotional reactions. In addition, at the end of each interview, the researcher asked the participants to share their experiences of the interview. The aim was to assess their emotional states to determine those who may need urgent attention and referral. Although all the participants reported positive feelings towards the interview, the researcher provided all the participants with contact details of the nearest psychology service centres (the university student counselling centre and Mankweng psychology clinic) for use in case they experience emotional or psychological discomfort at a later stage.

Data Storage and Management

The research data in the form of voice recordings and transcripts were stored in an external (USB) drive and Google Drive online platform for safekeeping and easy retrieval (should the need arise). Only the researcher and supervisors have access to the encrypted data. The data will be available for retrieval for a minimum period of five years.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a synopsis of the adopted study methodology. The chapter went on to further provide the rationale for the chosen research design, that is, narrative qualitative design including motivating for its use including related techniques and strategies. The research overall design was detailed for among others to help ensure the study dependability and trustworthiness. Towards the end, ethical considerations pertaining to the undertaking were also discussed.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to present themes that were derived from the participants' narrative blocks which were constructed from their individual biographical interviews. The first part in the chapter presents participants' biographical information. In the second part, a presentation of salient themes derived from all narratives is offered. The salient themes were generated following a micro-analysis of each participant's narrative. Individual narratives are appended in Appendix A (see on page 78).

Biographical Information of Participants

Table 1: Demographic details

#	Gender	Age in years	Level of study	Deceased Parent/s	Age of a child when parent/s died
1.	Female	22	Postgraduate	Mother	13 yrs.
2.	Female	19	Undergraduate	Both parents	Father: 7 yrs. Mother: 15 yrs.
3.	Female	33	Postgraduate	Father	20 yrs.
4.	Female	26	Postgraduate	Both parents	Father: 19 yrs. Mother: 22 yrs.
5.	Female	31	Postgraduate	Father	26 yrs.
6.	Female	23	Undergraduate	Mother	22 yrs.
7.	Female	26	Postgraduate	Father	9 yrs.
8.	Female	20	Undergraduate	Mother	7 yrs.
9.	Male	20	Undergraduate	Both parents	Mother: 6 yrs. Father: 6 yrs.
10.	Male	20	Undergraduate	Father	6 yrs.
11.	Female	23	Postgraduate	Mother	3 yrs.

Table 1 shows that the study sample consisted of 11 students who lost their parents. Among those interviewed, 9 of them were females and 2 were males. A total of 8 participants had lost only one parent while another 3 lost both parents. The distribution by age reveals an unequal number of participants in the age categories of 18-25 (64%) and 26-35 (81%). The overall mean age of all participants was 24 years.

Themes Across the Narratives

Four salient themes (see Table 2) emerged from the students' narratives. These are a) circumstances surrounding parental death; b) the nature of parent-child relationships before death; c) facets of continuing bonds expressed; and d) CB functions and post-bereavement adjustment. The four salient themes and their related subthemes presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Salient themes emerging from individual narratives

#	Main themes	Sub-themes
1.	Circumstances surrounding parental death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronic illness • Acute illness • Traumatic deaths
2.	The Nature of Parent-child Relationships prior Death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A close relationship • A complicated relationship • A distant relationship
3.	Facets of continuing bonds expressed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensory experiences/ A sense of presence

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grave visitations • Communication with the deceased • Engaging mementos • Engaging positive memories and pleasant sensations • Honouring memories and wishes of deceased parents • Relying on the deceased's guidance • Dreaming about the deceased • Talking about the deceased
4.	CBs functions and post - bereavement adjustment	

Theme 1: Circumstances surrounding parental death

The first salient theme that emerged from the participants' narratives is their description of the losses suffered. Most of the students described the loss experience to have been a tragic experience. For some, their loss was a gradual process preceded by chronic and acute illnesses, interpersonal conflicts and hostile environments. For others, it was a sudden and unexpected life-changing experience resulting from traumatic deaths such as accidents.

Loss to Chronic illnesses: Those who were bereaved following chronic illnesses relayed an experience of witnessing the gradual decline of their parent's health leading to their ultimate demise. They described the experience as follows:

When I was 12, my mom started getting sick, and it got worse by the day. She had a heart condition ... (Participant 1)

My mom fell ill in 2018; she had diabetes and hypertension. So, I had a suspicion when she had a stroke somewhere around June-July... (Participant

4)

Loss to Acute illnesses: Those who lost their parents to acute illnesses relayed stories of sudden illnesses leading to sudden loss.

My dad passed away during COVID-19 time and he had COVID... (Participant 5)

Her illness was so sudden and so was her passing... (Participant 11)

Traumatic Deaths: A few other students lost their parents following unpleasant encounters like accidents and family abuse:

I lost my father in 2018 while I was in grade 8. I was told that he got injured at work and that he was taken to the hospital where he died... (Participant 10)

My mom couldn't work because of the abuse. It really messed her up so she couldn't work anymore. She couldn't do anything... (Participant 4)

Generally, participating student suffered deaths to natural and unnatural deaths.

Theme 2: The Nature of Parent-child Relationships Prior to Death

The second theme that emerged from the narratives was characterisation of relationships the students had with their parents while growing up. The narratives revealed that some students had a close and secure relationship with their parents. This was evident in their relaying of the caring relationships they had with their parents characterised by emotional and instrumental support. In contrast, others had complicated, and insecure relationships characterised by a lack of emotional and instrumental support. Their relational experiences are captured as follows:

Quality Caring Relationships: Some participants described having had close relationships with their deceased parents. Such relationships were characterised by love and affection as well as material support. Students who had quality relationships

with their parents spoke highly of their parents and relayed a sense of security, closeness, and support received from their deceased parents in saying,

She never let anyone babysit me even when she was travelling. She was very protective ... (Participant 11)

My dad was such an amazing person. He was loving and he loved education so much. He always wanted to help me achieve my goals and try to make me a better person... (Participant 7)

My mother was not only a mother to me, but we were also friends. My mother was just that friend of mine... (Participant 6)

Complicated Relationships: some participants indicated that they had complex relationships with their parents, which were characterised by emotional unavailability, lack of mutual respect, and neglect. Consequently, such students' narratives revealed feelings of resentment towards their parents including long standing efforts to make sense of the relational difficulties. They narrated that:

There are moments when I wish I had a different mom than her. Even now that I've grown up, I understand how the abuse might have affected her and how at some point she had to take it out on me. Sometimes you understand what happened... (Participant 4)

I had a complicated relationship with my dad. I often felt that he preferred my brother's company but, in the last three years, from age 26 to 29, I opened up to him about how I felt and the impact that it had on me that he didn't seem to want to connect with me. And he was also always very critical of my weight growing up, so I talked to him about all of that. In the last three years, we ended up being quite close, but sometimes he still very much made me angry and made me feel alienated from him... (Participant 5)

Distant relationships: Other participants suggested that they had distant relationships with their parents. Students who had distant relationships with their parents, expressed feelings of pain including continued yearning for parental affection while others were nonchalant.

I've never had a father figure in my life. I don't know what it feels like to have fatherly love. I don't know my dad's heart. I don't know my dad's "I love you". He's never been there and that's just something that hurts... (Participant 4)

When it comes to my father, he wasn't much into emotions. He wasn't very approachable... (Participant 9)

I went in there and I managed to open the casket and that's where I saw my father. And everything just clicked that this person has died... (Participant 2)

Theme 3: Facets of Continuing Bonds Expressed

The facets of continuing bonds expressed by participants ranged from sensory experiences or a sense of presence, grave visitations, communication with the deceased, engaging mementos and so forth (see Table 2). Each of the CBs is presented below:

Sensory experiences or a sense of presence: Some participants had encounters wherein they sensed the deceased parent's presence in the immediate environment. While these experiences were predominantly present during the early stages of loss, the participants stated that the experiences eventually faded with time as they began to accept the parent's death. This sense of presence also brought confusion for some participants as they could not tell whether the deceased was

indeed present or not. While for others, the experience was experienced positively, for participant 4, the encounter was met as distressful hence the participant ended seeking psychological interventions.

I thought I was coping and then there were signs that I needed help. There were times after her passing when I would hear her voice or that knock on the door. So, it didn't make much sense... (Participant 4)

Sometimes I would feel his presence especially if I was visiting my mom in the house where they lived. It would be like I kind of see someone in the corner of my eye like a shadow passing by and then I would kind of turn my head. (Participant 5)

And there was this one specific night. I don't know if I really saw her, or if it was just a dream. It was at night in the dark, she entered the room, and I saw her approaching me, holding my hand... (Participant 6)

Grave Visitations: Some participants stated that they have yearly routines of visiting the grave of the deceased whereby they informed them (the deceased) about significant changes or developments in their lives. In most cases, special ritualistic practices are performed to facilitate communication and maintain the bonds.

I usually visit her grave once a year and when I go there, I just update her about the developments in my life since my last visitation. So, it's been like that ever since she passed away. I feel like since she's with me every day, she also deserves to know about my life the same way she would know about it if she was still alive... (Participant 8)

Other times me and my grandmother do visit her grave, and we perform those rituals where we talk to her... (Participant 9)

On the 25th of December, I visit her grave because it's her birthday. I do visit her on other days, but I mostly go on her birthday... (Participant 11)

The grave visitation was a commonly reported type of CBs and was experienced positively by most of the participants.

Communication with the Deceased: Some participants stated that after the death of their parents, they engaged in direct communication with the deceased. Such communication is sometimes carried out with the aid of letters, cell phones and verbal utterances. Additionally, the narratives revealed that participants seem to hold the belief that although the deceased is physically absent, they may still hear or see them.

During that time, I would also talk to him, and it happened a lot during the first year but is happening less and less. I've also written him letters. And in the beginning, before they reallocated his number, I would send him WhatsApp texts, and I would call his number to hear his voice over the voicemail... (Participant 5)

So, I tell her all these things so that maybe if she is indeed an angel, she can maybe protect me with this kind of relationship. To save me from everything, maybe even the things that will happen without my knowing. Maybe now she's able to protect me from everything... (Participant 8)

From the narratives, there's a general belief that communicating with the deceased maintained the ongoing relationships including the deceased being a source of comfort and protection.

Engaging Mementos: Participants also highlighted that they kept sentimental objects or mementos safe as way of maintaining the memories and bonds with deceased parents. This was especially important for Participant 1 who struggled with remembering her parent's face. To remedy the forgetfulness, she made intentional

efforts to frequently engage with her parent's picture. Participants 1 and 6 expressed this sentiment respectively as follows:

Now I've pinned a picture of me and her on my note board. I have put it there so that I can keep the memories alive in my head. So that I don't forget. I still struggle, but then I do try. Now when I go to work in the morning, I'll just turn and look at the picture. And try to connect with it... (Participant 1)

Last year I used to cry a lot. I remember this other time I left my room unlocked and my neighbour knocked on my door, and I did not respond. She just entered the room and found me crying. I was just thinking about her, so I decided to take my phone and look at her pictures... (Participant 6)

Engaging mementos also emerged as a vital source of comfort especially during times of distress. Mementos also served to preserve the memories of parents, something that was experienced positively.

Engaging Positive Memories and Pleasant Sensations: Some participants stated that recalling happy moments or engaging happy memories shared with parents was reassuring and comforting, especially when going through life difficulties.

Although it still hurts, I'm comforted by the memories that we shared together, we could sit and talk about life, she'd advise me about relationships especially when I told her that there was someone that I'm seeing... (participant 6)

My most cherished memory of my parents is of the time that the whole family travelled to Rustenburg after their wedding... (Participant 9)

I feel connected to her, when I'm thinking of positive memories... (Participant 11)

Some student participants asserted that they have moments whereby they are randomly triggered to remember their parents. Such moments included being exposed

to stimuli that reminded them of the deceased or during their special life events. For some, sensory stimuli provided positive feelings whilst for others it triggered momentary experiences of joy and reflections.

I still think about him. Sometimes I randomly think of a song that I used to hear when I was younger, and it reminds me of Dad. Then I start thinking about him or start reminiscing about those moments... (Participant 6)

Even random smells remind me of him. The smell of coal for example reminds me of him because, we used to stay at Vereeniging where we used a coal stove to cook, even the smell of Brut Men deodorant reminds me of him... (Participant 7)

But as for my mother, I do have moments when I think about her, and wonder that if she was here, she would be sharing in my joy of reaching university level. Especially since I'm the first person in our family to make it to university. I think about how proud she would be of me for how far I've come in life... (Participant 9)

Honouring Memories and Wishes of Deceased Parents: When experiencing hardships or feeling demotivated in life, some students drew strength from the memories of their parents, including positive attributes and wishes of their parents to keep going. For those who had unfinished business and unsatisfactory relationships such as Participant 4, this bond provides a sense of closure. They explained as follows:

It's only now through therapy that I understand that there's nothing I can do to bring my parents back. But the best I can do is to keep achieving what is

achievable because that's the best thing I can do to honour their memories...

(Participant 4)

And knowing that my mom believed in me so much is the thing that keeps me going. Even though I'm no longer performing the same way that I used to when she was still around. For example, in primary school, I would come home and tell her that I'm going somewhere to represent the school. She would be so happy and say, 'I know that you're going to change my life around'. So, even now although she's gone, I still want to change her life around. I don't know how, but I know she has a plot of land. Maybe I'll be able to build her a house on that land or maybe put a tombstone on her grave. That way, I would have made her proud the way she would have felt when she was still alive...

(Participant 8)

Relying on Deceased Parents' Guidance: Some students shared that whenever they are faced with life problems or challenges, they refer back to parental advice. This symbolic guidance is in the form of memories of previous conversations and the form of messages relayed in dreams. Consequently, participants feel a sense of ongoing care, guidance and protection from their parents. They explained that:

I believe in them being my guardian angels in the sense that I know when not to do something. If I dream of my parents telling me not to, then I don't do it...

(Participant 4)

Another time that I think about him is when I have disagreements with my peers and classmates. For instance, in those moments when a disagreement leads to a physical altercation. That's when I started thinking about my father and what he once told me. He told me that I should refrain from fighting be patient

and never rush things in life. So, the moment those words come to mind, I stop fighting, calm down and walk away from that scene... (Participant 10)

Dreaming about the Deceased: The participants revealed that they dream about their parents. Dreams with positive content provided comfort and positive feelings for some; while those with negative content caused negative feelings. Overall, dreams were interpreted as a parent's visitation as such, what was communicated in these dreams was taken as the parents' communication. Extracts taken from the participants' narratives are presented below to support this theme.

Although I'm a spiritual person, the only time that I feel like she is with me is when I dream of her. That's when I feel like she is here with me... (Participant 9)

Normally, when I think a lot about her, she will come to my dreams. I usually dream about her when I'm not ok. The last time I dreamt about my mom was when she was telling me that I should focus on myself and focus on being happy... (Participant 8)

Talking about the Deceased: The participants stated that they engage in conversations about their deceased parents. These conversations provided comfort and an opportunity to learn more about the parent, especially for those who lost their parents at a young age.

There are so many memories that if somebody said to me, 'I'm giving you the whole day to tell me the story about your mother' I wouldn't mind talking at all. Talking about my mom is therapeutic for me. Even if you could just listen and

not say anything, the fact that you are listening is enough for me. Even if it's not a psychologist, it can be anyone... (Participant 6)

But with my family, it is much deeper conversations, especially when talking about him with my mother. That's when I learn more about him. The kind of person he was, the things he used to do since my mother knew him more than I did. So, with my mom, we tend to talk about him frequently... (Participant 7)

While talking about bereaved parents was comforting or a positive experience for most participants, for a few others, it was met with emotional distress due to negative circumstances surrounding the parent's death. Consequently, the affected students reported avoiding talking about their deceased parents. For instance, Participant 1 revealed that "a lot was going on in the house. Fights left, right and centre and my dad would be busy yelling at my mom, and I could see at times that she could barely walk to the toilet. It was just a lot... For example, on Mother's Day, when people talk about their mothers, I just wish my sisters a happy Mother's Day and end it there. And when people talk about their mothers, I'll just comment but I make sure that I don't think of her, if that conversation comes up, I rather just start another topic."

While such students mainly avoided conversations about their parents, they also revealed that whenever they found themselves in situations where conversations about parents arise, they engaged in such conversations with caution so as not to reveal that they are orphans. The following excerpts further echo this finding:

I never talk about my parents. I literally hide the fact that I don't have parents. I feel like revealing that I don't have parents, kind of makes me vulnerable to people taking advantage of me. Like whenever I'm with people, say friends and

we're just talking and suddenly that topic comes up, I make sure that it passes quickly... (Participant 2)

I never talk about mom ever. I don't want people to feel pity for me. I'm that person who doesn't want people to pity me. So, when I talk about her, I just feel like maybe people will start feeling pity and I'll start crying so, I don't want that. I avoid talking about my mom. Usually when I'm talking with friends, maybe I'll just highlight something like my mom used to do this and that only. I don't have that deep conversation. I'll just say, I remember when my mom did this and that. I don't like conversations about my mom... (Participant 8)

Our conversations are mainly about my mother and never about my father and to be honest I never think about my father. But as for my mother, I do have moments when I think about her, and wonder that if she was here, she would be sharing in my joy of reaching university level. I remember that my mother loved me very much and I could tell her everything that bothered me, but when it comes to my father, he wasn't much into emotions. He wasn't very approachable ... (participant 9)

Theme 4: CBs Functions and Post-Bereavement Adjustment

The present study findings mainly suggest that engaging in CBs provided comfort for a majority of bereaved students whereby the bonds were described as therapeutic or helped in the management of negative emotions and were also sources of physical proximity upkeep with the deceased parent or parents. For instance, grave visitations, keeping and engaging mementos, and talking to the deceased, especially when feeling distressed provided comfort by providing a sense of closeness to the deceased. On the one hand, perceptual or sensory experiences such as sensing the

deceased's presence in the immediate environment were met with positive emotions by some and met with distress by a few others. Such sensory experiences were described to indicate that the deceased parent or parents continued to be present in their lives. While this is the case, one participant met the sensory experiences with some difficulties of confusion and led to seeking mental health interventions. This was a student who had a complicated relationship with the deceased parent.

Evident from the narratives were some participants' acknowledgment that dreaming about the deceased parent was also met with relief. Participants held the view that deceased parents remain present in their lives and dreams served as a mode of communication between their selves and parents. Through dreams, parents instructed, warned and guided them about potential dangers and challenges in their lives. This finding is enumerated by extracts from some student narratives here below:

Although I'm a spiritual person, the only time that I feel like she is with me is when I dream of her. That's when I feel like she is here with me... (Participant 9)

Normally, when I think a lot about her, she will come to my dreams. I usually dream about her when I'm not ok. The last time I dreamt about my mom was when she was telling me that I should focus on myself and focus on being happy... (Participant 8)

For some students, engaging positive memories, and identifying with attributes and values of the deceased parent or parents were also met with comfort and aided in their coping with their loss/es. Participants rely on internalised parental values and advice, which helps them navigate everyday life problems. Through these means or bonds, the students continued to feel connected to their parents while exploiting

lessons learned from parents in the past. In this way, the students expressed the view that they were not on their own whenever they were confronted by life challenges.

I feel connected to her when I'm thinking of positive memories... (Participant 11)

I actually dream of my mom almost every night. Even last night I dreamt of her. I remember when she had just passed, I felt like she was present. I don't know, maybe it was because I was not able to accept her death back then when the grief was still fresh last year. I remember it felt that way the whole week, every night... (Participant 6)

While for most students, CBs such as thinking or talking about a deceased parent or parents were experienced positively; for a few others such were found to be distressing. A closer inspection of such students revealed that the distress was related to the perception of parental loss as a negative experience that exposes one to being pitied or even being taken advantage of. Consequently, avoidance of conversations about parents became a way to avoid exploitation and pity. These perceptions are captured as follows: “*revealing that I don't have parents kind of makes me vulnerable to people taking advantage of me (participant 2)*”, and, “*I just feel like maybe people will start feeling pity and I'll start crying so, I don't want that. I avoid talking about my mom*” (participant 8). The essence of this finding is further captured by **Participant 1**, who elaborated that, “*a lot was going on in the house. Fights left, right and centre, and my dad was busy yelling at my mom and I could see at times that she could barely walk to the toilet. It was just a lot... For example, on Mother's Day, when people talk about their mothers, I just wish my sisters a happy Mother's Day and end it there. And when people talk about their mothers, I'll just comment but*

I make sure that I don't think about her, if that conversation comes up, I rather just start another topic".

Generally, the study findings highlight the adaptive function of CBs in this sample of university students. This is despite a few students having experienced talking about deceased parents, particularly distressing, hence they avoided invoking or engaging in parental memories and related conversations. The latter in particular appears to be related to earlier traumatic experiences and attachment issues with some parents. Notwithstanding this, the various facets of CBs exposed in the present study could be thought of as some form of post-bereavement coping strategies employed by students, especially when they are distressed and confronted by life challenges.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the salient themes that emerged from the narratives of eleven university students in a township setting. While the students lost their parents under various circumstances, including having had diverse experiences with them before their death, in their majority, the facets of their CBs with the bereaved parent/s were found to be adaptive. The study findings are discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

Despite the growing literature on CBs among the bereaved, little remains unknown as to how bereaved students maintain a relationship with their deceased parents, and subsequently, adjust to life in the absence of parents. As a result, the study aimed to explore student narratives on the nature and role of CBs with a deceased parent. In this chapter, the findings presented in the previous chapter are discussed. The research findings can add to the growing literature on CBs, particularly on how varsity students navigate their lives post-parental bereavement. Toward the end, the limitations and recommendations of the study are offered.

Parental Death and Continuing Bonds

The findings in this study show that parental death is a life-altering experience for children regardless of the age of the child when such loss occurs. The findings further show that parental loss triggers emotional and behavioural reactions. The students in this study experienced intense and protracted bereavement because of losing a parent or parents. This finding is consistent with the view that the death of an attachment figure results in predictable responses such as yearning, despair, intense sorrow, loneliness and withdrawal (Russ et al., 2024). Consequently, some of the bereaved students sought psychological interventions which helped with closure and coping. Service utilisation following parental loss was also reported in previous studies (Lundberg et al., 2020; Pitman et al., 2022). Adjustment post-parental bereavement appears to be a complicated process requiring targeted or specialised interventions. The present study, therefore, magnifies the need for constant care and support for parentally bereaved students in universities.

It also emerged from the study that the nature and quality of pre-death relationships did not have much bearing on the students' CBs expression. To exemplify, it is evident that Participant 4 was raised in a violent family system where she was deprived of both fatherly and motherly love and affection. Besides having had complicated relationships with her deceased parents, similarly to participants 5 and 9, she maintained bonds with their parents. More interestingly was to observe that Participant 4 maintained the bonds with her parents also believing that they were her guardian angels who were influencing her life affairs. She also expressed her bonds by stating that she had to continue honouring their memories. This finding suggests that irrespective of compromised prior relationships experienced with parents, including whether the loss suffered was natural or sudden, children appear to maintain bonds with the deceased parents. It could be inferred further that since biological parents are natural providers of children's emotional, physical and material needs (Choi & Pyun, 2014; Gaspar et al., 2022; Kubayi, 2022; Marks et al., 2007). Irrespective of their having had some shortcomings, children continue to seek guidance, comfort and protection from them even beyond life, or maintain bonds with deceased parents for adaptive purposes. In light of this finding, more research efforts need to be directed at investigating the impact of pre-death parent-child relationships, attachment styles, and many other factors such as the influence of students' post-death socio-economic experiences on CBs and bereavement outcomes.

Facets and Purpose of Continuing Bonds Expressed in Parental Bereavement

Bereaved students in this study showed commitment to both externalised and internalised bonds with their parents. More evident was the use of

multiple facets of continuing bonds by each participant. Generally, the present study findings highlight the adaptive function of CBs in the present sample of university students. The study replicates and supports past studies (see Hewson et al., 2023) in that the students engaged in various CBs strategies to cope with parental losses. ECBs used by participants included grave visitations, and engaging mementos while ICBs included engaging parental memories, talking about and dreaming about parents (Hewson et al., 2023; Foster et al., 2011; Pitcho-Prelorntzos et al., 2022; Root & Exline, 2014). The use of ICBs seemed to facilitate growth and resilience among the participants. For instance, positive thoughts about the deceased and drawing on prior advice helped the participants to address conflicting and challenging situations with ease. ECBs also facilitated coping especially in times of distress. For instance, the participants used mementos to feel closer to their parents. Consequently, reliance on mementos is considered to be a positive way of coping as it provides a pleasant experience for the bereaved by acting as a link between the world with and without one's deceased parent (Clabburn et al., 2021; Pitcho-Prelorntzos et al., 2022). Mementos were also found to provide a comforting presence in the time of loneliness and distress (Hewson et al., 2023).

Grave visitations in this study facilitated a connection to the deceased by providing physical proximity between the participants and their parents. Consequently, grave visitation provided an opportunity for the bereaved to communicate their needs to parents, including informing them of their achievements. Grave visitation therefore provides a platform for the bereaved to have a transcended relationship similar to the pre-death parent-child relationship in which the deceased parents continue to play a significant role in their children's lives (Madison, 2005). Consequently, grave visitations facilitate coping for the bereaved by providing

proximity to the parent; thus, alleviating feelings of loneliness and abandonment, which are usually experienced by bereaved individuals (Silvén Hagström, 2019). Some of the CBs found in this study signify the general belief among the bereaved that although the deceased may be physically absent, they continue to exist in a spiritual form and are therefore able to hear when spoken to (Clabburn et al., 2021). For instance, the CBs of dreaming and communicating with the deceased revealed the participant's belief that the deceased is a supernatural being that can still act on their lives. These CBs may therefore facilitate adjustment by alleviating an existential crisis regarding the finality of death (Bojuwoye, 2013; Davis et al., 2000). These findings also bring to light the role that spiritual beliefs and cultural practices play in these students' bereavement trajectories and CBs engagement.

Other types of CBs proven effective within the sample ranged from honouring parental memories and wishes to using parents as role models (Field & Filanosky, 2009). Such thoughts came spontaneously while at other times entailed intentional reminiscence about positive moments with parents. This particular finding is consistent with the view that one must connect with the deceased's memory to maintain a relationship with them (Currier et al., 2015; Pitcho-Prelorntzos et al., 2022).

Emotional states are often impacted by the experience of positive or negative memories and thoughts. Accordingly, based on the nature of thoughts and memories the bereaved engaged regarding the deceased, this affected their emotional states. For instance, the self-initiated effort of reminiscence about the positive memories of the parent provided comfort and facilitated a sense of connection to the parent, thus buffering against loneliness. Additionally, exposure to stimuli (i.e., music, clothes and scents that the deceased loved) that reminded the participants of their

parents also triggered positive emotions and remembrance of their parents. Brewer and Sparkes (2011) argue that sound and smell along with touch and taste either individually or collectively work to facilitate the ongoing relationship with the deceased. On the other hand, such perceptual and thought reminders about the deceased parents were also triggered by specific life events and occasions such as graduations and birthday celebrations. In some instances, however, such reminders led to negative emotions as it reminded the bereaved students of the absence of their parents during celebrations of some of their important life achievements.

The mixed emotional reactions can be understood based on the idea that thinking about a deceased relative entails two aspects, namely, remembering the deceased's life and remembering that the loved one has died (Mroz & Bluck, 2019). The former, as opposed to the latter, often triggers positive memories associated with comfort and connection to the bereaved (Mroz & Bluck, 2019). Since rumination entails repetitive thoughts either about positive or negative aspects of the loss, it may lead to both comfort and distress, and the latter could further lead to the development of psychopathology (Eisma, 2015). In this case, positive rumination appears comforting while negative rumination is distressful.

Another important facet of CBs reported was the reliance on parents as role models (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2022; Pearce & Komaromy, 2022). This finding aligns with the view that utilising pre-existing and newly constructed mental representations alleviated conflict in decision-making and provided comfort in times of hardship (Boerner & Heckhausen, 2003). The use of the deceased as an internal secure base was long observed to facilitate adjustment and to bring about personal growth (Field & Filanosky, 2009). In the same light, earlier parental motivations, encouragements and well-wishes serve as sources of encouragement and motivation for the bereaved

students later on in life after their parents have long passed. In this manner, continuing bonds in the form of pre-existing mental representations served a positive role in the lives of bereaved university students (Boerner & Heckhausen, 2003). This further highlights the role that a positive ongoing relationship with the deceased can change and validate one's identity.

While CBs were found to be adaptive and motivational for the bereaved students to continue life in the absence of parents, unfortunately, for a few others, thinking or talking about a bereaved parent or parents was met with some discomforts, and therefore had to be avoided. Previous studies also observed that for some bereaved, some facets of CBs were distressful (Filed & Fianosky, 2009; Pitcho-Prelorntzos et al., 2022).

The perception held by a few other students that talking about a bereaved parent or parents made them vulnerable to exploitation or harm by others is worthy of interrogation and further scientific investigation. Factors that could potentially help explain such thought processes may include influences of insecure attachments, age when parental bereavement occurred, and personal experiences post-parental loss. From an attachment perspective, parents are mental and physical security figures in the lives of children (Mikulincer, 2012; Rostila & Saarela, 2011). Therefore, losing a parent early in life and perhaps, suffering neglect, abuse and so forth thereafter, could impact the developing child's sense of security and the overall internal working model (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). As a consequence, such experiences could yield adults who may perceive themselves as generally vulnerable while not trusting others. Such adults could avoid talking about their parents, which potentially serves a defensive function against imagined threats. This is highlighted because not all students in this study perceived themselves as vulnerable, but they

avoided talking about their parents for the same reason. Nonetheless, this is formulated as a conjecture worth further scientific examination to help prove or refute the claim. Seemingly, the implications of such defensive functioning on the affected students' mental health may also need further exploration.

Limitations of the study

- The strengths and limitations of this study are determined by the data collection method, data analysis and interpretation. Firstly, the study utilised an inclusion criterion that was limited to students from one university. This means that the results generated in this study are limited to providing insights about CBs within the current setting. On the other hand, methodology is also presented as a strength. The use of biographical narrative interviews allowed for the generation of rich narratives that provided an understanding of the participants' pre- and post-lost experiences with their parents. This provided a better understanding of the participants' overall experiences and how such experiences impact their experiences on the continuing bonds phenomenon. As such, although the findings cannot be generalised to other settings, the methodology helped in the attainment of the study's aim of exploring student narratives.
- Secondly, two participants were interviewed in the Sepedi language. This may also contribute to the weakness of the study due to meaningful information being lost in translation.
- Thirdly, given that the narratives resulted from a co-construction process during the interview between the researcher and the participants, this may have also

influenced the findings. Consequently, the findings may not reflect absolute truths, but results shaped by participants' stories, the researcher's viewpoints and beliefs, prior experiences and knowledge based on the literature reviewed.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and implications of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to help improve the mental health care and support offered to university students who have lost a parent. These recommendations could potentially contribute to a higher quality of intervention for these students:

- As the findings have indicated that the students' adjustment post-parental bereavement appears to be a complicated process, the present study, therefore, magnifies the need for constant care and support for parentally bereaved students in universities. To promote the mental health and well-being of university students, academic institutions should consider forging alliances with mental health professionals and service providers.
- Universities should consider organising awareness campaigns on topics such as bereavement for the dissemination of crucial information related to grief and highlight the resources available to students in need on campuses. The dissemination of information through awareness can help to normalise grief experiences among this population and, therefore, facilitate early access to health care, leading to improved emotional adjustment and enhanced academic performance. Through this collaborative approach, academic institutions can create a supportive and nurturing environment that fosters resilience and promotes mental health among the student population.

- For clinicians working with parentally bereaved university students, the use of continuing bonds therapy is recommended. By fostering the ongoing connection between the bereaved and their deceased loved ones, continuing bonds therapy can be a powerful tool in helping students process their grief and find meaning in their loss. Through this approach, practitioners can explore the type of continuing bond that the student has with their deceased parent to identify any maladaptive coping strategies. By doing so, practitioners can suggest more adaptive bonds that can facilitate better adjustment and coping in the grieving process.
- The first recommendation for future research is to use a different research design and methodologies. For instance, future research may adopt the quantitative research approach to access larger study samples to allow for generalisation of study findings.
- Secondly, future research can focus on comparisons between the narratives of participants who lost their parents at different stages of their lives to determine if the age at which the loss occurred has any implications on the themes of continuity and discontinuity. Moreover, the age differences could also be studied to clarify whether the influence of cognitive development at the time of loss has any influence on continuity and discontinuity.
- Thirdly, in light of the finding that the students had different relationships with their parents and the subsequent impact of such loss on the quality of their lives, more research efforts need to be directed to investigate the impact of pre-death parent-child relationships, attachment styles, and the influence of student post-death socioeconomic experiences on CBs and bereavement outcomes.

- Lastly, the perception held by a few other students that talking about a bereaved parent or parents made them vulnerable to exploitation or harm by others is worthy of interrogation and further scientific investigation. Further research is necessary to help prove or refute these claims. Seemingly, the implications of such defensive functioning on the affected students' mental health may also need further exploration.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the results of the study on the existing knowledge and provided an overview of the most significant findings, limitations and recommendations for future research. The study aimed to explore student narratives on the nature and role of continuing bonds (CBs) with deceased parents. The findings revealed that the students have continuing bonds with their deceased parents; thus, supporting the view that people do not end their relationships with their loved ones post-death. On the other hand, the findings also revealed that engaging in CBs was found adaptive for most bereaved students, however, for a few other students, it may be met with distress leading to the severing of ties with deceased parents. Consistent with previous literature, the findings revealed that these differences in the expressions and avoidance of CBs use were a result of factors such as the pre-attachment relationship, circumstances surrounding the death and those after death. In light of these findings, recommendations for future research are provided.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participant Narratives

Participant 1

Participant 1 is a 22-year-old female student, who lost her mother at the age of 13. Her mother passed away while she was waiting to tell her about her academic achievement, a significant achievement for her given that her mother was always supportive of her education. Grew up under the care of both parents until her mother died. Went on to be under the care of her sister. Currently, has no contact with her biological father. The participant was initially raised by both her parents and subsequently raised by her older sister and has no relationship with her father. The participant's comprehensive story is herein presented.

Participant Background and Relationship with Deceased Parent.

“A lot was going on in the house”: The participant relayed a story of a normal upbringing with both parents being present in her life. She was raised by loving parents up until a time when her father retired from his work and began having multiple affairs which impacted the whole family system. When her father began having multiple affairs, he became abusive towards the whole family. The participant and her siblings bore witness to the ongoing fights between the parents which marked the beginning of a hard upbringing. She relayed a hostile environment of an absent father despite him residing with them. This is how she described her upbringing:

“Growing up, we lived a normal life. My dad was working at the mine and my mom worked behind the scenes at a designer prints fashion shops as a designer. I had a normal childhood until things went south when my dad started becoming abusive emotionally. He had a lot of concubines because he had a lot of money from his retirement from the mine. He started being abusive

emotionally and verbally and would say things like 'this is my house' and 'I earn more than you'. All the fights between my mom and dad were not that secret, they were done in front of us".

Circumstances pertaining to her mother's death.

"She's been sick": During the ongoing conflict between the parents, the participant's mother became ill and was diagnosed with a heart condition. During her illness, she received no support from her husband. Eventually, she and her husband stopped sharing the bedroom and slept in separate bedrooms. She explains, *"When I was 12, my mom started getting sick, and it got worse by the day. She had a heart condition. At that time, my dad was not really available. He was staying with us in the house, but emotionally and financially, he was just not available. He was staying in the same house, but he and my mom slept in separate bedrooms"*.

Ultimately the family environment became so unpleasant to such a point that whenever the participant's father arrived at home, the family resorted to dispersing to their respective rooms to avoid conflict. This is how she describes the event, *"Yesterday on social media I saw this trend where they say, 'you know you're toxic when your wife and kids immediately leave the TV room to their rooms upon your arrival'. That's how it was with us and my dad and even now I still struggle to watch TV because of that experience"*.

The lack of her father's support towards the ill mother left the participant feeling helpless as she had to watch her mother's health declining, the participant says, *"she's been sick since when I was 12 and having to watch it happen while your dad doesn't even care. A lot was going on in the house. Fights left, right and centre and my dad busy yelling at my mom and I could see that she could barely walk to the toilet. It was just a lot"*

“Me, my mom and my siblings moved out to a new place”: Due to the mother’s declining health and hospitalisation, the older siblings sought a court order granting the relocation of their mother, younger siblings, and their belongings to the older siblings’ house. About two weeks post the relocation, the mother passed away. She stated that, *“Later on, my older sisters came back with the police and had a court order stating that they can take everything that belongs to my mom and that we’re also moving out of my parents’ house. My dad still was not there at the time. He only came back late. My mom got discharged after two or three days, and then about a week later me, my mom and my siblings moved out to a new place. We left my dad at the old house and two weeks later, my mom passed away. She went out to the hospital this time, and she didn’t come back”*.

The death of their mother led to further relocation; a process that left the participant numb to the loss.

“After losing my mom, I think I was numb for a very long time. My brain was failing to process everything because she passed after we had just moved to a new place, while we were still trying to settle. After her burial, we moved again to another place”.

Grieving and Continuing Bereavement Bonds.

“I won’t think of her nor talk about her”: The participant revealed that she could not cope with her mother’s death.

“Everything became real after we relocated to another place. It was only after we moved to that place that my brain could register that this is what is happening. That’s where I started with the grief process, where I started to take everything in. But still it was too much for me to take in. It was overwhelming and heartbreaking. It felt like a dream, a nightmare that I’ll wake up from and

that when I woke up, we'd have our mom with us, alive. It was just hard for me; I think at some point I'd go for like a week without eating proper food. I'd just drink water and eat a lollipop per day and that would be it."

Due to the overwhelming emotions arising from the loss, she began to use avoidance as a coping mechanism to alleviate the overwhelming thoughts and feelings related to her mother's final months of life. She has made sure to avoid any conversations and thoughts about her mother. She explains that:

"I hardly think of her because, towards the end of life, it was not nice at all, mind you, I was only 13 years, and my little sister was just 10 years old. I think that it was hard mainly because of all the drama, given that she's been sick since when I was 12 and having to watch it happen while your dad doesn't even care. A lot was going on in the house. Fights left, right and centre and my dad busy yelling at my mom and I could see that she could barely walk to the toilet. It was just a lot."

"So, that's when I decided that I won't think nor talk about my mom. For example, on Mother's Day, when people talk about their mothers, I just wish my sisters a happy Mother's Day and end it there. And when people actually talk about their mothers, I'll just comment but I make sure that I don't think of her, if that conversation comes up, I rather just start another topic."

Overall, the participant has found that this central theme of avoidance has played a significant role in her bereavement journey. She highlights that not thinking about her mother has assisted in managing the harsh reality of life without her mother and it is also evident that avoidance has become her way of dealing with life challenges and stressors. She explains as follows:

“So, I can say that this thing of not talking about my mom has helped me in a way because, If I don't think of her death; It simply means that I'm not grieving. I was able to convince myself that I'm fine, and if ever I'm going through something that is too deep, I'd rather sleep. That's something that I've learned. If I experience a little inconvenience, I'm going to tell my brain that let's forget this and sleep.”

“I'm now trying by all means to treasure all the memories”: Participant 1 revealed that she is currently attending therapy. She has indicated that she has been working to address her long-term avoidance regarding all the issues that she has been avoiding including the loss of her mother. After attending a few sessions of therapy, participant 1 is now in a process of working through her grief and retaining memories of her mother marks a big part of that process. She says,

“I'm seeing a psychologist now and I've been working on this thing of me trying to convince myself that I have forgiven or forgotten everything that has happened”

She has however realised that this is not an easy process but has remained dedicated to work through it, nonetheless. The biggest challenge seems to be that her mother's memories are tied up to the memories of her father of which she overall experiences as negative. Her explanation is as follows:

“I'm now trying by all means to treasure all the memories. To Keep them alive in my head. But because I've been suppressing her memories for a long time, it's hard. Overall, the memories I have of her are positive except for the ones about her relationship with my father. Sometimes they're negative.”

“I've pinned a picture of me and her on my note board”: To remedy her challenges by recalling how her mother looked. She is making use of her mother's

pictures to help revive her memory. She has pinned her mother's picture on her note board to see it frequently. She says,

"Now I've pinned a picture of me and her on my note board. I have put it there so that I can keep the memories alive in my head. So that I don't forget. I still struggle, but then I do try. Now when I go to work in the morning, I'll just turn and look at the picture. And try to connect with it."

"The most loving person ever": After attending a few sessions of therapy participant 1 has been making some minor progress as far as engaging with her mother's memories. She has been able to think about her mother and is able to recall their prior relationship including the earliest memories that she had forgotten about. She now remembers the love and care she received from her mother. She describes two childhood memories of her mother giving her care when she was sick and also support in her education. This is what she says:

"She was the most loving person ever. I'm going to try to be like her. She was strict but she was nice at the same time. She was loving and these are some things that I look up to. She was my biggest cheerleader and my biggest supporter. I remember one day when the school announced that there is an upcoming school trip. Usually at primary school they gave us a period of two months to pay. I remember that we were the first to pay because she heard that it was an educational trip. She took my education way too seriously. So, I tend to tell myself that I'm going to be like this one woman for my future kids, and I'm going to be extra."

Another memory which came up during the interview thus taking her by surprise is from during her childhood when she was sick and her mother took her to a doctor,

a trip that ultimately became a visit to her mother's workplace where she received a pampering experience.

"I also remember this one time when I was 5. She took me to her workplace at a different company. I remember that I was wearing white jeans, white T-Shirt and White jersey. I think the owner there was Anila or Peru. I was sick so she took me to the doctor. From there she took me to her workplace. I fell asleep and when I woke up, everything was there for me to eat. Amongst those was steak. I was treated like a Princess. It's funny that this memory came to my mind"

In summary, participant 1's narrative reflects a story of her struggle with grief. The struggle is highlighted by a recurring theme of avoidance, in which avoidance of thoughts, reminders and conversations about the deceased became a way for her to cope with her loss. The narration also highlights the impact of trauma on her bereavement and subsequent coping. Her experience of domestic abuse that occurred prior to and post her mother illnesses led to multiple relocations which hindered her bereavement process. On the other hand, the traumatic events ultimately led to unpleasant memories which led to efforts to forget her past including her deceased mother. The trauma has overall shaped her avoidant way of coping not only with bereavement but with life stressors in general. Her narrative does however end on a positive note as she is currently undergoing psychotherapy which has led to significant improvement in her post death relationship with her mother. She is currently making efforts to remember and connect with her mother's memories.

Participant 2

Participant 2 is a 19-year-old female student who lost both her parents. She lost her father during childhood and lost her mother during her adolescent years. She initially raised with her mother but went to be raised by her maternal grandmother after her father's death. She was then adopted by her maternal aunt after her grandmother's death.

Participant Background and Relationship with Deceased Parent.

“He was working the type of job that required him to work in different provinces”: Participant 1 lost her father at a young age of 7, of which she had not yet made significant memories with him. The biggest contributor aside from death, was that her father worked away from home. He worked in different provinces and only spent time with his family during his leave days. Despite being separated by distance the two managed to make memories in the short time they had together. She states that:

“I lost my father in 2012 and then I lost my mother during covid in 2020. Although I was very young when I lost my father, I still remember visiting Durban, because he was working there. I don't know the type of work he did, but it was the type of job that required him to work in different provinces. So, while we were there in Durban, we stayed in a hotel. I think it was during his leave. We would go to the beach, see the sunrise and sunset along the coast. And the last memory I have of him was when he was sick. We used to eat my favourite lemon. I like lemon salt, so he would make it for me.”

“It's just an extraordinary bond which I can't find anywhere”: Participant 2 had a close relationship with her mother starting from the time that they lived together. Despite not living with her mother since 2012 after her father's passing. The pair

shared a strong connection that surpassed their subsequent separation. She describes their relationship as follows:

"I had a close bond with my mother. I started realizing what a mother's love is at a young age."

"She was the only person that could understand everything about me. She never criticized me, never judged me. She was always with me every step of the way."

The pair initially separated when the participant's mother agreed to her mother's request to stay with the participant. During the course of her grandmother's illness, an adoption took place which was only revealed after her grandmother passed away. Even with the adoption in place, the bond between the participant and her mother continued to thrive especially when she faced challenges in her new place of residence. This is how she explains:

"That's when the bond between us became strong because, after I moved in with my mother's sister I experienced a lot of changes. I had to drop my favourite sport, and I had to come back home early after school. There was a time when I was given a curfew that I mustn't exceed. By that stated time, I must make sure that I'm home. So, I quit my favourite sport and my athletics. I had to quit them all. I lived as if I had a baby to look after."

She indicated how the relationship between them served as a safe haven when she faced difficulties.

"And that's where all it all started, because my mother was the only person I can tell. That's how the bond between me and my mother became stronger. My mother sat me down and explained to me that 'since you told me where you signed down that you belong to my sister, there's nothing I can do. But I will always be there for you'. And that's how things were going. She was really

supportive to an extent that when she was no longer there. The difference was huge. Mentally, emotionally, everything changed.”

To further highlight the depth of her bond with her mother she explained that:

“It's just an extraordinary bond which I can't find anywhere. It's the type of relationship I had with both my mother and my grandmother. Those people could do everything for me, whatever it takes just to put a smile on my face.”

Circumstances pertaining to her parents' death.

“The family hid his passing from me”: Although the participant spent some time with her father before his passing, her family did not inform her of his passing. Having no experience of death at the time, it took the participant the whole week, the arrival of her father's body on a Friday and curiosity to find out that her father had passed away. She snuck into the room where the casket was placed, opened it and found her father's body. She describes her experience this way:

“I remember the family hid his passing from me, until I realized through the funeral that my father is no longer there. What made me find out was that, in our culture, the casket usually arrives on the day before the burial. So that night I saw the coffin, but I wasn't aware what it was then. I think I was still clueless. Then during a pre-funeral service, I just sneaked out when no one was looking, I went in there and I managed to open the casket and that's where I saw my father. And everything just clicked that this person has died”

“I already had experience with death”: At the time of her mother's passing, the participant had already experienced death through the death of her father and her grandmother. Years after losing her father, the participant went on to lose her grandmother during their stay together. Her grandmother fell sick thus causing the

participant to be her caregiver as her mother resided elsewhere. During that time the participant took over the house chores and primary caregiver until the time of her passing. Having witnessed her grandmother's final moments, the participants became aware of death at a young age. So, when her mother died after falling ill, the participant already knew death and its finality. She describes the experience as follows:

"With my grandmother, I was very much aware of death. What happened is that I was the one who was taking care of her. I made sure that I did everything for her while she was sick. So, she passed away during the holidays on a Sunday. My mother was doing laundry and as usual, I would wake up and make porridge for her. But the time when I was feeding her, I realised that the spoon came out with blood. Her eyes were still open, but when I checked for the movement, I noticed that they were not moving. And then that's when I called my mother and asked her to confirm something. That's when she told me that my grandmother passed. So, at the time of my mother's passing, I already had experience with death. It was during the day, and it was just the two of us at home. Our relatives came over to see her and upon seeing her state, they decided that we should rush her to the clinic. Since they had a car, we rushed her to the clinic. So, after a while at the clinic they came back to the car with her. They just told me to sit and not to look at her. It was only after we arrived at home that they told me that she had died."

"It's just an extraordinary bond which I can't find anywhere": Participant 2 had a close relationship with her mother starting from the time that they lived together. Despite not living with her mother since 2012 after her father's passing. The pair shared a strong connection that surpassed their subsequent separation. She describes their relationship as follows:

“I had a close bond with my mother. I started realizing what a mother's love is at a young age.”

She further highlighted their bond by stating that:

“She was the only person that could understand everything about me. She never criticized me, never judged me. She was always with me every step of the way.”

The pair initially separated when the participant's mother agreed to her mother's request to stay with the participant. During the course of her grandmother's illness, an adoption took place which was only revealed after her grandmother passed away. Even with the adoption in place, the bond between the participant and her mother continued to thrive especially when she faced challenges in her new place of residence. This is how she explains:

“That's when the bond between us became strong because, after I moved in with my mother's sister I experienced a lot of changes. I had to drop my favourite sport; I had to come back home early after school. There was a time when I was given a curfew that I mustn't exceed. By that stated time, I must make sure that I'm home. So, I quit my favourite sport and my athletics. I had to quit them all. I lived as if I had a baby to look after.”

She indicated how the relationship between them served as a safe haven when she faced difficulties.

“And that's where all it all started, because my mother was the only person I can tell. That's how the bond between me and my mother became stronger. My mother sat me down and explained to me that ‘since you told me where you signed down that you belong to my sister, there's nothing I can do. But I will always be there for you’. And that's how things were going. She was really

supportive to an extent that when she was no longer there. The difference was huge. Mentally, emotionally, everything changed.”

To further highlight the depth of her bond with her mother she explained that:

“It’s just an extraordinary bond which I can’t find anywhere. It’s the type of relationship I had with both my mother and my grandmother. Those people could do everything for me, whatever it takes just to put a smile on my face.”

Grieving and Continuing Bereavement Bonds.

“With my mother, I can remember almost everything”: In comparison to her father, the participant’s mother passed away during her teenage years. At the time they had managed to share a significant amount of time together and had established a good relationship. For this reason, the participant is able to recall many memories of her mother as opposed to her father of which she had limited memories of few incidents from their time together during her visit during holidays and the time they spent together during his illness. She explains that:

“And then with my mother, I can remember almost everything, because whenever I was down, she would be the one to cheer me up. She could make sacrifices for me, whatever it takes.”

She admits the limited memories due to not having had enough time with her father because of his early death.

“I cannot talk much about my father because I was still young at the time of his passing. But as for my mother, she was the only person that could understand everything about me. She never criticized me, never judged me. She was always with me every step of the way.”

“I still take them as part of my life”: In the absence of both her mother and her grandmother, participant 1 has learned to navigate life by herself. However, due

to the important role that her mother and grandmother played in her upbringing, she still considers them important in her life even in their death. Being aware that they can no longer provide physical or emotional support as they previously did. She has transformed their relationship into an internal one in which they can still play the role of support and advisors. In a time of need due to being puzzled by life situations, she consults their guidance by wondering how they would approach the puzzling situation.

She says:

“Because their presence really matters to me. I still take them as part of my life but not like they are physically available. I use the love they showed me as motivation. Something to sort of keep going in life. It is something that reminds me of who I am and where I belong. What I should and shouldn’t stand for. It gives me strength to stand up alone. To be motivated that whenever I’m alone, I can still be able to make it through. It keeps me going like It gives me that courage, that no matter what I’ve got this. So, I do think about them when I’m going through a lot and also when I’m happy or I’ve achieved something. I think that if my mother and grandmother were here, they would do something for me as a token of appreciation. I always relate my current situation to how they would relate to it.”

“I never talk about my parents”: Although the participant has some form of engagement with her mother’s memory, she generally avoids talking about her parents due to fear of being taken advantage of. Losing both her parents led to a difficult upbringing in which she feels that her trust in people was broken as the people whom she trusted to care for her in her parent’s absence treated her harshly. For this reason, she fears and avoids talking about the loss with others as they may subject her to the same treatment she received from her aunt when her mother’s death. She explains as follows:

“I actually still hide my emotions. I feel like when I'm going through a lot and then I try to speak about it to someone, I'm exposing myself. I'm making myself vulnerable to some sort of lack of support. So, I always hide everything like, even this thing of sharing, I feel like it also exposes me so whenever I'm not feeling good, I eat and sleep. It's something I still do even now, like hiding how I feel. Whenever I'm angry, I act as if it's normal or that I'm not angry. And that's why I never talk about my parents. I literally hide the fact that I don't have parents. I feel like revealing that I don't have parents, kind of makes me vulnerable to people taking advantage of me. Like whenever I'm with people, say friends and we're just talking and suddenly that topic comes up, I make sure that it passes quickly”

In summary, the second participant's narrative has highlighted her journey of bereavement with multiple losses from a very young age. The death of her grandmother and parents has predisposed her to life challenges including lack of emotional and financial support. Nonetheless, the emotional support that she previously received from her mother and grandmother continues to serve as a significant source against life challenges. Through the love and support she received from her mother and grandmother; the participant has developed resilience through transforming her relationship with both parties. The participant uses the two relationships as guidance in times of confusion and a source of motivation and affirmation of who she is as well as the strength she possesses.

Participant 3

Participant 3 is a 33-year-old student who lost her father at the age of 20. She was raised by both her parents and continued to live with her mother post her father's

death. She has provided a comprehensive story of her loss with a detailed account of the events in her story.

Participant Background and Relationship with Deceased Parent

“I was a daddy's girl”: Participant 3 had a very close relationship with her father. Being the last born in her family she spent a lot of time with her parents, more in particular her father. In addition to him knowing her favourite things, the two shared a common love for food. She describes her relationship with her father as follows:

“I was a daddy's girl. He was very attentive to detail. He knew the kind of snacks I liked and every time I would go on a road trip, he would make sure to have those snacks ready for me. He knew the brand and whatever flavour of drink I like down to chocolates, things that he doesn't even eat.”

“I've always been a daddy's girl. I can remember when I was a baby. My dad has always been someone who wanted me in his arms, and he had this big belly cause me and him loved food. Well, I always liked being held by him more than my mom for the belly and all the pet names he would call me. It was very rare for him to call me by name. At some point I thought that my dad doesn't know my name cause It's either my Angel, Sweetheart, Ponkash, he's never addressed me with my birth certificate name.”

Circumstances pertaining to her father's death.

“He had prostate cancer”: Participant 3 lost her father within months of his discovery that he had cancer. Although it became a process of moving, having to move him across provinces to try and get treatment for him, it was unfortunately at the advanced stage of discovery. This time between his diagnosis and his death felt too sudden for the participant.

“He had prostate cancer, and upon discovering it, it was already at the advanced stage, which is stage 4. So, he pretty much lived 12 months, and he was gone. He was 72 at the time of his passing. Four weeks before his passing, he was home and couldn't breathe in the middle of the night, my mom and our helper had to drive him all the way to a hospital in Gauteng because he didn't have so much confidence in Polokwane hospitals considering that, he's been going there but they couldn't even detect the cancer until it was too late.”

At the time of her father's hospitalisation, the participant and her family came to the realisation that her father was at the advanced stage of cancer. With this realisation came the anticipation of the loss which triggered emotional and psychological issues.

“So going to school, coming back, knowing my dad is in there and he probably won't come out alive. It really had a huge toll on me and evidently, I was diagnosed with Manic depression and anxiety.”

Grieving and Continuing Bereavement Bonds.

“Whenever I thought of him, I would speak to him”: The participant grew up as a guarded child. She was selective when it came to opening up to others. The loss of her father led to a regressive state whereby she shut herself from the world. Having lost one of her important and closest attachment figures, she began to talk to him as if he was still alive during the first few weeks of his passing. Although she was aware that he is no longer around, talking to him became a way for her to cope with his absence. She states that,

“I wasn't much of an open child. I was very selective as to whom I opened up to. So, after losing my dad I became closed up. But, whenever I thought of him, I would speak to him. But doing that it's not like I believed that he could hear

me where he is, but I think it's more of therapy for me. I remember I used to do that a lot during those few weeks following his burial."

"Writing always connected me to his memory": The first few weeks of her father's passing proved to be a difficult time for participant 3. Given that she had closed herself off from others, a family friend advised her to try journaling to process her grief. Journaling not only became a way for the participant to express her emotions and thoughts. Writing letters made her feel connected to her father as he also loved writing. She explains that,

"We had a family friend who is a psychologist. This psychologist said to me, 'you know what, for those things you cannot talk to me or mom about, or sometimes you don't even want to talk to God about just get a journal and write your dad letters and believe he reads those'. And I remember I would write, I don't know how many times in a day, and it was so helpful because, I could take out my frustration and my thoughts in those Pages and somehow, I would feel that he was close because it was part of our communication. He loved writing. He wasn't such a texter. He loved writing to me on my birthdays. I still have some of his love letters. Writing always connected me to his memory, and I felt like he indeed would understand what I'm going through or what this is. Well, the sadness that comes from it is that I miss him. Sometimes you just want to hold your dad on your bad days."

"We made so many memories that still sustain me even today.": Although the participant has those moments where she misses her father's presence in her life, she continues to remember him through the good deeds and sacrifices that he has done for her such as investments into her education. She states that,

“There's this warmness that comes from recalling that when he was here, he made sure that I felt his presence. Even beyond the grave, there are things that I can still point to that my dad has done this and this for me.”

In addition to being comforted by his good deeds, she also finds comfort in the memories that she and her father made in the years that they spent together. She explains her experience as follows:

“I've had an experience that few people have the privilege to. I only knew my dad for 20 years of my life. But I'm 33 now and we made so many memories that still sustain me even today. All of them 100% still make me smile, I walk tall and reaffirm myself that I am loved, and I was loved.”

In summary, the death of participant 3's father has left a big gap in her life as she not only lost a father, but a close companion with whom she shared similar interests. Although it left a big gap, the close relationship that the participant had with her father has left her with a wealth of positive memories for her to draw from in times of grief. She not only has internal sources of comfort in the form of memories but also has external sources of comfort in the form of letters and savings for her education.

Participant 4

Participant 4 is a 26-year-old who lost both her father and mother at age 19 and 22 respectively. The participant was raised by both her parents prior to their divorce. She later lived with her mother up until her passing.

Participant Background and Relationship with Deceased Parents.

“Basically, I've never known what it feels like to be normal child”: Although participant 4 was raised by both her parents. She had a rough childhood. She has witnessed her parent's fights including her father's abuse towards her mother.

Consequently, this affected her relationship with both parties due to them dragging her in their fights. The two parties ultimately divorced due to the long-standing abuse and the participant moved in with her mother since she was closer to her. She explained that,

“Basically, I've never known what it feels like to be a normal child. The luxury to do whatever I want, to follow my dreams however I want, to go wherever I want to go. I've never had that luxury, especially with regards to my mom. With my dad I also don't have any good memories with him. My parents separated because of domestic abuse. So, growing up, right up until the moment I left my dad's place to go stay with my mom. I can't say there is anything I can point to and say that I had a great moment there.”

“I don't know what it feels like to have fatherly love”: The participant had a distant relationship with her father. She grew up in a household in which her paternity was in question. The participant found herself at the centre of her parent's squabbles due to her father doubting her paternity. The participant's father suspected that the participant is not his biological child and that she may have been fathered by the mother's cousin. Her paternity issue not only affected her relationship with her father, but it also led to conflict between her and her siblings thus causing a distant relationship among them.

“One thing I hated about him was, whenever things turned for the worst, my dad will definitely tell me that ‘I'm not your dad’ So now it got to a point where even my siblings, especially my sister, whenever she had her own things, she'd tell me ‘Go and tell your stupid mom to tell you who your dad is’. And that's because I look more like my mom and apparently, I look like my mom's cousin, whom my dad has always said ‘that's your father’. So, it's something that I've

had to kind of outgrow in a way. It hurts, but I've had to be like, you know what, it's fine. My mom died without telling me who my real dad is.

The uncertainty around her paternity led to a rupture in her relationship between her and her father. Her father distanced himself from her and financial neglect. Her father would withhold financial support from her while providing financial support for her other siblings. She explained that,

"I got used to not getting the same treatment as others. I got used to the fact that when I asked dad if I could please get this, His response would be 'tell your mom that', that time my mom is not working. My mom couldn't work because of the abuse. It really messed her up so she couldn't work anymore."

The participant further highlights her experience of financial neglect. She says:
"I know for a fact that my dad didn't love me as much as he loved my siblings because I wasn't treated the same as others. I wasn't given the same things as others. It was the type of treatment where you're singled out from the rest. There are five of us. The other four got everything they wanted. They got this and that. I remember the worst part of it was when I had to go to high school because that's when my parents had separated. My sister got a new uniform. We were going to the same high school. She got a new uniform, new shoes, she's got a proper hairstyle. Even my little brother got items, everyone was sorted. Then there was me, if it wasn't for these other girls who were staying next door. I don't know if I would have had a uniform to go to school."

The paternity issue not only led to financial neglect towards the participant, but it also led to an emotional detachment between the participant and her father. In all the years that the participant lived with her father, she has never experienced any form of love or well wishes from him, an experience that has left her desolate.

“I've never had a father figure in my life. I don't know what it feels like to have fatherly love. I don't know my dad's heart. I don't know my dad's “I love you”. I don't know my dad's “I wish you well in your life”. So, it's hard for me to talk about him. My dad was not the star of my show. He's not the centre of my world. He's never been there and that's just something that hurts.”

“There are moments when I wished I had a different mom than her”:

Participant 4 had a conflicted relationship with her mother, although they have spent 8 years living together and had a close relationship. Their relationship revolved around the fulfilment of her mother's needs at the cost of participant 4's own needs and wants. The conflict began even when her mother was still married to her father. There were incidents where her mother would take her frustrations out on her due to the abuse. She explains as follows:

“And then with my mom as much as I'm grateful for the years that we spent, just the two of us for eight to nine years and having been able to take care of her. It's sad to think of the things that I've had to go through. And see her turn into something else that I never thought she'd be. There are moments when I wished I had a different mom than her. And even now that I've grown up and I understand how the abuse might have affected her and how at some point she had to take it out on me. Sometimes you understand what happened.”

Circumstances pertaining to her parents' death.

“I'm not sure as to what caused his death”: At the time of her father's passing, the participant was staying with her mother due to her parent's divorce. Although she and her father did not have a good relationship most of her life, the two of them were trying to mend their relationship as such, she would visit him on some occasions. Although she knew that he was sick, she never really knew the exact

medical condition she had. She only noticed a colostomy bag and when he ultimately passed, her father's family did not disclose his illness to her. she explains that,

"I'm not sure as to what caused his death because I was not staying with him at the time of his passing. And his family never really wanted to tell me what exactly happened, but I remember a month before he passed, I visited and then when I got there, he had a colostomy bag. The bit of information that I got was that he may have had prostate cancer or kidney failure in the end because he couldn't go to the bathroom on his own."

"She had diabetes and hypertension": The participant's mother started getting sick in 2011 due to chronic illnesses. Her illness altered the life of the participant in such a way that she almost dropped out of university. When her mother became ill, the participant had to become her mother's caregiver. Initially her mother was still mobile and able to take care of herself however, in 2018 her mother's illness progressed and rendered her immobile causing her to solely depend on the participant's assistance. During this time, the participant had to move out of her rented place of residence and move in with her mother indefinitely so that she can take care of her full time.

"My mom fell ill in 2018; she had diabetes and hypertension. So, I had a suspicion when she had a stroke somewhere around June-July. Sometimes doctors don't communicate with you so that you understand everything. I don't know if maybe they thought that I'm a child therefore I won't understand or what, but I saw the signs that this is a stroke. But then I never really focused on it. I started taking care of her and have been taking care of her since 2011 when I moved in with her. But then it seemed like she could walk around. She could do things on her own up until 2018, when she fell ill. She was now immobile;

she was using crutches to walk but that wasn't the problem. And then now 2018 passed, I almost dropped out actually, that's how bad things got. But in the last moments I went back to class, and I wrote and passed what I passed and failed what I failed."

Her mother's health continued to decline up to a point where she could not speak anymore. Her condition caused further strain for the participant since her immobility and inability to communicate made her more dependent on the participant up until her passing in 2021. She described the experience as follows:

"So, in December time, she was coming along just fine, but the unfortunate part is at the end, she couldn't talk anymore. She was just pointing then, but when she pointed or when she nodded, whatever gesture she did I was able to understand what she was saying."

"There were times after her passing where I would hear her voice or that knock on the door": After the loss of her mother, the participant struggled to adjust to life without her mother. During the early phases of her loss, the participant had sensory experiences of her mother being present. At some point she sensed a knock that her mother used to make to let her know that she was awake and needed assistance. At some point she also heard her mother's voice. She explained that,

"But as for losing my mom, I thought I was coping and then there were signs that I needed help. Because nothing made sense. Before her passing, we had a routine where even though she couldn't talk anymore, she'd wake up and walk from the bedroom to the sitting room and I'd wake up, make her breakfast, prepare her medication, and inject her with insulin and so on. So, after she passed, there were times when I felt a signal that she'd do when she was

waiting on my door. There were times after her passing where I would hear her voice or that knock on the door. So, it really didn't make much sense."

Grieving and Continuing Bereavement Bonds.

"Now I'm able to talk about her passing without crying": It was at the point of isolation, self-neglect and Isolation that a friend of hers advised that she seek psychological intervention. The participant was refusing to eat, bathe, and didn't want to engage in any sort of activity. She could not imagine life without her mother. She was eventually diagnosed with depression.

"Everything was just coming apart; my world just fell apart right there. It was bad. I was at a point where I didn't want to eat. I don't want to bathe. I didn't want to do anything with life. It really took me a long time. I've been in therapy since 2022, and it really helped a lot. Because I don't think that I would have survived the loss of my mom. I was just fortunate enough to have this friend who happens to be a doctor at some local clinic, who gave me a letter and then I took the letter, went to Mankweng hospital then that's when I started therapy and actually got diagnosed with clinical depression. So, to a certain extent I'll say that the perception has changed because I initially felt like I couldn't live without my mom, that I can't move on without her. There are some nights when I'm sleeping and then I feel like she's in my room. Maybe I just heard her voice or something. Having considered where I'm coming from, I still cry about it most times. But now I'm able to talk about her passing without crying. I'm able to tell somebody my story without crying about it."

"In honour of their memory, let me continue to excel": Despite not having the best of memories with both her parents, the participant still feels her parents' absence in her life. Life events such as graduation and getting a job often trigger

thoughts about the parents leading to wishful thinking. The absence of her parents in moments of achievements leads to demotivation. It seems that even though she has not made the best of memories with her parents, their approval and admiration remain important for the participant, and such their memory seems to serve a comforting role in her distress arising from their absence in her achievements. She therefore uses their memory to propel forward and maintain her excellence in her endeavours.

“Most of my memories of my parents are not good memories. But I do think about them in those moments where I reach certain achievements in life that you wish you could celebrate with your parents. Like now, I’m due to graduate for my masters next year, and also when I started working last year, those are the moments when I wished both my parents were here. There are certain things that I do in life where I wish they were here. Be it my mom, Be it my dad. Despite the relationship we’ve had. I just wish that man was still alive to see me excelling like this. So sometimes it gets demotivating and then I like, why am I doing these things because the people that are supposed to celebrate it with me, are not here, but somehow, I will say that in honour of their memory, let me continue to excel.”

“It’s only now through therapy that I understand that there’s nothing I can do to bring my parents back. But the best I can do is to keep achieving what has been achievable because that’s the best thing I can do to honour their memories.”

“There is this African saying that your dreams tell a story”: The participant feels connected to her parents through her dreams. She believes that her parents continue to communicate with her through dreams. Based on the context of the dream, the participant believes that her parents do warn and protect her from lurking danger

and in other times their presence is an indication of victory for something that she plans to do in her awake state. She explains as follows:

“There is this African saying that your dreams tell a story. And that’s how I feel like it is with me. I mostly feel like I continue to be connected with my parents through dreams. I don’t have a proper relationship with my siblings. But there were times where if ever they do something or they were going to do something to me, I know I would see my daddy in my dreams. It was a given, if I’m going to do something and probably, I’m going to win in whatever that I’m going to be doing, I’d dream of my dad. It felt great and it still does because. Whenever I have dreams of my dad, I have that sense of satisfaction that at least I can still dream of him. And the same applies with my mom. I believe in them being my guardian angels in the sense that I know when not to do something. If I dream of my parents telling me not to, then I don’t do it. Although that thing may not actually occur in the same way it happened in the dream. That’s more of a connection that I’m really grateful to still have with my dad and my mom in the spiritual realm. Somehow and to a certain extent I find it comforting and great that I can still be able to dream about my parents.”

In summary participant 4 did not have a good relationship with her parents. From an early age she witnessed parental disputes which has led to neglect from her father and physical abuse from her mother. The eventual separation by her parents brought about new challenges as she had to become a full-time caregiver for her chronically ill mother. Although her father’s passing did not have a significant impact on her coping, her mother’s passing did have a negative impact on her leading to depression. She has since been adjusting well due to receiving psychological

intervention. She continues to have an ongoing relationship with her parents through dreams and memories.

Participant 5

Participant 5 is a 31-year-old female who lost her father at the age of 29. She was raised by both her parents. The participant was living with her husband at the time of her father's passing.

Participant Background and Relationship with Deceased Parent

"I had a complicated relationship with my dad": The participant had a complicated relationship with her father. She often felt like her father made no effort to have a close relationship with her. The two overall had ups and downs in their relationship due to the father's criticism mainly due to her weight leading to the participant feeling like her father prefers her brother over her. At the time of his passing the two had a better relationship although the participant still felt her father needed to be more respectful in his communication towards her.

"I had a complicated relationship with my dad. I often felt that he preferred my brother's company but, in the last three years, from age 26 to 29, I opened up to him about how I felt and the impact that it had on me that he didn't seem to want to connect with me. And he was also always very critical of my weight growing up, so I talked to him about all of that. And in the last three years, we ended up being quite close, but sometimes he still very much made me angry and made me feel alienated from him"

Circumstances pertaining to her father's death

"He had COVID": The participant's father died due to contracting the Covid-19 virus after being hospitalised for two weeks. At the time of his passing strict safety measures were put in place to prevent the spread of the virus as such, visitations

were only allowed in critical instances when patients were critical and potentially facing death that close family members would be allowed. It was because of this rule as well as the participant's fear of being reinfected with the virus that she only opted to visit him in his critical and final moments of his life. Unfortunately, her father died before she could arrive at the hospital.

"My dad passed away during COVID-19 time and he had COVID. He was treating it at home. But his oxygen levels continued to decline. So, then he decided to go to the hospital."

"My mom called me and said that I need to come to the hospital. If I wanted to see him, I needed to come then. So, my husband and I live in Centurion and the hospital was in Pretoria. So, I was in Polokwane for my studies in 2022. Then we drove to the hospital, I got there, and I was all panicked, telling them I needed to go to the ICU. I need to see my dad before he passes away and they still had all of those COVID temperature checks at the hospital. So, I was running in there and eventually they just let me go past. I asked them how to get to the ICU and when I got to the ward, he had already passed away."

Grieving and Continuing Bereavement Bonds

"He was such a big part of my life to now come and pretend like he never existed": The participant has come to realise that not everyone is open to engaging with memories of the deceased. The presence of family members such as her father's siblings provide an environment where the participant feels like it is suitable to share common memories about her father. However, she has experienced that conversations about her father are usually short lived as some members get uncomfortable with the topic, much to her frustration. The participant feels that sharing

memories is a natural event particularly if someone played a huge role in one's life. She explains that,

"I've also found that people get quite uncomfortable if I do talk about my deceased parents especially, like my uncles and my aunts who are my dad's siblings. I can see they become so uncomfortable. If I even mention his name, not necessarily a deep conversation about how life sucks without him. My uncle will just be like, 'yeah, you know, he always said something like this and something like that' and then they get very uncomfortable. So, I guess people deal with grief in different ways and they seem to be a bit more avoidant. But then, that's something that can really frustrate me if I see that people are uncomfortable because I feel like he was such a big part of my life to now come and pretend like he never existed or never bring up a shared memory is just that's unnatural."

The participant has rather found comfort and understanding from friends who have also lost her parents. She feels that as opposed to family members and friends who can only just try to understand her experience, friends who lost a parent have more depth of understanding and are able to provide a supportive space for the expression of her grief. She explains that,

"Living with the loss of a parent is one of those cliches where you don't understand what someone goes through, when they lose their parents until you've been through it yourself. And I can see that with my friends and my family. They try really hard to relate and to comfort but only the friends that have also lost their parents are the ones who I really feel like they understand what I'm going through, even though we have different relationships with the parents that we lost. There is that sense of 'I can't put it into words how you're feeling,

but I know that it sucks, and I know that there's nothing that I can say to really make you feel better'. I feel like they're also a bit more equipped in just providing a holding space."

"Before they reallocated his number, I would send him WhatsApp texts":

During the course of the first year after her father's death, the participant had an ongoing communication with her father. She used to talk to him, telling him how much she wished he was still around. Additionally, she wrote him letters, sent him WhatsApp messages and would also call his number so as to hear his voice when the call went to voicemail. She states that,

"There was a time during the first year of his passing where I thought that I wouldn't be able to speak about him because I would end up just being too emotional, but that is happening less and less. During that time, I would also talk to him, and it happened a lot during the first year but is happening less and less. I've also written him letters. And in the beginning, before they reallocated his number, I would send him WhatsApp texts and I would call his number to hear his voice over the voicemail."

"Sometimes I would feel his presence": In the first year of her loss, the participant used to feel her father's presence around her. These incidents occurred mainly when she visited her parents' house. Sometimes she would perceive a figure that looks like her father and at times she would smell his aftershave.

"Sometimes I would feel his presence especially if I'm visiting my mom in the house where they lived. It would be like I kind of see someone in the corner of my eye like a shadow passing by and then I would kind of turn my head. But the feeling of his presence is something that I wouldn't say is consistent. So, everything else, like talking to him or verbalizing that I wish you were here."

“I'd smell his aftershave”: The participant often finds herself randomly thinking about her father. In such moments, she also gets sensory experiences such as smelling her father's aftershave. She describes the incident as follows:

“Things like that happened a lot in the time directly after his passing, but it's happening less and less, but the presence thing I would say was kind of random and I wouldn't even have consciously known that I was thinking about him and then I'd smell his aftershave.”

“There are things that I wish that I could share with him.”: The participant also finds herself thinking about her father due to certain life events such as birthday celebrations and completion of educational milestones. Such events become a reminder about the deceased's absence leading to the participant's yearning for his presence to share and celebrate those moments.

“I think about him often. And there are things that I wish that I could share with him. Like my completion of my studies and moving into a new house”

“His mannerisms in me are keeping that connection alive”: The participant continues to feel connected to her father through the perceived similarities between them. She now realises that she has the same mannerisms as him and she is reminded of their similarities in moments when she is confronted with the opposing views and thoughts from her mother and brother.

“I'm now realizing that me and him have more in common than I realized. And I think when I'm confronted with my mother and my brother, who are very different from me. I would be reminded that my dad would have been the one who guards me. He would have understood what I was saying or what I'm going through. And sometimes I would do something, and I would think like oh, this is

exactly what he would have done. So, I think seeing some of his ways, his mannerisms in me are keeping that connection alive.”

In summary, the participant had a distant relationship with her father most of her life although they had started to mend their relationship towards the end of his life. Although she and her father were not together throughout the years, she admits to having a better relationship with him at the time of his passing. She continues to feel connected to him through her mannerisms and randomly feel his presence when she visits her parents' house.

Participant 6

Participant 6 is a 23-year-old female student who lost her mother at the age of 22. She was raised by her mother up until her passing. The participant currently resides with her grandmother.

Participant Background and Relationship with Deceased Parent.

“My mother was not only a mother to me, but we were also friends”: The participant had a close relationship with her mother. They had mutual trust and respect for one another. The participant could tell her mother anything. When her mother died, she felt that she lost a confidant as she no longer had someone she could talk to and confide in. she states that:

“My mother was not only a mother to me, but we were also friends. Now I have three or four things that I can't even tell anyone about, and I tend to think that if my mom was still alive, I would be telling her these things. My mother was just that friend of mine. Even when she would be in dispute with my uncle, my grandmother or aunt, she would say to me [Participant 6], you are the only daughter that I trust amongst your siblings’.”

Circumstances pertaining to her mother's death.

“She kept her diagnosis a secret while letting everyone believing that it was something else”: The participant's mother had a chronic illness which she had been living with for four years. She however kept her diagnosis a secret up until her illness progressed leading to frequent medical consultations. During the time of her illness, she had defaulted on her treatment as she wanted to hide her illness from her family. Although she disclosed to the participant at some point closer to her death, the participant and her family only believed the diagnosis after finding her medical records sometime after her passing.

“So sometime after her death, we were just trying to clean and clear her room. To our surprise we actually found medical records to confirm that indeed she had the medical condition that she died from. It was dated four years ago. It became evident that the doctor knew what was happening with my mom. And then I tried to text him. He told me that he was in no position to reveal to us anything due to doctor-patient confidentiality. It's a pity that we found out when she had already passed, otherwise we would have supported her and maybe encouraged her to continue taking the medication. But maybe she was tired of taking the meds since she had been living with the condition for four years. She kept her diagnosis a secret while living everyone believing that it was something else”

Grieving and Continuing Bereavement Bonds.

“I saw her approaching my bed and holding my hand”: One evening during the week of her mother's passing, the participant had a sensory experience where she saw her mother entering her room and holding her hand to reassure her that she is happy and at peace. She explains this experience as follows:

“And there was this one specific night. I don’t know if I really saw her, or if it was just a dream. It was at night in the dark, she entered the room, and I saw her approaching me holding my hand. Maybe she could see that I was struggling to digest the news of her passing. In that state or dream I saw her approaching my bed and holding my hand, reassuring me that she is happy and at peace.”

“I actually dream of my mom almost every night”: When the participant’s mother passed away, she began to have dreams about her. She dreamt about her mother every night and at times during those days following the loss she felt her presence. She says that,

“I actually dream of my mom almost every night. Even last night I dreamt of her. I remember when she had just passed, I felt like she was present. I don’t know, maybe it was because I was not able to accept her death back then when the grief was still fresh last year. I remember it felt that way the whole week, every night.”

“I was just thinking about her, so I decided to take my phone and look at her pictures”: After her mother’s passing, the participant was not coping well. She spent most of the time crying while isolating herself. During that time, she found comfort in looking at her mother’s pictures. She explains that,

“Last year I used to cry a lot. I remember this other time I left my room unlocked and my neighbour knocked on my door, and I did not respond. She just entered the room and found me crying. I was just thinking about her, so I decided to take my phone and look at her pictures.”

The participant states that she continues to find comfort in engaging with her mother’s pictures.

“These days I just see her pictures and I don’ t cry, instead I smile and enjoy the moment.”

“When I saw the female patients there, I just imagined my mother”: Her mother’s death not only impacted her mental health negatively, but her death also led to academic challenges as well. After the loss of her mother, the participant was unable to focus on her studies and she was also unable to do her practical learning at the hospital. During her practical rounds, the participant was unable to cope as she was placed in a female patient ward as she was triggered by seeing female patients inside the wards. The sight of the female patients triggered images of her mother lying on the hospital bed. It was at this point that her lecturers intervened by sending her to the university student counselling centre.

“I don’t even know where I would be today, because I even planned to quit my studies. So, when I came back to campus, I had to attend counselling at D block (the university counselling centre) because I told my lecturers that I would not be able to continue with my studies. When I was placed at a hospital for practicals, I was placed next to a female ward. When I saw the female patients there, I just imagined my mother laying there on the bed. I just couldn’t do it. So, I came back and told my lecturer that I can’t continue. But they said that I can pause my practicals and attend counseling.”

“Talking about my mom is therapeutic for me”: Although the participant lost a significant person in her life, she continues to find comfort in the memories that they created together. Memories of the support and companionship that her mother provided continues to help her cope with her mother’s loss. She states that,

“Although it still hurts, I’m comforted by the memories that we shared together, we could sit and talk about life, she’d advise me about relationships especially when I told her that there was someone I’m seeing.”

Instead of despairing, the participant rather enjoys sharing all the memories about her mom with anyone who is willing to listen to her story. She further explained that,

“There are so many memories that if somebody said to me, ‘I’m giving you the whole day to tell me the story about your mother’ I wouldn’t mind talking at all. Talking about my mom is therapeutic for me. Even if you could just listen and not say anything, the fact that you are listening is enough for me. Even if it’s not a psychologist, it can be anyone.”

In summary, when the participant’s mother died, she not only lost a mother, but she also lost a close friend whom she could confide in. Her passing led to both emotional and academic challenges which she was able to overcome with the assistance of counselling. Although she is still grieving for her mother, she continues to find comfort in sharing and engaging with her mother’s memory. In addition to the memories, she also finds comfort through her mother’s presence in her dreams.

Participant 7

Participant 7 is a 26-year-old female who lost her father at the age of 9. She was raised by both her parents and currently resides with her mother. She provided a comprehensive narration with factual information.

Circumstances pertaining to her father’s death.

“My father had some epileptic seizure”: The participant’s father had a sudden death due to an epileptic seizure. The participant explained that her father

came back home from work with flu-like symptoms. Later that evening her father had an epileptic attack and passed away on the spot. She states that,

“One day he came back from work, and he said he was not feeling well. He was coming down with flu or something, and then that night we went to sleep. I think that was his last goodbye, because he just said goodnight and went to bed. In the middle of the night, I heard some commotion in the house, and I wanted to check what was happening, but my mother locked us in our room. She didn't want us to see what was happening because my father had some epileptic seizure and at that time she was trying to go out for help. I was in the room, and I could hear her, but I did not see exactly what was happening. Later on, the paramedics came in. They were busy with him trying to assist him, but it was too late.”

“My dad was such an amazing person”: The participant had a good relationship with her father. She describes her father as a loving and supportive parent who was always interested in imparting knowledge to her. He was also supportive and encouraging in her education. She states that,

“My dad was such an amazing person. He was loving and he loved education so much. He always wanted to help me achieve my goals and try to make me a better person. So, every day when he came back from work, He'd try and see what I learnt at school. He would also teach me some of the things that I needed to know or some of the things that are actually happening such as current news, current affairs, anything that has to do with education. He was always hands on.”

Grieving and Continuing Bereavement Bonds.

“We always make sure that every year we go to his grave to visit him”:

The participant's father continues to be part of the family despite his passing. The participant and her family continue to visit her father's grave to update him on the new developments in their life and their achievements. She explains as follows:

“We always make sure that every year we go to his grave to visit him, try to engage with him and update him on some of the things that are happening in our lives and what we have achieved. We also update him about our wants and things that we are working on.”

“I also feel like he's there with me”: The participant has sensory experience of her father's presence. The experience occurs whenever she thinks about him. She believes that in those moments whenever she thinks about him, her father would be present and protecting her from harm. She states that,

“I also feel like he's there with me every time, especially when I'm about to face danger. I will think about him randomly and then something happens, sometimes you could see that it was supposed to be a huge thing, but because he is always around the damage is usually minor, that's when I know for sure that he was around. On other occasions I can see that something was about to happen, but he stopped it.”

“We always talk about him at home”: The participant's father continues to be present in the participant's conversations. She often talks about him with her mother in which they share memories about him, while on the other hand, the participant gets to learn more about the type of person her father was given that he died while she was still young. She also engages in conversations about him with her friends, whenever she sees things, or hears songs that remind her of him.

“I do talk about him, actually we always talk about him at home. With my friends on the other hand, I’d talk about him if I see something that reminds me of him. It’s usually just me saying my father used to love this kind of music. My father used to love these kinds of things and oh! I have pictures of my father wearing such fashion. But with my family, it is much deeper conversations, especially when talking to my mother. That’s when I learned more about him. The kind of person he was, the things he used to do since my mother knew him more than I did. So, with my mom, we tend to talk about him frequently.”

“I still think about him.”: The participant also engages with her father’s memory through the music that he used to love. When such songs come to mind the participant not only feels protected, but she also feels comforted and loved by her father despite his physical absence.

“I still think about him. Sometimes I randomly think of a song that I used to hear when I was younger and say, ‘this song reminds me of dad’. Then I start thinking about him or start reminiscing about those moments”

“And even when something good is about to happen. I’ll think of something that he used to do or the music he used to love. Mostly it’s music. So, if I randomly think about a song that he used to love, I’ll be happy at that time and I’ll sing it out loud. Or maybe if danger is about to happen, that music will just play in my head. I really feel like even in death he is still protecting me and the whole family as well. In that moment I feel like he’s still a part of me, even though he’s dead. I feel a sense of belonging, and I feel loved by him.

“Even random smells remind me of him”: Encounters with familiar scents also trigger the participant’s memories of her father. The participant finds herself being reminded of her father whenever she smells scents such as a perfume that her father

used to wear. Another scent that seems to trigger her childhood memories with her father is the smell of coal. She explains the experience as follows:

“Even random smells remind me of him. The smell of coal for example reminds me of him because, we used to stay at Vereeniging where we used a coal stove to cook, even the smell of Brut men deodorant reminds me of him, my mother said he used it a lot and as a way of feeling his presence mom kept one of his shirt unwashed and bought the deodorant for a year or so and used it herself, she said the smell made her believe she was still around. So, every time I smell that coal and Brut deodorant, I always think about him.”

In summary, the participant lost her father suddenly due to an epileptic seizure at a young age. Despite her loss at a young age, she continues to engage with her father’s memories through conversations with her mother and grave visitation where she updates him about the developments in her life.

Participant 8

Participant 8 is a 20-year-old female student who lost her mother when she was 7 years old. She was raised by her aunt until her demise. She provided a comprehensive story of her experience of loss.

Participant Background and Relationship with Deceased Parent.

“My relationship with my mom was so good”: The participant did not stay with her mother and was cared for by her grandmother. Her mother worked and lived away from home due to work and she would come back after some time. Despite them living apart, the participant still had a good relationship with her mother which is highlighted by outings every time her mother came back home.

“My mom wasn’t staying with me full time because she was working somewhere else, but I knew that every time she comes back from work, she would take me

and my siblings out and buy us food, clothes and everything else. She would make those moments count so that when she's not around we wouldn't even feel her absence. I knew that when she came back, I was going to have the best life for those few weeks or months because she always made sure that I got anything I wanted."

In addition to the outings, the participant and her mother had regular telephonic conversations. Her mother used to call her in the morning before leaving for school giving her well wishes for the school day. She states that,

"My relationship with my mom was so good. So good that I didn't even realize that we were not staying together. She would make sure that she calls every day to check up on me. Every morning when I go to school she would call to wish me a good day."

Circumstances pertaining to her mother's death.

"Now that I'm grown, and I was told what led to her death": Having lost her mother at an early age, the participant did not know what led to her mother's death. Her family only told her the cause of her mother's death when she had finally grown up. Not knowing the cause of her mother's death led to her making her own conclusions that she may have been bewitched which also led to the participant blaming people for her death. It was only now that she was told about her mother's illness that she feels relieved and is accepting her mother's death. she states that,

"Now that I'm grown, and I was told what led to her death, I have accepted her death. My mom died from HIV/AIDS. Now that I'm older, I've learned about HIV/AIDS, and I realised that back then when she was sick there was not enough medication, or it was not yet known that HIV/AIDS doesn't kill you when you take medication. So, I have accepted that it was her time to go, and only if

she had access to medication earlier, maybe she wouldn't have died. Back then I kept on blaming people and thinking that she was bewitched because my family didn't want to tell me the truth about what killed her. So, I thought maybe it's witchcraft. So now that I know what killed her, I made peace with it."

Grieving and Continuing Bereavement Bonds.

"I never talk about mom ever": The participant usually avoids conversations about her mother. In instances where she cannot avoid such conversations, she keeps the conversation as minimal as possible. She fears that opening up about her loss might lead to people pitying her thus leading to her becoming emotional. She states that,

"I never talk about mom ever. I don't want people to feel pity for me. I'm that person who doesn't want people to pity me. So, when I talk about her, I just feel like maybe people will start feeling pity and I'll start crying so, I don't want that. I avoid talking about my mom. Usually when I'm talking with friends, maybe I'll just highlight something like my mom used to do this and that only. I don't have that deep conversation. I'll just say, I remember when my mom did this and that. I don't like conversations about my mom."

"I get a sense of her voice saying keep quiet and be strong.": The participant also has sensory experiences of her mother's communication with her. In times of conflicts or situations that challenges her to make tough decisions, she tends to hear an internalised voice of her mother, comforting and encouraging her.

"Sometimes I do feel like my mom is with me, especially when I'm crying or having a mental breakdown. That's when I get a sense of her voice saying keep quiet and be strong. But it's not like a real voice of someone who is alive but just a voice inside my heart that says, 'be strong, you don't have to cry.'"

“I tend to feel her presence, especially when I look at her picture.”: The participant also has sensory experience of her mother’s presence during her happy and bad moments. Such presence is also facilitated by her engagement with her mother’s picture thus leading to a sense of comfort as she feels like she is together with her mother.

“Every time something happens, regardless of whether it is good or bad. I tend to feel her presence, especially when I look at her picture. I don’t cry at all. At that moment I just feel like we are together and so I don’t have to cry. I just look at the pictures and say, “I wonder what life would be like if you were still around.”

“I usually visit her grave once a year”: The participant also has a yearly routine of visiting her mother’s grave at which she goes to update her about all the development that occurred since her last visitation. She explains that,

“I usually visit her grave once a year and when I go there, I just update her about the developments in my life since my last visitation. So, it’s been like that ever since she passed away. I feel like since she’s with me every day, she also deserves to know about my life the same way she would know about it if she was still alive.”

“So, I tell her all these things so that maybe if she is indeed an angel, she can maybe protect me with this kind of relationship. To save me from everything, maybe even the things that will happen without my knowing. Maybe now she’s able to protect me from everything.”

“I do think about my mom a lot.”: Circumstances that followed the participants her mother’s passing often triggered thoughts about her mother. Her mother’s passing forced her to relocate from her initial home to live with relatives whom she had no prior relationship with, leading to adjustment difficulties as well as

emotional and financial challenges. Finding herself in a position whereby she had to fend for herself often led to thoughts about her deceased mother in which the participant longed for her mother's care. She explains the experience as follows:

"I do think about my mom a lot. For instance, when she died, I had to relocate to another place to stay with her aunt. So, her aunt is my granny but at some point, I felt like she didn't give me the kind of love that I expected, or the same type of love that my mom would have given me. I had to grow up quickly because I had to learn to take care of myself. To Learn to buy myself things from deodorant to sanitary pads and everything else. I had to manage with the small money I got. I had to manage everything and that made me grow up at a very young age. Sometimes when I experienced emotional and even financial issues, or even those things that I can't share with others, I would feel that if only my mom was still here, maybe all these things would never happen."

It is due to their relationship that the participant wants to continue to treasure her mother's memory. She explains as follows:

"I don't want to forget my mom at all, because she has been the best mom to me."

"Normally, when I think a lot about her, she will come to my dreams": The participant has dreams about her mother in which she provides her guidance about situations that puzzle her in her awake state. Whenever she encounters such conflicts, she thinks about her mother thus leading to dreaming about her.

"Normally, when I think a lot about her, she will come to my dreams. I usually dream about her when I'm not ok. The last time I dreamt about my mom was when she was telling me that I should focus on myself and focus on being happy"

“I still want to change her life around”: Memories of being her mother’s pride and joy, motivates the participant to keep going in life. Her mother’s belief that the participant would one day change her life for the better continues to encourage the participant to do well enough in her life so as to fulfil her mother’s wishes.

“And knowing that my mom believed in me so much is the thing that actually keeps me going. Even though I’m no longer performing the same way that I used to when she was still around. For example, in primary school I would come home and tell her that I’m going somewhere to represent the school. She would be so happy and say, ‘I know that you’re going to change my life around’. So, even now although she’s gone, I still want to change her life around. I don’t know how, but I know she has a plot of land. Maybe I’ll be able to build her a house on that land or maybe put a tombstone on her grave. That way, I would have made her proud the way she would have felt when she was still alive.”

In summary, due to losing her mother at a young age, her family hid the cause of her mother’s death from her, leading to challenges with accepting her mother’s death. She has upon finding out the cause of death, accepted her passing and continues to have a relationship with her mother. The participant continues to engage with her mother through pictures, grave visitation and dreams and the sense of her mother’s presence provides comfort as she does not feel alone.

Participant 9

Participant 9 is a 20-year-old male who lost both his parents around the age of 7. He was initially raised by both parents but was later on raised by his grandmother post his parent’s death. He provided a comprehensive story although he was unable to recall some factual information.

Participant Background and Relationship with Deceased Parents.

“My mother loved me very much and I could tell her everything that bothered me.”: Although the participant’s parents died while he was still young. He was still able to recall the relationship that he had with both parents, during the time that he stayed with them post their marriage. He recalls his mother’s love and emotional availability at the time of his need. Although he was unable to go at length regarding the dynamics of their relationship, he briefly stated that,

“I remember that my mother loved me very much and I could tell her everything that bothered me.”

He also briefly described his relationship with his father whom he felt was the opposite of his mother in terms of approachability and emotional availability.

“When it comes to my father, he wasn’t much into emotions. He wasn’t very approachable.”

He also recalls his father being abusive towards his mother, an experience which he states that it did not affect him then as he was yet to understand what abuse really is.

“My most cherished memory of my parents is of the time that the whole family travelled to Rustenburg after their wedding. I think it was their honeymoon getaway. While staying with them I noticed that my father used to abuse my mother. He used to hit her. Their fights did not really affect me much when I was still young. I think I was in grade 1 or 2. I think that I was too young to understand that it was abuse.”

Circumstances pertaining to his parents' death.

“They both died within the same year”: The participant does not recall the circumstances surrounding his parents' deaths, he only knows that they died within a period of a month.

“They both died within the same year. My mother died in July and my father in August.

Due to his young age during the passing of his parents, the participant also does not know the exact cause of his parents' death. He only knows that the pair died of acute illnesses, an information which he got from their funeral which his grandmother kept until now. He states that,

“As for their cause of deaths, I don't really know but. The only thing I know is that they both died of illnesses because I saw their funeral cards and they state that they died of a short illness. My grandmother kept both cards and they're still there at home so that's how I know that they died of illnesses.”

The circumstance surrounding his parents' death also led to the participant's belief that there was malicious intent behind his parents' deaths. He explains as follows:

“The manner in which my parents died seems rather fishy to me, I don't believe that it was a coincidence. I believe in spirituality and tradition. So, the fact that my parents died within one month of each other's passing does not make sense to me. It's impossible. I think that someone must have done something to them. I think that they were bewitched”

Grieving and Continuing Bereavement Bonds.

“The only time that I feel like she is with me is when I dream of her”: The participant states that he feels his mother's presence whenever he dreams about his

mother. His dreams of her crying, seem to confirm his belief that his parents were bewitched. He explained that,

“Although I’m a spiritual person, the only time that I feel like she is with me is when I dream of her. That’s when I feel like she is there with me. And in those dreams, I see her crying, so that’s why I think that someone had a hand in her death.”

“Our conversations are mainly about my mother and never about my father”: The participant engages with his mother’s memory through conversations about her. Their conversations are however limited to his mother, as the participant admits that he does not think about his father. He states that,

“Our conversations are mainly about my mother and never about my father and to be honest I never think about my father.”

Given that the participant does not recall much about his parents, talking about his mother provides an opportunity for him to know more about her, especially the conversations that he has with his maternal grandmother since she knew her from the time she was born. The conversations bring up a sense of fulfilment for her as he tends to identify with her through perceived similarities. But such moments also bring up feelings of sadness for the participant as he is reminded of their absence in his life.

“I also use that time to ask her about my parents, and she will tell me about all the stories about my mother. For example, she will tell me about the type of person she was. Even those things that I don’t know, or I can’t recall, she does tell me about them. For example, she told me that my mother used to perform well in school and in that moment, I felt joy and pride because I believe that I will probably take after given that I have made it to university.”

“As for my mother, I do have moments when I think about her”: Knowing that his mother also did well academically, the participant often wonders how his mother would react and feel like with the progress that he made educationally. He wonders about the joy and pride his mother would’ve felt given that he has achieved something that has not been achieved in his family.

“But as for my mother, I do have moments when I think about her, and wonder that if she was here, she would be sharing in my joy of reaching university level. Especially since I’m the first person in our family to make it to university. I think about how proud she would be of me for how far I’ve come in life.”

Apart from intentional engagement with his mother’s memory, the participant also finds himself being reminded of his mother. The fact that the participant was raised by his maternal grandmother led to challenges for him. Although he explained that she did everything she could for him, he acknowledged that there were some things that his grandmother could not do for him due to her old age and other responsibilities. For this reason, the participant would face challenges in such aspects that his grandmother could not manage such as fetching his school report in primary and secondary school, helping with university applications and compiling the relevant documents. In such moments the participant would think about his mother and the gap that she left in his life.

“Whenever I encounter those life challenges that everyone faces at some point. That’s when I think about my mother and the fact that she is not here to help me.”

In addition to life challenges, positive incidents such as graduation season also trigger thoughts about the participant’s mother. At times of graduation the participant fantasizes of his graduation and making his mother proud.

“Other times me and my grandmother do visit her grave”: The participant stated that he believes in spirituality. As part of his belief, the participant routinely visits his mother’s grave where he performs rituals to aid in his communication with his mother. During the veneration, the participant talks to his mother to update her about the development in his life and asks for protection. He describes the event as follows:

“Other times me and my grandmother do visit her grave, and we perform those rituals where we talk to her. During that process we use candles, calabash and each one of us takes turns to talk about whatever is in our hearts. For example, in my last visitation there, I was just accepted to study at the university so, I went there and started off by giving thanks for protection and getting into university, then I told her that I won’t be able to come and visit her for the time being, and lastly, I asked her to protect other members of the family. I feel like doing this ritual gives me closure and helps me to accept the situations in my life.”

In summary, although the participant lost his parents at an early age, engaging with his mother’ memory continues to be a big part of his life. The participant has intentional engagement with his mother through active imagination and grave visitation, while or unintentionally having a relationship with her through dreams and spontaneous memories.

Participant 10

Participant 10 is a 20-year-old male who lost his father at the age of 14. The participant was raised by both parents despite residing with his mother. He was able to narrate his story coherently.

Participant Background and Relationship with Deceased Parent.

“I had a good relationship with my father”: The participant’s parents were not married as such, the participant lived with his mother. Despite not living with his father, the two of them had a good relationship. He states that his father would visit them and that he provided financial support for him and his siblings until he passed away.

“I had a good relationship with my father despite not staying with him. I stayed with my mother, and he stayed somewhere else. He would come and visit me and my siblings, so I can say that we had a stable relationship.”

Circumstances pertaining to his father ’s death.

“I was told that he got injured at work”: The participant’s father died as a result of a work-related accident. His death was sudden as he passed away at the hospital after his admission. The participant was only told that it was an accident but does not really know what led to the accident as well the type of injury he suffered.

“I lost my father in 2018 while I was in grade 8. I was told that he got injured at work and that he was taken to the hospital where died.”

Grieving and Continuing Bereavement Bonds.

“I picture how it would be like to have him around especially now that I’m grown”: The participant states that when his father died, he struggled to cope and would often get lost in thought thinking about his father. He admits that he still has those moments of getting lost in thought thinking about the past, especially when he is alone. He also tends to fantasize about life with his father in it. He explains that,

“Sometimes I think about him, I think about the past and I get so preoccupied that a person can call out to me, and I wouldn’t even hear them. I imagine what

my life would be like if he was still present, I picture how it would be like to have him around, especially now that I'm grown."

"I start thinking about my father and what he once told me": The participant uses his father's words as guidance. When he was younger, his father advised him to not engage in fights and to exercise patience. So now that his father is no longer around, the participant continues to draw on the advice that his father gave him while he was still alive. On one occasion he states that he remembers his father's words when he has academic challenges. With regard to such incidents, he says that,

"I usually think about him whenever I fail to do something to my satisfaction. For example, in class, especially with mathematics I'll be trying so hard to solve those equations, yet I just don't seem to get it right"

In such instances his father's words encourage him to persevere through the academic challenges. In other instances, his father's words become his moral compass, to direct him away from engaging in dangerous activities. He states that,

"Another time that I think about him is when I have disagreements with my peers and classmates. For instance, in those moments when a disagreement leads to a physical altercation. That's when I started thinking about my father and what he once told me. He told me that I should refrain from fighting and to be patient and never rush things in life. So, the moment those words come to mind, I stop fighting, calm down and walk away from that scene."

"There are still those moments whereby I think about him and become emotional": The traumatic nature of his father's death seems to have triggered a perception of the world being a dangerous place. Sometimes thoughts about his father trigger fearfulness for the participant. He states that thinking about his father makes him think that he may also be in danger. He explains that,

“Even though I have accepted his death, there are still those moments whereby I think about him and become emotional. I still feel that little bit of anger and from then on, I’ll just be quiet. It usually happens when I’m sitting alone. Sometimes I will even start shaking, I then begin to feel scared.”

The participant therefore has a fearful approach to situations and in such cases, the words of his father seem to also be confirming his fears of unsafety in social settings.

“So, that’s why when I think about my dad, I think that maybe something bad is about to happen to me and that maybe I’m also about to die. So that’s why whenever I’m about to fight someone, his words come to mind and then I think what if I fight this person and then it so happens that, it’s my unlucky day then I get hurt and die? So, his words guide me in such situations.”

In summary, the death of the participant’s father changed his perceptions about his safety. Although he has internalised his relationship with his father, his father’s memory seems to cause the participant discomfort due to the manner in which his father died. Although the participant uses his father’s words as guidance to motivate him in academic challenges, his use of his father’s words as a moral compass seem to trigger fear.

Participant 11

Participant 11 is a 23-year-old female student who lost her mother when she was 3 years old. She was then adopted and raised by her maternal aunt until her demise. The participant provided a comprehensive narration; she does not seem to recall the circumstances of her mother’s death in detail.

Participant Background and Relationship with Deceased Parent.

“She was very protective”: The participant had a close relationship with her mother. Being her youngest child, the participant’s mother always tugged her along even on her long business trips between countries. As such the participant spent a lot of time with her mother. She states that,

“She never let anyone babysit me even when she was travelling. Her mother was from Mozambique and her dad was from KZN. So, she used to do business between Mozambique and KZN. She used to buy things here and sell them in Mozambique. So, she would travel with me a lot from the time I was a baby. I had two other sisters, but she left them with other family members including my grandmother. But with me, she was very protective.”

Circumstances pertaining to her mother’s death.

“Her illness was so sudden and so was her passing.”: The participant’s mother died of natural causes. Her mother died due to a sudden illness. Due to being young, the participant does not recall much about the events around her mother’s passing.

“Her illness was so sudden and so was her passing. Her funeral was kind of popular because my family is also popular in a way. We come from a somewhat royal family, so the place was packed on her funeral day, but everything went by too quickly for me.”

Grieving and Continuing Bereavement Bonds.

“Whenever I’m facing hardships, I feel my mother’s presence”: The loss of the participant’s mother and aunt left her exposed to the hardships of life. When her mother died, the participant was cared for by her aunt. The passing of her aunt thus

deprived her of a mother-figure and someone who can share in her joy and also guide and help her during challenging situations. She explains that,

“It gets hard without them, for example when I’m struggling to understand some things or to adjust and they are not here to help me. Especially when it comes to academics. And also, when I achieve something, I do find it sad because she’s not here to celebrate with me.”

While the situations bring up negative emotions, they also trigger a sense of her mother’s presence. The sensory feeling of her mother and aunt’s presence provides courage and motivation causing her to persevere through the challenges.

“So, they do come to mind in those moments when I’m facing hardships, I feel my mother’s presence especially in those moments when I feel like I won’t survive whatever challenge I’m faced with. When I feel that it’s too much. I tend to feel like they (mother and aunt) are there pushing me to keep going and they are supporting me and cheering me on. Even giving me the strength to overcome whatever I’m going through, but in a sense of an angel or a guidance.”

“I feel connected to her, when I’m thinking of positive memories”: Positive memories seem to facilitate a sense of connection with her mother while negative ones lead to feelings of loneliness and abandonment.

“I feel connected to her, when I’m thinking of positive memories and I’m not feeling sad. But I do feel disconnected to her, when I’m going through a hardship then I feel kind of alone. Then I feel like she abandoned me.”

“On the 25th of December, I visit her grave because it’s her birthday”: The participant also has a yearly routine of visiting her mother’s grave. Every year on

Christmas day she visits her mother's grave to update her about her developments in her life such as academic progress and relocations. She explains as follows:

“On the 25th of December, I visit her grave because it's her birthday. I do visit her on other days, but I mostly go on her birthday. I buy flowers and put them in a vase. Then I'll just talk to the grave as if I'm talking to her and tell her that this is what happened throughout the year. Maybe if I have new updates such as making it to honours and how old I am now. All the things that I feel like she missed out on or other things that happened throughout the year such as moving to a new place. Just having a conversation as if she is physically present.”

In summary, although the participant lost two significant attachment figures in her mother and aunt, she continues to find strength and motivation from their presence and finds comfort in the felt connection she has with her deceased mother.

Appendix B2: Consent Form

Full title of project: A Narrative Study on Continuing Bonds with Deceased Parents:
A Sample of University of Limpopo Students, South Africa

Researcher: Calvonia Molepo, Masters Clinical Psychology Student.

Please tick the box.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.
3. I agree to take part in the above study.
4. I agree to the interview/ focus/ consultation being audio recorded.
5. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications emanating from this study.
6. I am aware that the researcher will keep my information confidential except in cases where the interview material will have to be shared with supervisors of the research project. However, the supervisors also have a responsibility to keep my personal information confidential.

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Name of researcher

Date

Signature

Supervisor

Date

Signature

Appendix C: Topic Guide

Objectives	Questions to elicit responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To highlight the nature of parent-child relationship to the bereavement of parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Could you share with me the memories of life before your parent's death? Could you share with me memories of your parent (s)? What is your earliest memory of your parent (s)?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To establish the circumstances surrounding the parent's death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Could you share your thoughts, feelings, and or memories about the loss event? How do you understand or make sense of your parent's death? How have the feelings, emotions, and reactions to the loss changed overtime?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To identify the types of bereavement bonds maintained and their associated psychological meanings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you ever talk about your parent (s) with others? With whom? Do you ever think about your parent (s)? On what occasions? Do you ever talk to your parent (s)? See him/her? Feel his/her presence? What thoughts and/or feelings are associated with the memories of your parent (s)? What thoughts and/or feelings are associated with the loss of your parent (s)? Do you feel that you have an ongoing connection with your parent (s)? In what way? Why is it important for you to have or not have an ongoing connection with your parent (s)?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How has the disconnection or connection been assisting you in dealing with the loss of your parent(s)?
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Appendix D: Request for permission to conduct the study

University of Limpopo,
Department of Psychology
Limpopo (Turfloop Campus)
Bag X1106
Sovenga
0727
Date: _____

To the registrar.

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Permission to conduct research at the University of Limpopo

My name is Calvonia Molepo.

I am studying for a master's in clinical psychology in the school of Social Sciences at the University of Limpopo. I am seeking permission to do research at the University of Limpopo.

The research will entail collecting data from students currently studying at the university.

I will invite students from the university to participate in this study. Participants will include both undergraduate and postgraduate students who lost a parent or both parents. If they agree, they will be asked to take part in unstructured biographical narrative interviews. For example: the students will be asked to give a narration of their lives, including life before the loss of their parents and also their experiences of life after the loss of their parents. The students will be required to set aside approximately 2 hours of their time. Data collection (the interviews) may take place on the university premises or outside the premises depending on where the students reside. The interviews will take place depending on the students' availability. The participant's responses will be audio or video recorded.

Participants will be asked to give their written or verbal consent before the research begins. Their responses will be treated confidentially, and identities (their names) will be anonymous unless otherwise expressly indicated. Individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

The research participants will not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way. They will be reassured that they can withdraw their permission at any time during this project without any penalty. While there are no foreseeable physical risks in participating in this study, the researcher is aware that the topic of death can be difficult to discuss. For this reason, respondents will be informed about the study's possible impact to allow them to make an informed decision of whether to participate in the study or not. Participants who may express discomforts in being enrolled in the study will not be forced or induced in any way to participate in the study. The participants will not be paid to participate in this study.

All research data in the form of voice recordings and transcripts will be stored in an external (USB) drive and google drive online platform for safekeeping and easy retrieval (should the need arise). Only the researcher and supervisors shall have access to the encrypted data.

I therefore request permission in writing to conduct my research at the university.

Please let me know if you require any further information. I look forward to your response as soon as it is convenient.

Yours sincerely,




Calvonía Molepo.

202336942@keyaka.ul.ac.za

Appendix E: Sample social media advertisement for recruitment of student participants

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY


You are eligible to participate if:

-  You are registered student with the University of Limpopo
-  You are over 18 years
-  You have lost a parent/ parents.


About the research


I am a master's student in clinical psychology at the university of Limpopo. I am currently conducting a research study that aims to explore student narratives on the nature and role of continuity or discontinuity of bereavements bonds with a deceased parent.

Bereavement bonds are an active and ongoing internal relationship with a deceased person.



To participate or ask questions, contact me:

 calvoniamolepo@gmail.com

 0796510590

Interviews will be conducted in person and/or online at the convenience of the participants.

Appendix F: Ethical Clearance Certificate (TREC)



University of Limpopo
 Department of Research Administration and Development
 Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa
 Tel: (015) 268 3935, Fax: (015) 268 2306, Email: tukiso.sewapa@ul.ac.za

TURFLOOP RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
ETHICS CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

MEETING: 19 August 2024

PROJECT NUMBER: TREC/1533/2024: PG

PROJECT:

Title: A Narrative Study on Continuing Bonds with Deceased Parent: A Sample of University of Limpopo Students, South Africa

Researcher: M.C. Molepo

Supervisor: Prof. M. Makgahlela

Co-Supervisor/s: Dr. M. Maotoana
 Dr. M. B Setwaba
 Dr. M. Mothapo

School: Social Sciences

Degree: Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology

PROF D MAPOSA
CHAIRPERSON: TURFLOOP RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

The Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC) is registered with the National Health Research Ethics Council, Registration Number: **REC-0310111-031**

Note:

- i) This Ethics Clearance Certificate will be valid for one (1) year, as from the abovementioned date. Application for annual renewal (or annual review) need to be received by TREC one month before lapse of this period.
- ii) Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure as approved, the researcher(s) must re-submit the protocol to the committee, together with the Application for Amendment form.
- iii) PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES.

Appendix G: First draft of the transcript.

Extracted from Participant 3's interview.

P3: There, I don't know. How the service was. I don't know. I think I emotionally and mentally checked out. But you know the events that led to the death were very traumatic, especially for my mom. Because she was..home it was three, you know two. Four weeks before his passing, he was home and couldn't breathe in the middle of the night. My mom and our helper had to drive him all the way to Mill Park Hospital because he didn't have so much confidence in Polokwane hospitals considering that. He's been going there, but they couldn't even identify the cancer until it was too late, and we drove in the AMs to Mill Park. I only found out in the morning when she called and she's like ohh yeah. We brought you there to no park. And by then I was in Gauteng doing my first degree. And I think what was even more traumatic is the complex where I was staying was right opposite Mill Park. I could see the board and the hospital entrance of Mill Park Hospital from my balcony. So going to school and coming back, knowing my dad is in there and he probably won't come out alive. It really had a huge toll on me and evidently, I was diagnosed with Manic depression and anxiety and the day of his passing. Actually, the night before his passing, I remember just having a sudden urge to call him and this was around 10:30 to 11:00 in the evening. I was chilling with my friends. I excused myself and called him and he was asleep, but he picked up and we spoke for a while and for a reason. That conversation I still have. Remember it if it was yesterday and. There was something about the way he would say he loves me. Well, my dad, every time before he hangs up, he would say I Love you, sweetheart. But that night, he kept on saying I love you. I love you very, very much. Very, very much. I love you. God, you know, as if he was. I'm sorry [crying].

Interviewer: It's OK, it's OK. Take your time.

P3: Yeah.

Appendix H: The second draft of the transcript (A narrative block).

Extracted from participant 3's interview.

P3: There, I don't know. How was the service? I think I emotionally and mentally checked out. But the events that led to the death were very traumatic, especially for my mom. Because she was home it was three, two. Four weeks before his passing, he was home and couldn't breathe in the middle of the night, my mom and our helper had to drive him all the way to Mill Park Hospital because he didn't have so much confidence in Polokwane hospitals considering that he's been going there, but they couldn't even identify the cancer until it was too late and we drove in the AMs to Mill Park. I only found out in the morning when she called and she's like oh yeah. We brought your dad to Mill Park. And by then I was in Gauteng doing my first degree. And I think what was even more traumatic is the complex where I was staying was right opposite Mill Park. I could see the board and the hospital entrance of Mill Park Hospital from my balcony. So going to school and coming back, knowing my dad is in there and he probably won't come out alive. It really had a huge toll on me and evidently, I was diagnosed with Manic depression and anxiety and the day of his passing. Actually, the night before his passing, I remember I just had a sudden urge to call him, and this was around 10:30 to 11:00 in the evening. I was chilling with my friends. I excused myself and called him and he was asleep, but he picked up and we spoke for a while and for a reason. That conversation I still remember as if it was yesterday and there was something about the way he would say he loves me. Well, my dad, every time before he hangs up, he would say I love you sweetheart. But that night, he kept on saying I love you. I love you very, very much. Very, very much. I love you. God, as if he was.

Appendix I: Turnitin Report

A NARRATIVE STUDY ON CONTINUING BONDS WITH DECEASED PARENTS-A SAMPLE OF UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO STUDENTS, SOUTH AFRICA.docx

ORIGINALITY REPORT

6%	2%	4%	2%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	Joseph M. Currier, Jennifer E. F. Irish, Robert A. Neimeyer, Joshua D. Foster. "Attachment, Continuing Bonds, and Complicated Grief Following Violent Loss: Testing a Moderated Model", <i>Death Studies</i> , 2014 Publication	2%
2	"Encyclopedia of Geropsychology", Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 2017 Publication	1%
3	ulspace.ul.ac.za Internet Source	1%
4	Victor Counted, Richard G. Cowden, Haywantee Ramkissoon. "Chapter 3 Place Attachment and Resource Loss During a Pandemic: An Ecological Systems Perspective", Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 2021 Publication	<1%
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