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PREVIEW

**IDENTITY AND INTIMACY IN ADULTS WHO HAVE SUFFERED  
PARENTAL DEATH IN CHILDHOOD OR ADOLESCENCE**

by  
**Carolyn Pica Beer**

**A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology at  
Pace University  
New York  
1999**

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PREVIEW

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Carolyn Pica Beer

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## Abstract

The present study explored the impact of parental death in childhood and adolescence on the development of identity and intimacy in adulthood. In addition, grief resolution and bereavement circumstances were investigated for their relationship to these variables. Thirty-nine parentally bereaved and 107 non-bereaved college students (42 males and 104 females) completed the Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (OMEIS; Adams, Shea, & Fitch, 1979), subscales of the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (EPSI; Rosenthal, Gurney & Moore, 1981), the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR; Olson & Schaefer, 1981), the Texas Revised Inventory of Grief (TRIG; Faschingbauer, DeVaul, & Zisook, 1978), and a demographic questionnaire.

It was hypothesized that parentally bereaved participants would report lower levels of identity and intimacy than non-bereaved participants. ANCOVA results, with age as the covariate, disconfirmed these hypotheses. On the contrary, partial support for an inverse relationship was found whereas bereaved participants had significantly lower identity diffusion scale scores and were classified as identity diffused significantly less often than non-bereaved participants,  $F(1, 141) = 9.34, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .03$ . Likewise, bereaved



participants evidenced significantly higher EPSI intimacy scores than non-bereaved participants,  $F(1,141) = 3.77, p = .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .03$ .

A statistical investigation of the impact of grief resolution on the dependent variables was not feasible due to low  $n$  size. However, qualitative case material is presented and discussed.

Lastly, bereavement circumstances were analyzed for their relationship to identity and intimacy. Death of a father was related to higher identity adjustment than death of a mother ( $r = -.33, p < .05$ ). Remarriage of the surviving parent ( $r = .33, p < .05$ ) and attainment of counseling ( $r = .40, p < .05$ ) were also related to higher levels of identity. Perceived closeness to the deceased and the experience of having anniversary reactions were positively related to EPSI intimacy ( $r = .35, p < .05; r = -.36, p < .05$ ). Individuals who accepted a “substitute” parent in their lives showed higher levels of recreational intimacy ( $r = .40, p < .05$ ). Finally, lower sexual intimacy was related to feelings of having the same illness as the deceased ( $r = .35, p < .05$ ).

The results of this study are discussed and challenge more traditional views about childhood bereavement and psychosocial development. Suggestions for future research are provided with a focus on sampling procedures, the use of longitudinal data, and the hypothesis that parental bereavement can facilitate identity development.

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Ever since Sigmund Freud's landmark treatise on "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917/1957), questions about the effects of the loss of one's love objects, a universal human experience, on the fate of the individual's psychosocial development have been a subject of considerable thought and research. The death of a parent in childhood can be a traumatic, confusing, and influential event. According to Wolfelt's Loss Inventory (1983), the death of a parent has the most profound impact on a child when compared to other types of deaths. In the United States, approximately 5 to 15 percent of children lose one or both parents by the age of 15 (Harris, 1991). If we include children up to the age of 18, this percentage assumably increases. In addition, the incidence of parental death may be even higher for those in low socioeconomic areas, and with the impact of HIV/AIDS, the likelihood that a child may lose both parents has increased over the years.

When a parent dies, the child's family system, social network, and personal beliefs about the world are all impacted (Worden, 1996). Children are forced to discover a new reality, one that does not include either a mother or a

father. As a result, family roles change and demands on individual members may increase. Along with these new roles and responsibilities come changes to the physical environment. Families must adjust to new financial constraints, which often include a change in where and how the family lives.

In addition to providing for the physical well-being of their children, parents are also the foundation for emotional and moral development. Worden (1996) writes, "The loss of a parent to death and its consequences in the home and in the family change the very core of the child's existence." Although there are differences in the quality of how parents provide for the emotional, social, physical, and psychological well-being of their children, parents remain the most significant influence over child development (Worden, 1996).

Throughout the literature on bereavement, researchers and theoreticians have explored the acute and long-term effects of parental death on mental health and the development of pathological responses, changes to the physical world, and the bereavement process itself. In addition, Bowlby's (1960, 1963) contributions to the understanding of the effects of primary object loss in the early years on development and on the ability to form secure attachments has brought to awareness the psychological significance of such an event. However, the focus of Bowlby's work is on the impact of parental loss in early development whereas relatively little research is available on loss reactions in latency-age and

adolescent children. Therefore, our understanding of the impact of parental death on corresponding developmental stages of identity and intimacy is limited to theoretical assumptions. For example, researchers clearly accept that the death of a parent challenges the individual's ability to maintain continuity of self-perception and the ability to initiate and sustain attachments to others (Worden, 1996; Rando, 1993; Bowlby, 1980). Parkes (1972), Worden (1996) and Rando (1993) discuss the need of the individual to reformulate, adjust, and redefine the self in response to the new assumptive world. Baker (as cited by Webb, 1993) defined identity consolidation and reintegration as part of the final phase of the grief process. The literature also suggests that the greatest impact on identity development occurs when the grief process becomes arrested. However, given all of these theories, attempts to quantify this phenomenon and its effects on identity and intimacy development have not been cited.

The purpose of this study is to examine and quantify the effects of parental death in latency and adolescence on the formation of identity and intimacy in adulthood. It is an attempt to take a more globally accepted theoretical assumption and to define it more specifically with regard to personal development. The objective of this research is to obtain insight into the psychological processes of the individual whose parent dies. In addition, this research hopes to explore the effects of parental death for those who have

resolved their grief and those who have not yet completed mourning. The literature indicates that events surrounding the death, such as attendance at the funeral and keeping personal mementos, predict a more positive resolution around the death. These factors, among others, will also be discussed in this paper. It is hoped that this insight will lead to the development and structuring of therapeutic interventions so that potential issues for children whose parents die may be addressed and worked through.

### *Bereavement, Grief, and Mourning*

For the purpose of this study, it is important to define the concepts of bereavement, mourning, and grief. Worden (1996), in his writings on the “Child Bereavement Study” of parental death, offers a conceptual understanding that clearly identifies important differences among these terms. Worden (1996) defines bereavement as “the adaptation to loss” and mourning as “the process that children go through on their way to adaptation.” Grief is defined by Worden (1996) as the “child’s personal experience, thoughts, and feelings associated with the death.” These definitions do not differ from the descriptions provided by Bowlby, 1960; Wolfelt, 1983 and other researchers, but rather simplify them. The most important aspect to understand is that mourning is a process and not a specific, initial grief reaction. Future adaptations are continual based on new experiences and phases of development (Grossberg & Crandall, 1978).

Rando (1993) posits that grief is experienced in four major ways: psychologically, behaviorally, socially, and physically. Despite similarities amongst children who experience grief, the variety of potential responses is vast and unique. Characteristics of the mourner, characteristics pertaining to the nature and meaning of the specific loss, characteristics of the death, social systems, and physiological demands are all factors that influence grief and mourning (Rando, 1993). Baker (as cited by Webb, 1993), suggests that there are three tasks in the grief process. The early phase of grief requires understanding of what has happened and employment of defense mechanisms to curb the emotional impact of the loss. In the middle phase, the individual must begin the process of acceptance and bearing of the psychological pain. In the late phase, the individual must reconsolidate his identity in response to the new reality and resume developmental progress.

The question that is most debated in the literature is whether or not young children have the capacity to grieve. Most researchers and theoreticians agree that the capacity to recognize and accept the finality of death is central to the grief process. Comprehension of the finality of death occurs as ego functioning matures. The dispute among researchers lies in when this period of ego development occurs. Bowlby (1980) suggests that infants experience grief reactions as young as six months of age. On the other hand, Wolfenstein (1966)

suggests that the young child can not complete the process of mourning until after the period of adolescence when the individual has negotiated the developmental tasks of adolescence, the foremost being separation from the parents. Somewhere between these two positions lies the opinion that mourning is possible when the child has developed reality testing and object constancy (A. Freud, 1960; Furman, 1974). The average child of six is beginning, cognitively, to realize that death is a final, permanent state and cannot be reversed. This corresponds with Piaget's Concrete Operational Stage of cognitive development. Therefore, the general consensus among death researchers seems to be that the cognitive capacity to conceptually understand the finality of death and the ability to grieve occurs by the age of seven (Raphael, 1983; Furman, 1974; Worden, 1996).

#### *Death of a Parent*

Parent/child bonds can be the most intimate of relationships. These relationships often fulfill needs for nurturance, affection, love, achievement, and status (Raphael, 1983). The potential loss of fulfillment of these needs is ever present when a parent dies. The impact of parental death shatters the child's sense of family security (Zambelli & DeRosa, 1992). Coping with the loss often becomes the child's problem, as the surviving parent's energy is directed towards dealing with his/her own grief and life changes.

With the death of a parent comes a new family constellation, including changes in roles, relationships, and responsibilities. Within this new constellation, the individual must redefine the self to reflect the reality of these new experiences (Raphael, 1983). The crisis of bereavement largely stems from the loss of the self in the context of the lost relationship. When the son's father dies, so does that part of the boy that was son to father. Furthermore, being motherless or fatherless extends the issue of who we are as related to the rest of the world. Particularly in latency when children are concerned with being like others, the child's feeling of being different from peers exacerbates the trauma of the loss (Raphael, 1983). Worden (1996) reports that children from the Child Bereavement Study stated feeling stigmatized having only one parent and often tried to hide it from others. These children reported that they feared being teased, bullied, and treated differently (Worden, 1996). A recent personal experience involved an 11-year old child who returned to school following a visit with her mother who lived out of state. Upon her return, the teacher asked the student how her mother was. The student replied, "Fine," and discontinued the conversation. Later that day, the teacher was informed by the surviving parent that the child's mother had died. This child later confided that she could not tolerate others feeling sorry for her or looking at her differently.